

Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research

Giselinde Kuipers
Outi Sarpila *Editors*

Handbook of Beauty and Inequality

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Giseline Kuipers · Outi Sarpila
Editors

Handbook of Beauty and Inequality

Editors

Giselinde Kuipers 
Center for Culture, Conflict
and Inequality, Sociology Department
KU Leuven
Leuven, Belgium

Outi Sarpila 
Department of Social Research/
INVEST Research Flagship Centre
University of Turku
Turku, Finland



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This exemplary and ambitious Handbook of Culture and Inequality is a timely contribution to our understanding of how beauty operates in our social world. The introduction offers a sharp analytical framework to organize what is a multi-layered interdisciplinary field, while the contributions carefully parse how beauty shapes inequality in fields of activity ranging from teaching, to politics and fashion. This book is certain to become a classic reference for everyone intrigued by the power of beauty.

—Michèle Lamont, Harvard University

Beauty has emerged in recent years as a key arena for social scientists interested in inequality. This invaluable volume brings together cutting-edge thinkers from different disciplines to think about the myriad ways beauty is related to various forms of advantage and exclusion in contemporary societies. Timely, comprehensive, and asking important, provocative questions, this volume demonstrates that beauty and inequality represents a distinct and urgent field of emerging social science research.

—Sam Friedman, The London School of Economics and Political Science

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but vision is socially structured along quite unequal lines. This original, timely and rich handbook looks at the intersection of beauty and social inequality and compiles a wealth of interdisciplinary research into how beauty both creates, maintains and sometimes capsizes inequality.

—Roberta Sassatelli, University of Bologna

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Contributors

Lynda G. Boothroyd Durham University, Durham, UK

Luuc Brans KU Leuven, Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality, Sociology department, Leuven, Belgium

Gladys Pak Lei Chong Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China

Yiu Fai Chow Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China

MacKenzie A. Christensen Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

Maxine Leeds Craig Sociology Department, University of California Davis, Davis, California, USA

Elizabeth A. Daniels School of Social Sciences, Centre for Appearance Research (CAR), College of Health, Science & Society, University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK

Kobe De Keere University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Ella Guest School of Social Sciences, Centre for Appearance Research (CAR), College of Health, Science & Society, University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK

Dana Hamplová Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Prague, Czech Republic

Dana Kaplan The Open University of Israel, Ra'anana, Israel

Irmak Karademir School of Sociology and Social Policy, Law and Social Sciences Building, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Amélie Keyser-Verreault Academia Sinica, Institute of Ethnology, Taipei, Taiwan

Giselinde Kuipers Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Iida Kukkonen Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Juliane Kühn Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Nuremberg, Germany

Linda H. Lidborg Durham University, Durham, UK

Katelyn Rose Malae Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utah Valley University, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Andrew Mason University of Warwick, England, UK

Elizabeth Aura McClintock Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

Ashley Mears Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Alka V. Menon Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Søren Flinch Midtgaard Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Anne Monier University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Ellis Monk Harvard University, Cambridge, US

Emmanuel Narh Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Dennis Nickson Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

Hanna Ojala Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Sanne Pieters Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Ilkka Pietilä University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Narges Pirhayati Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Petra Raudenská Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic

Carolina Rabasa Rucki Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Outi Sarpila Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland;
INVEST Research Flagship Centre, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Michael L. Smith Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Prague, Czech Republic

Dieter Vandebroek Department of Sociology, Free University of Brussels, Brussels, Belgium

Laura Vonk Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, The Hague, The Netherlands

Aurélië Van de Peer KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Chris Warhurst University of Warwick, Warwick Institute for Employment Research, Coventry, UK

Heather Widdows University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Tobias Wolbring Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Nuremberg, Germany

Wanying Zhou Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

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

Giseline Kuipers, Outi Sarpila, and Luuc Brans

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.,

G. Kuipers (✉) · L. Brans (✉)
KU Leuven, Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality,
Sociology department, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: giselinde.kuipers@kuleuven.be

L. Brans
e-mail: luuc.brans@kuleuven.be

O. Sarpila (✉)
University of Turku, Turku, Finland
e-mail: outi.sarpila@utu.fi

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

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

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. Vandebroek & 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. Vandebroek & 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 & Tiggemann, 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*.

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 “beautyism” (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

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.

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 Giseline 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](#)”, Giseline 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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Giselinde Kuipers is Research Professor at the Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven University. She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural standards and their consequences for social interactions, identities, and inequalities. She has published widely on the relation between culture and inequality, as well as beauty, fashion, media, humor, popular culture, and cultural industries, often from a comparative or transnational perspective. Currently, she directs a large comparative study on beauty and inequality funded by the European Research Council.

Outi Sarpila is a Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Centre at the University of Turku. Between 2023 and 2026, she is serving as a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku. Sarpila has led two externally funded research projects focused on themes of appearance and inequality. The most recent of these, funded by the Research Council of Finland, has partially facilitated this handbook project. Sarpila's background is in economic sociology, and she has specialized in quantitative research on appearance. Her research on these themes has previously been published in journals such as *Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, and *European Societies*.

Luuc Brans is a Postdoctoral Researcher at KU Leuven with a background in political science and cultural sociology. In his PhD (KU Leuven, 2024), he investigated the ideologization of fashion, in particular how powerful players in the European cultural field of fashion navigate the climate crisis and sustainability. His research interests are at the intersection of culture, politics, and sustainability. Luuc earned his degrees at the universities of Amsterdam and Edinburgh, and was twice a visiting fellow at Harvard University, where he was an affiliate of the Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs. His work has been published in *Cultural Sociology* and *Journal of Consumer Culture*.

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Part I

Beauty

Beauty as Subordinate Capital

Maxine Leeds Craig

1 Introduction

Prompted by feminist social movement critiques of beauty as a source of oppression in women's lives, five decades of historians (Banner, 1983; Brumberg, 1997; Gilman, 1999; Peiss, 1998), sociologists (Black, 2004; De Casanova, 2004; Gimlin, 2002; Mears, 2020), and feminist theorists (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Elias et al., 2017; Hobson, 2003/2004; Widdows, 2018) have made physical beauty the focus of their work. These writings converge at three points. The first is that ideals of beauty are socially constructed. The second is that beauty has been more of a social mandate for women than for men. The pervasive expectation that women ought to care about beauty, and its corollary that men should not care too much about their appearance, is fundamental to the gender binary. Third, women's engagement with beauty brings them a complex mix of pleasures and penalties.

Despite the weight of scholarly consensus that the benefits beauty may bring to women's lives are accompanied by burdens, some have treated beauty as an easily realizable source of profit for beautiful women. Catherine Hakim's *Erotic Capital* and Daniel Hamermesh's *Beauty Pays*

claim that beauty is capital from which the beautiful directly profit. Is beauty capital and was a generation of scholars wrong? Yes and no. Yes, beauty can function as capital. No, a generation of scholars who wrote on beauty was not wrong. Beauty can function as capital, but the returns beauty provides to beautiful women are limited and carry liabilities.

This chapter examines research on modeling, beauty contests, and service work to view beauty as a form of capital in fields where it is likely to produce the highest and lowest rewards. I ask if the corporeal capital produced in those fields is gendered, and how readily beauty as a form of corporeal capital converts to wealth or power for the beauty. Finding that beauty is a form of feminized capital with limited convertibility, I suggest three sources of its devaluation: (1) the subordinate position of beauties, (2) the linkage of beauty and sex, and (3) alienation of the profits of beauty. Each of these arises from beauty's status as feminized corporeal capital. Since gender is co-constructed with race and class, I return to historical and ethnographic studies to examine the incorporation of race and class inequalities into beauty ideals.

2 Concepts: Capital and Fields

The possibility that beauty can function as a form of capital draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, embodied, and symbolic capital, which

M. L. Craig (✉)
Sociology Department, University of California,
California, USA
e-mail: mbcraig@ucdavis.edu

extend the ways to think about capital beyond its conventional definition as economic wealth (Bourdieu, 1986). Without being rigidly deterministic, socioeconomic location influences both the amount and the composition, or mix of cultural, embodied, symbolic, and other forms of capital, an individual is likely to acquire. Cultural capital is a set of tastes, dispositions, and knowledge that individuals gain throughout life, but most powerfully when young, which can facilitate ease within social settings and institutions. To the extent that forms of capital shape diet, habits of leisure, the use of the body at work, access to and orientation toward health care, postures, and emotions, capital is embodied, leading sociologists studying beauty, labor, sports, disability, and sexuality to employ the concept of corporeal or physical capital (Bernstein, 2007; Glenn, 2008; Green, 2008; Kaw, 1993; Otis, 2012; Paradis, 2012; Talley, 2014; Vandebroek, 2017; Wacquant, 2004; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital is “the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 4). When cultural capital becomes symbolic capital, acquired advantages are mistakenly perceived as innate talents. For example, the consecration of upper-class speech patterns as proper speech, and therefore as symbolic capital, allows privileged classes to limit access to institutions that might otherwise facilitate upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991). The conversion of economic capital into cultural, corporeal, or symbolic capital and back again into wealth is a mechanism that can mask the reproduction of inequality by making a system that rewards economic advantage appear to be a meritocracy.

Fields are relatively autonomous social spaces such as fine art or the discipline of physics in which players contest the field’s boundaries (i.e., asking is that art, or is she a physicist?) and determine what will count as capital within it (Bourdieu, 1990; Martin, 2003). Competitors in these domains maneuver to establish their expertise to define what will be consecrated as, for example, an interesting painting, or good scholarship. Those who win these contests possess cultural capital;

they have won institutional recognition of their judgments of taste.

Field theory opens questions that are foreclosed by many economic studies of beauty’s rewards. The existence of agreed upon standards of beauty serves as the point of departure in most economic research on beauty. In these studies, the beauty whose effects are measured is often hastily defined (Hakim, 2011, pp. 21–24; Hamermesh, 2011, pp. 19–24). According to John Levi Martin and Matt George, such approaches measure the financial advantages of beauty while treating the definition of beauty as exogenous to the system that generates value (Martin & George, 2006, p. 121). While economists treat beauty as a stable currency, beauty ideals, like other forms of cultural capital, are the outcome of struggles within fields over which kinds of bodies are most esteemed. Field theory expands the focus of research on beauty’s value to the social processes that produce beauty ideals.

Historical studies of beauty demonstrate the variability of beauty ideals (Banner, 1983; Gilman, 1999; Najmabadi, 2005). For example, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi studied paintings and poetry of early nineteenth-century Iran and found that men and women were equally likely to be described as beautiful, and that a beautiful face required thick, connected eyebrows (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 11). Even within the same time and place, standards of beauty differ across fields. Beauty may provide advantage to its bearer in a beauty pageant, a service job interview, or a model’s casting call, but the logics that structure these sites and set the terms for winning the appearance-related contests that take place within them vary (King-O’Riain, 2006; Mears, 2011; Otis, 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010). Each field has its own logic of “vision and division” that enhances or diminishes the positions of individuals drawn wittingly and unwittingly into tests of their attractiveness (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21).

Just as Bourdieu’s *Distinction* documented the arbitrary prizing by French upper classes of raw vegetables, no bodily feature, be it straight hair or double eyelids, is inherently, inevitably, or always and for everyone beautiful. The content of beauty is arbitrary in the same way that no regional accent

is inherently superior to another as a form of communication. To say that beauty's content is arbitrary does not mean that ideals are beyond explanation, but only that the explanations will be historically and socially contingent and reflective of larger patterns of dominance within a society.

2.1 Consecration of Beauty Ideals in Fields

Modeling is a relatively autonomous field in which a variety of professionals work to define a moment's favored look. The most prestigious modeling agencies distinguish themselves precisely by selling looks that would not have a chance in beauty contests (Mears, 2011, pp. 38–41). Though model booking agents speak of discovering a look, Mears' ethnography of the field reveals that agents, scouts, editors, photographers, and clients collectively engage in the work of consecrating looks (Mears, 2011, pp. 8, 167–169). They try to pick up on clues, especially from those perceived within the industry as high status, to identify which sort of face will be the season's most favored appearance.

More than other fields, fashion is driven by the need to identify new beauties (Entwistle, 2002, p. 327). Therefore, fashion produces innovative, shortly lived ways of seeing beauty. By comparison, the ideals of beauty consecrated in pageants change slowly. Racist beauty standards excluded Black women from the possibility of being crowned the winner of the Miss America pageant for most of its history. After years of protest from African American social movement organizations, the pageant began to crown Black women as beauties and expand the way the wider public would see beauty (Craig, 2002).

Consecration of beauty ideals also occurs in low-end service occupations. Managers hire, reward, and penalize workers on the basis of appearance (Avery & Marion, 2007; Misra & Walters, 2022; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Williams & Connell, 2010). Many service jobs explicitly require women to meet standards of attractiveness, which are delineated in workplace

policies. Williams and Connell report that decisions regarding the right look are made at corporate headquarters of retail chains and put into practice at the store level by managers. Corporations use the appearance of their front of the store employees to position themselves in relation to competitors, hiring workers whose appearance conforms to the brand identities they wish to communicate.

Harrah's casinos contributed to the perception that cosmetics are an essential element of an attractive woman's face when it required women workers to wear face powder, blush, mascara, and lipstick (Avery & Marion, 2007, p. 85). Similarly, at a multinational hotel in China, women service workers line up at the beginning of every shift for inspection by managers who evaluate their cosmetics use (Otis, 2012, p. 85). Model booking agents, beauty pageant organizers, and the management of high-end retail corporations, casinos, and hotels do not simply hire beautiful women; they are participants in fields that generate beauty ideals. The ideals they consecrate are not identical and do not change at the same rate. They are relatively autonomous fields. The Miss America Pageant lagged a decade behind the fashion industry in placing a Black woman at the pinnacle of beauty. Beverly Johnson was on the cover of *American Vogue* in 1974, 10 years before the pageant crowned a Black contestant, Vanessa Williams. There is, however, a way in which the judgments in these fields coincide, and that is the gender of a beauty. Beauties are women.

3 Beauty as Feminized Corporeal Capital

The fields that consecrate beauty as corporeal capital reproduce beauty as a feminine trait. Though men model, modeling is construed as properly a women's career even by those working in the field (Mears, 2011, p. 237). Likewise, beauty contests are overwhelmingly contests of women. Karen Tice studied the rare men's beauty pageants that have been organized on a few college

campuses and found that organizers and contestants worked to deflect the assumption that participation in a pageant feminized the contestants (Tice, 2012, p. 100). The aesthetic labor required in workplaces generally intensifies gender differences. When Harrah required its female workers to wear cosmetics, it prohibited male employees from wearing them (Avery & Marion, 2007, p. 47). The more important appearance is to an occupation the more likely it is that women will be preferentially hired. In the post-war period through the mid-1960s, as airlines increased the emphasis on appearance, men were pushed out of flight steward positions (Tiemeyer, 2013, pp. 44–45). The job, renamed stewardess or hostess, was recast as one for attractive, young, single women (Vantoch, 2013, p. 44). As the occupation was reformulated again and became more gender-integrated, less emphasis was placed on beauty.

Beauty is not the product of a single field, but fields that consecrate beauty have an important homology. They reinforce beauty as feminized capital. The consecration of feminine beauty within modeling, beauty contests, and in service work contributes to the reproduction of gender as a structure. As reality television, makeover shows, and influencers have supplanted the place of beauty contests in establishing beauty ideals (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006), they continue to stress the greater importance of physical appearance for women, even when men are the subject of makeovers (Davis et al., 2014). The assumption that beauty is a feminine trait has even affected the protocols of researchers studying the value of beauty. In a 2014 study, McClintock found that prior investigations of the advantages beauty overstated the advantage beauty brought to women in marriage markets because they did not measure the attractiveness of the women's male spouses (2014, p. 578). Hamermesh reports that in experimental situations women's appearance is judged by more exacting standards than those applied to men (Hamermesh, 2011, p. 29). In a review of the literature, Fikkan and Rothblum (2011) concluded that women were more penalized than men for being fat in employment, in romantic relationships, and in health-care settings. Beauty is a gendered embodiment

and a gendered form of capital. Women who are judged beautiful fulfill a gendered social expectation (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). The prizing of women's beauty across multiple fields reinforces the belief that women ought to be beautiful.

4 Race and Class Intersections

Gender as a structure intersects with race and class as social structures (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, broad inequalities of race and class are frequently incorporated into beauty ideals. Several examples from the United States demonstrate these intersections. In the 1950s, beauty was an explicit occupational requirement for airline stewardesses. White supremacist beauty ideals applied within the industry excluded Black women from employment. In 1957, the New York State Commission against Discrimination investigated the case of Dorothy Franklin, a Black woman whose application for a stewardess position was rejected by Trans World Airlines (TWA) (Craig, 2002, p. 68). TWA's representatives claimed that they had not practiced racial discrimination but rather had rejected her on the basis of her appearance. Yet Franklin's race made her appearance categorically unacceptable to the men who were authorized to recognize beauty. As long as the skin tones, facial features, and hair textures of Black women excluded them from the glamorized positions of airline stewardess, the symbolic capital of whiteness seamlessly blended into the corporeal capital of beauty. White racial appearance continues to be favored by employers in service work in the United States (Avery & Marion, 2007, p. 23n46; Walters, 2018; Williams & Connell, 2010, p. 374) requiring Black women and their advocates to continue to contest the boundaries of what is deemed an attractive, professional appearance. Black women experience discrimination via workplace regulations that prohibit the wearing of hairstyles that are recognized as attractive within Black communities. In 2019, California passed the Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act banning workplace discrimination

based on hairstyle. Additional states have enacted similar legislation (Rowe, 2021).

Beauty contests have perpetuated racial inequalities and consequently have been the focus of organized challenges to racism (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Roberts, 2014; Tice, 2012; Yano, 2006). King-O'Riain describes the racialization of beauty in Japanese American beauty contests. Judges' evaluations of beauty involved assessments of the appearance of racial purity of contestants. They prized contestants who were light-skinned but not too light, disadvantaging some mixed-race Japanese Americans while perpetuating prejudices against Japanese women with dark complexions (King-O'Riain, 2006, p. 84).

The incorporation of racial inequality into beauty standards also occurs within fashion modeling. Mears reports that agents code Black women's bodies as lower-class and on that basis exclude the majority of Black models from the most prestigious work (Mears, 2011, p. 196). Ann DuCille has argued that the commercial beauty industry has found ways to profit from the marketing of "certain signifiers of blackness" (DuCille, 1996, p. 27). The general exclusion of Black models from prestigious work therefore occurs alongside a contradictory trend. Driven by the fashion industry's need to garner attention, singular Black models, often having darker skin tones, and recent African origins, are given broad exposure. The industry's need to reach beyond white consumers and to stand out by featuring novel faces has expanded the range of skin tones consecrated as beautiful. However as long as the use of Black models in prestigious settings is rare, Black beauty will continue to be perceived as an exoticized, and therefore marginalized look. At a time when a limited number of dark-skinned women are celebrated as beauties in global media, light skin color still functions in many women's lives as a form of capital (Glenn, 2008, p. 282; Hunter, 2021).

Beauty ideals consecrated at workplaces frequently incorporate bodily practices, such as class-coded application of cosmetics that are grounded in class distinctions (Avery & Marion, 2007; Black, 2004; Otis, 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010). Aesthetics that may be prized

within working-class communities may present barriers to employment, and therefore, the use of look policies in service work can reinforce class inequalities (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Beauty is feminized capital, but gender is co-constructed with race and class. Therefore, fields that consecrate beauty often privilege the appearance of whites and the middle class. One of the privileges of social dominance is the authority to determine beauty, and a weapon of dominance is the designation of ugliness. These dynamics make beauty a stake in racial, ethnic, and national political struggles (Balogun, 2020) creating tensions for people of color who engage in practices such as skin lightening or cosmetic surgery that can be construed as attempts to appear whiter. Cosmetic surgeons respond to these tensions by claiming to transform faces without transgressing racial boundaries (Menon, 2023).

5 Beyond the Boundaries of Fields

The processes that define beauty in modeling, in beauty contests, and in forms of service employment respond to trends emerging beyond the boundaries of their fields and affect the ways in which girls and women feel when they look in the mirror. For example, in the 1950s the unstraightened texture of African American hair was broadly perceived within and beyond Black communities as unsightly (Craig, 2002). Beginning around 1960 Black women and men in social movement organizations began to wear short unstraightened hairstyles as a way of demonstrating racial pride. The unstraightened hairstyles, which came to be known as naturals or afros, spread from social movement organizations to college campuses and through mass media to wider Black communities. The hairstyles became the focus of conflicts in service workplaces. By the late 1960s processes of consecration transformed the way unstraightened Black hair was perceived. The aesthetics that develop in the fields of modeling, beauty pageants, and service workplaces do not entirely originate in those fields. Yet the visibility and prestige of fashion, beauty

contests, and some service positions mean that the aesthetic contests that take place in them will have consequences for how beauty is seen in the larger society.

Bourdieu argues that capital is accumulated labor (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). If capital is accumulated labor, how can beauty, which is sometimes a biological accident, be capital? The holder of capital is rarely the one who labored to produce it. Ugliness provides a useful perspective on the production of beauty. Disabilities scholar Susan Schweik studied laws banning the unsightly from public. Unsightliness, like beauty, is not an “objective aesthetic,” it is, according to Schweik, a “political situation or process” (Schweik, 2009, p. 142). A beautiful face is beautiful because enough people in positions to judge it, and have their judgments carry the weight of authority, deem it so. They and perhaps their ancestors have labored to claim the position of beholders, whose eyes determine beauty. The accumulated labor that stands behind beauty as a form of capital is sometimes the labor of social movements.

6 Limits to the Convertibility of Beauty as Capital

I have shown that beauty is consecrated in a variety of fields as feminized corporeal capital. Since gender is co-constructed with race and class, beauty ideals often reinforce hierarchies of race and class. Here, I return to the question of beauty’s value. If beauty is a form of corporeal capital, how readily may it be converted to wealth or power? Forms of cultural capital such as educational credentials or command of standard grammar can efficiently reproduce advantage. The returns that flow to beauties are less sure. The field of fashion modeling, an employment market in which looks are almost everything, should be the place where a beauty easily reaps the rewards that flow from good looks. Yet it is a field where beauty’s value is revealed as limited. Wissinger argues that public fascination with the field as one in which any girl may have a chance to succeed has produced an enormous pool of applicants (Wissinger, 2015, p. 197). It is normative for girls to wish to be

beautiful, a wish nurtured at early ages by media directed to girls and women (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Kane, 2012, pp. 106–107). While the very small number of women identified at any time as supermodels reap enormous rewards, the legions of models that walk the runways in fashion weeks may be paid in clothes (Mears, 2011, p. 51). Even more girls and women spend time and money in unsuccessful attempts to enter the field. Models have temporary and difficult jobs, and the majority of those deemed beautiful enough to find work as professional models receive limited rewards. To greater and lesser extents, working models, aspiring models, and girls and women consumers participate in unpaid glamour labor (Wissinger, 2015, p. 3) that ultimately produces profit for fashion, cosmetics, and entertainment industries. The promise of the benefits of beauty drives these profits.

Among studies of beauty pageants, Tice’s analysis of campus beauty queens speaks the most to the question of the convertibility of capital accrued within them. She suggests that rewards available to pageant contestants are generally small in relation to the costs of time and money expended. Though campus queens and the colleges and universities that crown them justify the pageants as launching pads for careers, queens reign for a year and then may gain some entrance to fields linked to beauty such as modeling, or in the beauty pageant industry itself (Tice, 2012, pp. 12–13, 81). These fields offer meager rewards to most participants.

Otis studied women who work in various forms of service at multinational hotels in China. Women who were perceived as attractive were preferentially hired. Once hired, women were trained by managers to enact modes of feminine deportment that the managers believed would appeal to international guests. Bodily capital did not convert well to either economic or social capital for women who worked in the hotels. According to Otis “women may gain access to skills and forms of bodily expression that signal their feminine class sophistication, but these alterations rarely enhance their opportunities for employability in markets outside of the consumer service sector, or even in the service sector, as they age” (Otis, 2012, p. 23).

Poorly paid attractive employees brought status and profit to a multinational hotel. The returns to their bodily capital primarily flowed to their employers. Furthermore, some luxury hotels that catered to local businessmen were sites of prostitution. Women who worked in service occupations in these hotels had to carefully calibrate their appearance so that they would be perceived as attractive enough to meet workplace standards but not mistaken for prostitutes (Otis, 2012, pp. 116–117).

Contrary to those who argue that women broadly profit from their attractiveness, studies of occupations that require women to be attractive show that the rewards are usually slight. In the accounting of beauty's rewards across a spectrum of occupations reported by Hamermesh, men perceived as handsome, working in professions that are not necessarily focused on appearance, are the most likely to profit from appearance at work (Hamermesh, 2011, p. 55). This finding was supported in a review of quantitative studies of the economic benefits of attractiveness across a range of professional occupations (Kukkonen et al., 2023). Is there a relationship between beauty's feminine gender and its limited convertibility? In the following section, I suggest three sources of the devaluation of beauty as a form of capital: (1) the subordinate position of beauties, (2) the linkage of beauty and sex, and (3) the alienation of the profits of beauty. Each of these arises from beauty's status as feminized corporeal capital.

6.1 Beauty as the Capital of Subordinates

Historical and ethnographic studies of fields in which women's financial rewards are tied to their appearance demonstrate that beauty is the capital of subordinates. Elizabeth Bernstein studied prostitutes and described the "bodily capital" of street-walking prostitutes as "a symbolic currency often acquired by members of the dominated fractions

of society who, deprived of other forms of social power, cultivate their bodies as value-producing investments" (Bernstein, 2007, p. 42). Bernstein identifies appearance as the resource of last resort. Much of the work available to large numbers of employees in which appearance explicitly matters is poorly paid, low status, and more likely to be filled by young women.

Beauty is a form of corporeal capital that loses value over time, especially for women. The reign of a beauty queen is a year. The average modeling career is over in fewer than five years and is not lucrative (Mears, 2011, p. 12). When, in 1953, American Airlines imposed an age limit of 32 years on its stewardesses, its justification was that attractive appearance was unusual in women older than 32 (Barry, 2007, pp. 112–113). The feminized beauty that is rewarded in fashion, beauty pageants, and service work is youthful beauty. In historic moments when the designation beauty was normatively applied to men, the beauties were younger men who were the objects of desire of more powerful older men. Beauty is the corporeal capital of valued subordinates in their youth.

An instance of aesthetic over-qualification reveals the subordination inherent in being positioned as a beauty, and the limits that are built into beauty's purported advantages. In a widely reported 2013 case, a woman in the United States lost her job because her employer found her to be "too beautiful." The 13 July *New York Times* reported that a dentist fired his assistant because, as he claimed, he feared the effect of her beauty on his marriage. The case of the dental assistant who was too beautiful to keep her job highlights the insecurity built into beauty as a form of capital. It is illustrative of a point made by Lisa Adkins that when jobs are gendered, "power at work" involves "issues such as sexuality, desire, and pleasure" (Adkins, 2001, p. 672). The dental assistant's firing calls attention to the desire that is at the heart of the recognition of beauty and the vulnerability of beauties to judgments of those authorized to behold, judge, hire, and fire them.

6.2 The Linkage of Beauty and Sex

Beauty is not risk-free. Beauty is a form of capital that is potentially stigmatizing for women because it sexualizes, and sex outside of marriage has been and continues to be stigmatizing for women (Currier, 2013). Struggles to define the most favored look within fashion modeling and within beauty contests have been intertwined with efforts to raise the prestige of the field as a whole and participants within it. This has involved differentiating participants from commercial sex workers and other marginalized categories of women. John Robert Powers, whose agency established modeling as a profession in the 1920s and 1930s, worked to project the respectability of the women he hired as models (Wissinger, 2015, pp. 119–123). Powers marketed feminized corporeal capital, a product that at the time was easily associated with sex work, and therefore a product with a legitimacy problem. His solution was to carefully control public perceptions of the wholesomeness and professionalism of his models and to promote them as “long-stemmed American beauties,” raising modeling’s status by aligning it with national pride. In the first half of the twentieth century, Miss America pageant director Lenore Slaughter introduced a talent component to the contest in 1938, and in the 1940s the pageant associated a college scholarship with the contest to make it appear to be more than a display of women’s flesh (Banet-Weiser, 1999, pp. 39–40; Tice, 2012, pp. 30–31).

Darlene Jespersen, employed for 20 years by Harrah’s casino as a bartender, was fired for refusing to wear make-up after the corporation imposed new appearance rules. Avery and Marion suggest that Jespersen refused to comply with the new appearance guidelines because she felt that they blurred the lines between higher status bartenders and lower status, sexualized barmaids (Avery & Marion, 2007, p. 83). The luxury hotel workers studied by Otis had to carefully manage their appearance to meet workplace expectations for attractiveness while fending off harassment by customers who misidentified them as sex workers. The taint of association with sex work is a problem

for fields in which women’s beauty is required, especially when fields of service work are in emergent stages such as modeling in the 1920s and the work performed by women in luxury hotels in China.

Research on the convertibility of investments in attractiveness suggests that working-class girls and women are especially unlikely to reap its rewards because they are frequently misrecognized as hypersexual. Julie Bettie’s study of working-class Latinas in the United States (Bettie, 2003) found that investments in feminine appearance disadvantaged them in school settings. Teachers wrongly perceived them as likely to become young mothers and unsuitable for college preparatory tracks. The returns to beauty available to the working-class English women studied by Skeggs (1997) were limited because their class positions rendered them especially vulnerable to disrespect. Appearing too feminine undermined the respectability they wished to claim.

6.3 Alienation of the Profits of Beauty

Field analysis brings into the analytical frame all of the players who are invested in beauty’s definition. Bringing these players into view raises a question beyond that of the value of beauty for beautiful women. It allows us to ask who profits the most from women’s beauty. The relatively low wages of beautiful workers increase corporate profits. Multinational hotels in China profit from hiring attractive women and paying them poorly. Otis explained that women hotel workers’ bodies function as “a gendered and class resource that men accumulate” (Otis, 2012, p. 22). Luxury hotels alienate the profits that arise from the beauty of women’s faces and bodies. A similar alienation occurs in the more profitable work performed by models. Wissinger quotes a successful model lamenting that the problem of having a model’s look is “that you don’t own it. You can never own it, and it can be taken away from you at any moment” (Wissinger, 2015, p. 171). In VIP party circuits promoters reap substantial profits from the beauty of “girls” whom they recruit to

attend parties for food, drinks, and the promise of fun (Mears, 2015, 2020).

Mears argues that sociologists must move beyond thinking of embodied capital in terms of “individual-level rewards” (Mears, 2015, p. 2). Lynn Chancer suggested something similar when she wrote “women are forced into constituting a major form of capital: what we might call here ‘sexual capital’... women have to take back their own identities and bodies” (Chancer, 1998, 261). Skeggs characterized women as “sign-bearing carriers” of cultural capital (Skeggs, 2004, p. 22). Empirical studies of beauty reveal the frequent divide between those who bear embodied cultural capital and those who profit from it. Bourdieu theorized three forms of cultural capital:

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state... (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

As beauties, women may be both possessors of capital in the embodied state and the object possessed, the “cultural good,” like “instruments, [or] machines” that produces profit for another.

Indeed, it is through alienation that beauty becomes most profitable.

Bourdieu noted the negating collision of embodied and objectified forms of capital that takes place in women’s bodies when he observed that “women enter the dialectic of pretension and distinction more as capital-bearing objects than capital-accruing subjects” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 174). A study of attitudes in Finland found social approval of women’s efforts to become attractive but disapproval of their attempts to profit from beauty (Sarpila et al., 2020). Women live these contradictions. They know that they will be held accountable to standards of beauty and will risk stigma if they do not attempt to be beautiful. They recognize beauty as a route to pleasure and profit, albeit one fraught with dangers and uncertainties. Many therefore invest time and money in glamour labor to avoid stigma and for the pleasures and uncertain rewards achieving beauty may bring.

7 Conclusion

A body is only beautiful if it is made so by a way of seeing. Too often laymen, social theorists and social scientists are dazed and confused by beauty and lose sight of its social underpinnings. Though beauty may seem to disrupt social hierarchies, it is a social product. Only a form of beauty that is socially recognizable in a given historical moment and cultural setting can have such force. I have used Bourdieu’s field theory to argue that beauty is corporeal capital, produced like other capital in fields. In this application, I am extending Bourdieu’s model to areas to which he devoted relatively little attention—to beauty specifically—and to the broader issue of gender. Bourdieu neglected gender for much of his scholarly life. Though late in his career, Bourdieu identified masculine domination as the “prime example” of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 1), class overshadows gender in the majority of his writing (Black, 2004, p. 66; Lovell, 2000, p. 20; Mottier, 2002, p. 346; Shilling, 2003, p. 128). Bourdieu made brief references to beauty, and they are worth considering in this context. Beauty appears in a passage of Bourdieu’s, 1984 *Distinction* (1984, p. 193) and strikingly, the same passage appears, with minor alterations in translation in his 2001 *Masculine Domination*.

Thus bodies would have every chance of being valued strictly in accordance with the positions of their owners in the social space if the autonomy of the logic of biological heredity did not sometimes, and exceptionally, bestow on the economically and socially most deprived the rarest bodily properties, such as beauty (which is then called ‘fatal’ because it threatens the established order), and, if conversely, the accidents of genetics did not sometimes deprive the ‘great’ of the bodily attributes of their position, such as beauty or height. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 65)

In the quotation beauty appears as an inherently valuable entity with the power to undermine the established social order. Struck by beauty’s power, Bourdieu, the premier social theorist of embodied capital, seemed to momentarily cede sociological ground to biology. I provide the lengthy quotation because it is one that has received attention from other scholars who have attempted to tease out the place of physical body in Bourdieu’s work

(Martin & George, 2006, pp. 125–26; Shilling, 2003, p. 124). In it, biological accidents crash into the close fit of class and physical embodiment. Beauty appears as a disruptive force. It is a force that is external to the system of class stratification and it has the power to fatally attract across class lines.

Through an examination of fields that produce profit from beauty, I have shown that the social significance of the bodily features that constitute appearance will always be influenced by the socially-derived meanings that are applied to them. When considered alone, class cannot illuminate the relationships between judgments of beauty and social structure. Indeed without a gender analysis beauty may seem to disrupt the social order. If the force of beauty is considered with gender in mind, what is evident is that the social valuing of beauty as a feminine trait is a pillar of gender as a structure.

By applying field theory to beauty, I have argued that beauty is a phenomenon that is as social as it is physical. Beauty is not a problematic case for social theory—a biological exception to an otherwise social world—but instead an especially telling instance, which illuminates the importance of gender for corporeal forms of capital. Analysis of beauty as a physical and social phenomenon tells us that gender matters for corporeal capital, and gender always intersects with race and class. A study by Monk and his colleagues of how race and gender affect the economic benefit of attractiveness found that “bodily capital is unlikely to function perfectly as currency; instead its value is likely to be inextricably linked to the value of its bearer” (Monk et al., 2021, p. 204). The broad classification of bodies as male or female carries social expectations for differing forms of bodily capital. Beauty is a feminized form of capital. It raises a woman’s status but only to a level beneath that of others who are authorized to consecrate and benefit from her beauty.

When a certain look gains enduring recognition as beauty it functions as symbolic capital. Beauty is an appearance whose dazzling effect erases its own origins in processes of aesthetic consecration. According to Bourdieu, among forms of capital,

cultural capital is the most likely to “function as symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246). Cultural capital is likely to be misrecognized as merit, talent, or fate, rather than accumulated privilege. If that is the case, when beauty appears to disrupt, it is not that a biological accident has interrupted the working of social forces, but that the symbolic capital associated with certain kinds of appearance masks the social accumulation of advantage.

Beauty as feminized capital masks masculine privilege. Beauty reproduces male power because it reinforces women’s dependence on their attractiveness to men. Gender as a structure intersects with race and class as structures. Beauty may function like capital, but it does not work like money, whose value is the same in any hand. It is more like foil-wrapped chocolate candy money, which when moved to a pocket on a hot day melts and becomes worthless, and soiling. Beauty’s value will be enhanced, diminished, wiped out, or made perverse depending upon whether it is located in bodies recognized as male or female, how the body is racialized, its age, and perceived economic class. Further research can ask similar questions regarding the gender of other forms of corporeal capital. Are there forms of embodiment such as a muscular physique, tall stature, or displays of emotion that might function within some fields as masculine corporeal capital? What can be discovered about structures of inequality when we analyze the convertibility of masculine corporeal capital? How do race and class affect the convertibility of masculine corporeal capital? Beauty is not just an odd case for the study of corporeal capital; it is a crucial one, crucial for revealing how corporeal capital works.

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Maxine Leeds Craig is Professor Emerita in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Davis. She studies the politics of beauty, and the ways in which social structures of race, gender, and class are lived in day-to-day embodiment. She is the author of *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move* (Oxford University Press 2014), *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press 2002), and editor of the *Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics* (2021).

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Beauty and Morality

Heather Widdows

1 Introduction

This chapter explores the dynamic relationship between beauty and morality. It makes a philosophical argument that beauty, understood as the physical appearance of the body and the face, is more valued than ever before. As a result, attaining the beauty ideal, being thin, firm, smooth and young enough, has become for very many a moral imperative, something we feel we have a duty to do, such that non-engagement makes us feel like failures. This failure is moral in that it induces shame of the self, a belief we are bad or not good enough, and therefore not deserving of other goods (for example, career success, economic success and relationship success). Valuing beauty in this way is a dramatic change from how beauty was valued in previous generations; appearance did matter, but only to some people, some of the time, and it did not matter across domains and irrespective of what else was valued.¹ Understanding this change, and particularly the way that beauty success and failure is morally tinged, helps us to understand why beauty is increasingly valued over

other goods, such as health and education, and why perceived beauty failure is so devastating, evidenced, for example, in the exponential rise in body image anxiety.

Philosophy is a theoretical discipline, which seeks to provide insight and give explanations with regard to how people think and what they value and, in its political and ethical forms, give guidance for collective and individual living. As a result, it is different to social science disciplines in two key ways: First it is a normative discipline as well as a descriptive discipline. In other words, it considers how things should be as well as how things are, and makes arguments for better and worse individual and collective ways of living. Second, while empirically informed, it is not an empirical discipline. Philosophy abstracts from particulars, to make claims about broad changes in moral and political understandings. Accordingly, it often uses the second person, ‘we’, to describe changes which are evident in value frameworks and individual commitments, across broad groups of people. Exactly how these changes manifest is often very different in different demographics, and in the case of beauty, this is absolutely the case. For example, the increasing dominance of the beauty ideal, and evidence that individuals are valuing beauty more and differently, is different in different places. For example, a middle-class woman in the West may show this by increased attention to diet and exercise and the prioritising ‘tweckments’, a working-class woman, with less resources, may opt for

¹For a fuller evidenced argument of the changes in how beauty is valued across demographics, for example by men as well as women, by the old as well as the young, and irrespective of profession, see Chap 2, ‘Life is one long catwalk’, of *Perfect Me* (Widdows, 2018a).

H. Widdows (✉)
University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
e-mail: heather.widdows@warwick.ac.uk

more visible cosmetic surgery, and a poor woman in sub-Saharan Africa, with far less resource, might prioritise the purchase of skin-lightening creams over other basic goods. Furthermore, the pressure to meet beauty standards falls differently on different groups, in general, more on women than men, and more on the young than the old. The philosophical claim is that despite these real and important differences, across contexts and across demographics, everywhere there is a change to the way beauty is valued. While valued differently by different individuals and groups, in all groups it is valued more than it was, and more time, money and effort are spent on improving appearance. By seeing the similarity in these very different practices, philosophy is able to make general claims about the way that beauty is valued compared to other goods, while recognising that some individuals and some sub-cultures can hold very different values. The advantage of philosophical analysis is that it can capture big picture changes in value frameworks, which fundamentally impact on how we conceive of human beings, human selves, values and interactions, providing an explanatory framework for other types of research. With regard to beauty philosophy captures the global value-shift, which is important to understand and explain the changing place of beauty socially, culturally and for individuals. The disadvantage of philosophy is that it lacks the detail of individual case studies and can neglect the complexities of differences between communities and individuals. A full understanding of any subject requires insight, interaction and learning from different disciplines, and the insights of this chapter are complemented, challenged and extended by the different disciplinary insights of the other chapters in the volume.

The argument of the chapter proceeds in sections. In Section 2.1, it outlines the traditional rejection of beauty as an unimportant and trivial good. Valuing beauty was regarded either as amoral, because beauty is irrelevant to life going well, or as immoral, because it is morally wrong to value beauty. Section 2.2 introduces empirical evidence to show that in fact beauty is both valued and valuable. Section 2.3 explores how, contra traditional assumptions, beauty is for

many the most valuable good, and beyond what is justified by the empirical evidence. It gives five reasons to support the claim that beauty is morally valuable, and in fact functioning as an ethical ideal, such that, for many, engaging in beauty is a moral duty. Section 3. draws on stories from the EverydayLookism project to illustrate the moral shame of beauty failure, further illustrating the moral dimension of beauty. The chapter finishes, Section 4, with reflections on the transformative implications for research of recognising the moral pull of the beauty ideal.

Understanding the moral imperative that drives beauty engagement explains many otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. For example, it explains why people are willing to undergo all kinds of risky practices, from skin lightening to buttock implants, and why, despite the evidence that ideal bodies are unobtainable, we continue to strive for them and feel shame when we fail. How to respond to the changing value of beauty, in an increasingly visual and virtual culture, is likely to become a key preoccupation of future years. Key to ensuring that future interventions are effective is recognising that beauty engagement is underpinned by moral commitment.

2 Valuing Beauty

2.1 Beauty as Amoral or Immoral

This section will explore the connection between beauty and morality. In particular that, despite the importance of beauty in the earliest understandings of moral value, physical beauty has largely been regarded as morally suspect, something which we are misguided or wrong to pursue.

In the earliest Western Philosophy, beauty was regarded as an important moral value, with a direct connection to the values of goodness and truth. Beauty was considered valuable for itself, and as the value that helps us attain moral virtue and recognise goodness. For example, Plato describes our instinctual love of beauty and sees beauty as a powerful moral motivator, obviously valuable, as we “apprehend it through the clearest of our senses, clear and resplendent” (Plato, ed.

Hamilton and Huntington, 1989, p. 497). Beauty is more immediately and obviously valuable than other “beloved goods”, as beauty alone, “has been ordained, to be most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all” (Plato, ed. Hamilton and Huntington, 1989, p. 497). Beauty’s early prominence as an important moral value was not maintained. There are myriad reasons, perhaps most obviously, the rejection of the body in Christian thinking, with the body, particularly women’s bodies, regarded as sources of temptation and evil. The dualisms of Christianity—good/evil, mind/body, reason/feeling, male/female—were echoed in Western philosophy. The epitome of the elevation of reason is Descartes’ famous ‘I think therefore I am’. If what matters for philosophy is the mind, then neglecting and distaining the body is not surprising. As a result, in contemporary moral theory, not only is beauty neglected, but when it is discussed, which is rare, beauty is presented as the archetypal non-moral value. Beauty is either regarded as irrelevant to whether life goes well or morally suspect, an unworthy good which is wrong to value. That valuing beauty is regarded as amoral or immoral is illustrated in the typical way that the prominent moral, social and political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson uses beauty in her argument about how to revise theories of justice.

In her influential paper, ‘What is the Point of Equality?’, Anderson (1999) uses beauty as the example of a good that is not morally valuable and is immoral to value. Importantly, she does not provide an argument or reasons for why this is the case, but assumes that it is obviously and self-evidently so. In the paper, she is considering the proper purpose of theories of justice. In so doing, she talks about the kinds of goods which fall within the sphere of justice. In other words, the kinds of goods that are important enough to require some form of State intervention. Intervention can come in a number of forms: redistribution to ensure that everyone has a fair share, or sufficient, of these goods; mitigation to reduce the injustice suffered by a lack of such goods; or direct compensation for the lack of such goods. Theorists disagree on exactly which goods fall into the sphere of justice, but common

goods include, wealth, education and, sometimes, health or healthcare.² A good which emphatically does not fall under the sphere of justice is beauty. Accordingly, Anderson states: “When is a deficit so bad as to require compensation? One doesn’t want anyone with any trivial personal dissatisfaction, such as having bad hair, to be entitled to compensation” (Anderson, 1999, p. 303).

Anderson assumes that beauty is not, and should not be, morally valuable. She does recognise that some people value beauty, but she dismisses these people. It is *trivial* to think that ‘bad hair’, for which we can read appearance in general, is the kind of good which might be important. For Anderson beauty is not only unimportant, but morally suspect, a good you are wrong to value. She continues:

Suppose a vain person would get hysterical over the prospect of being genetically determined to have a hooked nose. A person’s anxiety over this prospect might be enough to make it rational for her to take out insurance for plastic surgery before knowing how her nose will turn out. It is hard to see how such as preference could create an obligation on the part of society to pay for her plastic surgery. Moreover many people don’t see hooked noses as such a bad thing, and many of these people have hooked noses: they would rightly feel insulted if society treating having a hooked nose as such as grievous defect that is was entitled to compensation. (Anderson, 1999, p. 303)

While she recognises some people value beauty, and they might rationally act to preserve or enhance their beauty, she dismisses beauty as generally valuable. For her beauty is not a good that falls into the sphere of justice, and therefore not something which society might distribute, or mitigate or compensate a lack of. Bad hair is trivial, a hook nose might make a vain individual anxious, but there is no justice obligation to correct

² Perhaps the most famous theory of justice is that put forward by John Rawls in his 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls’ list of goods which fall within the sphere of justice includes “rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth” (Rawls, 1971, p. 214). Rawls does not include health in this list, but others in the Rawlsian tradition do, for example, Norman Daniels argues that health, or more accurately health care, is social good necessary for normal functioning and therefore belongs in the sphere of justice (Daniels, 1985).

this; indeed it would be harmful and discriminatory to others to do so. Beauty is valued by the anxious and vain person, not by the balanced and good person.³ The moral dismissal is strident, and valuing beauty is morally wrong. It is a category mistake to think that beauty is morally valuable, and therefore, those who value beauty are misguided, deluded or morally suspect.

Similar arguments are made by feminist philosophers and thinkers, although not for overtly *moral* reasons, rather on the grounds that engaging in beauty is part of the subordination of women. Key feminist thinkers in this tradition include: Sandra Bartky (1990), an influential professor of philosophy and gender studies; Susan Bordo (1993), a well-regarded philosopher and gender studies scholar, Andrea Dworkin (1974), an important feminist activist and writer, best known for her critique of pornography; Sheila Jeffreys (2005), professor of political science; and Iris Marion Young (2005), famous political philosopher and socialist feminist.⁴ All these thinkers reject beauty as a trivial good, a tool of patriarchy, something women are duped into valuing to maintain gender inequality.

Dworkin's classic account illustrates this position. She dismisses beauty engagement as part of the mechanism for gender subordination; "we recognized all of our social behaviour as learned behaviour that functioned for survival in a sexist world: we painted ourselves, smiled, exposed legs and ass, had children, kept house, as our accommodations to the reality of power politics" (Dworkin, 1974, p. 21). More recently, in a similar

vein, Jeffreys states that "beauty practices can reasonably be understood to be for the benefit of men...women are expected to both 'complement' and 'compliment' men" (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 32). Women are valued for their superficial appearance, while men are valued for their intellect, earning power, physical prowess, provider status and so on. The pursuit of beauty, for these thinkers, if not quite immoral is certainly morally or politically, suspect.⁵

The next two sections will show that the philosophical dismissal of beauty as an amoral or immoral good is not a widely shared view in contemporary society. Beauty is in fact valued, and having or lacking beauty does make life go better or worse. Moreover, in direct contrast to the philosophical view, beauty is valued beyond the empirically proven advantages it gives, such that, for many, beauty is morally valuable, something we have a moral duty to pursue.

2.1.1 The Value of Beauty

The view that beauty is not valuable—an amoral or immoral good—is one which has been held beyond the academy. For example, the Christian rejection of the body and appearance as vanity was a dominant social and cultural position that shaped Western culture. The remnants of this view, that beauty doesn't or shouldn't matter, are still evident in popular culture: 'Don't judge a book by its cover', 'It's what's on the inside that counts', 'Beauty is skin-deep'. In this section, I will explore the empirical evidence which cumulatively shows that, despite the persistence of these views, beauty is increasingly valuable and valued in contemporary society.

That beauty is a valuable good is an empirical claim which is supported by considerable evidence. Most work has been done with regard to employment. For example, in his influential

³ While Anderson dismisses beauty as a good which can be morally valuable, she does at least consider beauty, unlike most justice scholars. For example, she recognises that appearance flaws can impact on how well life goes, for example, a "birth defect, affecting not only a person's appearance, that is considered so abhorrent by current social norms that people tend to shun those who have it" (Anderson, 1999, p. 335).

⁴ There have also been many more popular and journalistic books, perhaps most famously Naomi Wolf's best seller, *The Beauty Myth*, (1990). Wolf has become an increasingly controversial writer and activist supporting movements such as the anti-vax movement, and some of her research has been discredited. Nonetheless, *The Beauty Myth* was an accessible account of the dominance of the beauty ideal and important in the debate.

⁵ There are occasional challenges to this view from within this tradition, for example, Ann Cahill talks about the joy of getting ready for her brother's wedding with her sisters (2003), and Iris Marion Young speaks of the joy of touching, wearing and sharing clothes (2005). Second wave feminism was challenged directly by third wave feminism, but this second wave view of beauty is remarkably uniform.

book, *Beauty Pays* (2011), Hamermesh describes a beauty premium and an ugly penalty; a “3 or 4 percent premium for good looking workers”, and total gap of 12 to 13 per cent between those who are unattractive and attractive (Hamermesh, 2011, p. 46). Such that for men there is 17 per cent difference in earnings between good-looking men and bad-looking men, and 12 per cent between good-looking women and bad-looking women (Hamermesh, 2011, p. 46). Hamermesh’s conclusion is contested, not least by authors in this volume, for example, Craig’s chapter on ‘Beauty as Subordinate Capital’, yet the general claim, that attractiveness tends to bring advantage over unattractiveness holds. The ‘halo effect’ is well documented and leads attractive people to be assumed to have positive personality traits, such as friendliness, competence and intelligence (Eagly et al., 1991). Conversely, unattractive people are judged negatively, as lazy or less trustworthy, evidenced by higher conviction rates and harsher punishments for the unattractive (Mocan & Tekin, 2010). As noted by Raudenska in this volume, “simply put, studies conclude that other people (particularly in the job market, amongst co-workers or managers) believe and expect, based on individual’s physical attractiveness, that attractive people have innumerable positive traits and less attractive people have more negative traits. As a result, they are treated differently based on these expectations”.

While conforming to the beauty tends to bring advantage, and failure to conform disadvantage, the picture is not uniform across demographics. For instance, as Craig writes in this volume, while beauty is a form of capital “the returns beauty provides to beautiful women are limited and carry liabilities”. Likewise, hierarchies of beauty should not be considered in isolation, and there are complex relationships between lookism, racism and sexism; for example, thinness can be valued for class or race reasons, in addition to appearance reasons. However, the interaction is not univocal, and beauty can challenge and undercut, as well as reinforce and exacerbate, other hierarchies of power. This said, as a general rule, being beautiful—being thin, firm, smooth and young enough—makes life go better, and lacking beauty, being unattractive, makes life go worse.

While the actual benefits that beauty affords are still contested, it is the case that we are valuing beauty more (even if it may not deliver all we believe or hope it will). In our work lives and our personal lives beauty is both valued and valuable. That beauty is valuable is beginning to be taken seriously by policymakers and the public more generally. For example, in the increasing recognition that lookism is a serious form of discrimination or that body image anxiety is devastating and at epidemic proportions amongst young people, as Chambers notes, “distress about our bodies has reached epidemic levels” (Chambers, 2022, p. 2). Yet, as the next section will show, our commitment to beauty cannot be explained by the empirical evidence alone. We value beauty far more than is justified by the evidence. Only recognising the central place of beauty in our moral framework can explain our commitment to beauty.

2.1.2 Beauty as a Moral Duty

In this section, I will suggest that beauty is not a trivial good, but an important good which is valued not just instrumentally but intrinsically, as a dominant moral good. Indeed, conforming to beauty ideals has become a moral duty, an ethical imperative, shaping not only how others treat us, but how we think of ourselves. Accordingly, beauty is a serious moral good, and only if we understand this, can we understand what is happening in our increasingly visual and virtual culture.

In *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, I argued that beauty has become a dominant, demanding and global ethical ideal. An ethical ideal is a value framework according to which we order and structure our daily lives, our relationships, community and society. Value frameworks come in many different types, each with their own dominant values, values against which we judge ourselves and others and which we strive to attain. Examples of ethical ideals include: the Aristotelian value framework, where virtues are the moderate path between excess, for example, bravery is the virtue between cowardliness and foolhardiness (Crisp, 2014); the stoic ideal with the primary virtues of justice and temperance; the warrior ideal that endorses the ‘warrior virtues’ of bravery and honour; and the Christian ideal, which

values faith, hope and charity (Taylor, 1989). To say that beauty has become an ethical ideal is to say that we value beauty as a primary good, valuable not just for what it delivers but for itself. We believe that if we conform to the four features of the beauty ideal—thinness, firmness, smoothness and youth—we will have a better life, we will succeed, we will be good. We regard the attainment of the ideal, and the body work required, as virtuous, and failure to attain the ideal, as a vice. The view that beauty is functioning in this way is encapsulated in this quote from a 16-year-old young woman:

I think people think oh I have to look like that because they think that they will have a perfect life as well. If I'm beautiful, if I'm attractive, if I'm skinny then everything else in my life has to come up as well, like my school grades will come up, I'll get a boyfriend, you know I'll have a great social life. (Tiggemann et al., 2000, p. 649)

The empirical evidence of the last section shows that beauty does make life go better in certain ways, but to say that beauty has become an ethical ideal goes beyond this. Being more attractive might make it more likely that you get an interview for certain jobs, but only with the right qualifications. Similarly, it might make it more likely that you get a first date, but beauty alone will not maintain a relationship. To endorse beauty as an ethical ideal is to do more than recognise that beauty can make life go better, it is to adopt beauty as a central value, a value which shapes daily practices and long-term goals. It is to change how we judge ourselves and others; it is an elevation of appearance over other values. That beauty is now functioning as an ethical ideal is evidenced in numerous ways, and in the rest of this section, I will outline five of these: first, that we judge success and failure according to conformity to the ideal; second, that engagement is virtuous; third, that beauty is what we desire and strive for; fourth, that we believe beauty will deliver; and fifth, that the emotions which attach to beauty success and failure are moral emotions.

First, we judge ourselves (and others) according to how we look. Who we are, and whether we are good enough, is read directly from our bodies, from the extent to which we conform with the beauty ideal (Widdows, 2018a). Others make similar claims, for example, Clare Chambers

argues “on the ordinary day-to-day level we associate our bodies very deeply with ourselves...we understand criticism of our bodies to be criticism of ourselves, and we imagine our changed bodies to be reflective of our changed selves” (Chambers, 2022, p. 319). Increasingly, and in many contexts and demographics we judge ourselves successful when we attain the beauty ideal, and failures when we do not. Moreover, these are moral judgements, global judgements of the self, not local judgements of one aspect of the self.

Second, and directly connected, we regard beauty engagement and body work as virtuous and failure to engage as a moral vice. We are good, when we go to the gym, stick to the diet, and perform the daily tasks of routine maintenance. Bad, when we let ourselves go, when we eat the ‘naughty’ cake, or the sinful, or synful, food.⁶ Remember that the details of what is required differ in different demographics and contexts. For example, in some places, thinness is more valuable than smooth and toned skin, in others, pale skin is most important, in others, particular breast or buttock shapes dominate. Moreover, even though the trends are towards a more similar ideal bodies—bodies which are thin, firm, smooth and young—very different narratives and justifications are used to make body engagement justified and accepted. Yet the global ideal is converging, and thinness, smoothness, firmness and youth are the emerging global ideal.⁷ Moreover, globally, working on the body has become more important, while body work still falls more

⁶ Slimming World’s ‘Syns’ are foods which are high in fat or sugar have a ‘Syn’ value, and slimming world members are “encouraged to plan 5–15 Syns a day” (Slimming World). Slimming World state that ‘Syn’ stands for ‘synergy’ between foods, though before Syns there was a ‘Sin-A-Day’ eating plan.

⁷ For a fuller evidenced argument that there is an emerging global ideal, see Chap. 3, ‘A new (miss) world order’ of *Perfect Me* (2018a). Please note the claim is not that the ideal is the same in all places, but that the trends to thinness, firmness, smoothness and youth, track similarly, resulting in global convergence. It is also the case that while there is increasing pressure to engage in beauty practices and value appearance for men, there is, as yet, no global ideal. The only global feature which can be evidenced for men is tallness.

heavily on some demographics—on women more than men and the young more than the old—it is more important across demographics. And for many people working towards the beauty ideal, in the form of body work and beauty engagement, has become a (moral) duty, required, something people feel they must do.

Third, attaining the beauty ideal is what we desire most, what we aim and strive for. For example, New Years' Resolutions—the goals we set for ourselves—are primarily concerned with improving the body. The top three UK New Years' resolutions of 2022 for women repeating the trends of earlier years were “Doing more exercise” (51%), “losing weight” (44%) and “improving my diet” (42%) (Ibbetson, 2021). These goals are increasingly globally dominant, for example the prevalence of the thin-ideal is international (Schaefer et al., 2019).

Fourth, increasingly we believe that if we attain the beauty ideal we will attain the goods of the good life. As noted in last section, there is some evidence that attractive people will be granted more opportunities and better treatment. But they will not, contrary to the belief of the 16-year-old young woman quoted above, be automatically successful. Beauty alone will not provide better relationships, better friendships, more money or a better job. But, just as the good Christian believes that she will be rewarded in this life or the next for exhibiting Christian values, so those who fall under the beauty ideal believe their success and hard work will be rewarded when they better approximate the beauty ideal.

A fifth reason for thinking that beauty is functioning as an ethical ideal is the emotions which attach to beauty success and failure are profoundly moral (Widdows, 2018a, pp. 31–35). Emotions of praise, blame, shame and guilt. Shame, and shaming, is prevalent across beauty practices, with fat shaming being regarded as an almost acceptable form of shaming. However, shame can attach to almost any perceived beauty failure and, characteristically of moral failure, the shame is not local shame, for a bad action, but global shame, shame of the self. I will return to this briefly in the next section.

Taken together beauty has, for many, become an ethical ideal, fundamentally connected to morality. Increasingly beauty is valued irrespective of profession and continues to be dominant as we age, and applies at times when previously it did not, for example, in illness.⁸

2.2 Case Study: Body Shame as Moral Shame

That people are willing to risk their health, and even their lives, to improve their appearance, is often incomprehensible to those who don't fall under the ideal. Why would people put their health at risk for a trivial good like beauty? But if beauty is not a trivial good, but rather a valuable moral good, fundamentally tied to judgments of self-worth, then valuing beauty over health begins to make sense. For those who fall under the ideal almost any risk is worth it to enhance appearance. Many routine beauty practices, such as skin lightening and tanning, carry extensive health risks, and some forms of cosmetic surgery, such as buttock implants, are extremely risky (Widdows, 2018a; Widdows, 2018b). The costs of failing to live up the ideal are significant. As noted in Sect. 2.2, there are well-documented disadvantages of opportunity and treatment for the unattractive. In this section, I focus on one internal moral harm which attaches to perceived beauty failure, that of shame.

If beauty is functioning as an ethical ideal, then perceived moral failure induces and invokes moral shame, shame of the self. Moral shame, unlike some other types of shame, is about wrong-doing or wrong-being. As Lucy O'Brian notes, on the 'adverse self-evaluation model' of shame, a model of shame where you feel you have done something wrong, for “X to feel shame is for X to construe herself as having done, or being, something bad” (O'Brian, 2020, p. 546).⁹ When it comes to body

⁸ Chap. 2 of *Perfect Me* documents how the beauty ideal has extended, such that it continues to be dominant into old age and times of illness, and applies irrespective of profession, to politicians, sportswomen and the woman on the street (Widdows, 2018b, pp. 50–69).

⁹ There are different philosophical accounts of shame, and some philosophers rule out body shame as moral shame;

shame, as noted in the last section, criticism of our bodies is received as criticism of ourselves. The below stories are taken from the Everyday-Lookism Project. The project was modelled on the very successful EverydaySexism project, and it seeks to raise awareness of lookism and begin to push back against it by sharing lookist stories. Very many of the stories convey shame:

Whilst having my legs waxed, the beautician attempted to body shame me into waxing everything else too. Left feeling disgusted with my body and ashamed about my decision not to remove more hair. (EverydayLookism, Story 137)

My very drunk friend looked at me and said “you might be fat but at least you’re pretty”- as if one should cancel out the other. I think about that a lot. It was over 9 years ago. (EverydayLookism, Story 138)

As a teenager, perhaps 12 or 13, a boy pointed at my bare legs and laughed at how hairy they were. Everyone around me joined him in laughing at me. I felt utterly ashamed. I had up until this point not even noticed. That was the last time... I’ve probably thought about my body hair everyday for 20 years. (EverydayLookism, Story 244)

My friends called me ‘finger toes’ when I wore sandals to an evening out. I never buy or wear open shoes because of that and it was 15 years ago. (EverydayLookism, Story 411)

I was picked to play a ballerina in a school play when I was in year 1 (age 5-6). Someone’s mum complained to the teacher because I was “too fat to be a ballerina.” My mum then chose to keep reminding me about this comment years later. I’m 29 and it still bothers me to this day. (Everyday-Lookism, Story 501)

There is lots of further work to be done on body shame, morality and beauty ideals. But what is important for understanding the relationship between beauty and morality is recognising that the shame which attaches to beauty failure is shame of self—moral shame—it is shame that runs deep and stays with people for a long time. Recognising this helps to explain why people will do almost anything to attain the ideal, even when they know ideal bodies are unobtainable. Recognising the way beauty engagement is intimately connected to and intertwined with morality has extraordinary explanatory force, with implications for future research, policy and practice.

however, for the purposes of this paper, what matters is whether people feel ashamed of their bodies, in a way which implies they are ashamed of themselves.

3 New Directions

The dramatic change how beauty is valued—from a morally trivial to a morally dominant value—is profound. Beauty is now something that is valued over other goods, such as health. This impacts on people’s identity—on how we feel about ourselves, what we want for ourselves and what we spend our time and money on—and on social norms and communities—as how we interact with each other changes. This has extensive implications for future research. Perhaps most important is the need to take beauty seriously. We need to fund significant research into beauty: empirical work into the advantages and disadvantages which beauty brings, psychological work into how beauty engagement makes us feel, and theoretical work into the implications of such dramatic changes to our value framework.

To illustrate with just one very practical example, the changing way that beauty is valued challenges the premises medical practice is built on. Medical ethics relies on individual informed consent to ensure ethical practice. It assumes that individuals are best placed to know whether or not an intervention is in their best interest, and it assumes that health is a dominant, if not primary, value. In a world where individuals prioritise appearance over health, such practices are fundamentally flawed. As a result, regulating cosmetic surgery in the same way as other surgery is unlikely to ensure positive health outcomes and new approaches are urgently needed. The need to revisit and revise our premises, practices and policies extends across domains and yet is not well recognised. To give a further example, while “appearance discrimination in employment seems to be as pervasive as other forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination, and its effect on earnings seems to be just as pronounced” (Mason, 2023, p. 83) appearance discrimination is not yet taken seriously. This needs to change.

In almost every domain, beauty is more valued and valuable than we assume. This changes how we behave and means we urgently need to rethink our assumptions, practices and policies. Most importantly, if beauty engagement is, at least for those who fall under the ideal, a moral duty, then

suggesting people should simply change what they do or how they feel is to ask something almost impossible. Changing our value frameworks, like changing our religious beliefs, is not a simple choice, but embedded in social networks, cultural practices and entwined with our self-conceptions. If we took seriously the extent to which beauty is infused with morality, most research in the humanities and social sciences would have to be done differently.

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Heather Widdows is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. She is author four books *The Connected Self: The Ethics and Governance of the Genetic Individual* (2013), *Global Ethics: An Introduction* (2011), and *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (2005). Her most recent book *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* (2018) was described as “groundbreaking” by Vogue and as “a scholarly work that is urgently relevant to the current cultural moment” and one of the best books of 2018 by The Atlantic. She was Deputy Chair of the Philosophy sub-panel for REF 2021 and was a member of the 2014 sub-panel and served two terms on the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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Sexual Capital

Dana Kaplan

1 Introduction

In recent years, sociologists drawing on the Bourdieusian tradition and its subsequent developments, have increasingly turned their attention to forms of inequality and stratification that, while enduring, are often difficult to observe and quantify (Atkinson, 2024; Bennett et al., 2009). Central to this body of work is a focus on the cultural dimensions of inequality, and particularly on the ways in which bodies function as sites where class-based social experiences, dispositions, and trajectories are inscribed and made visible (Bennett et al., 2009; Flemmen et al., 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Gonzales & Rolison, 2005; Shilling, 1991; Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume). This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital, defined as "a cultural resource invested within the body" (Shilling, 1991, p. 654), which captures how cultural dispositions are internalized, performed, and mobilized to generate social advantages. At the same time, Bourdieu's framework underscores that the value of embodied capital reveals how these advantages are constrained or obstructed depending on how they align with dominant cultural norms and expectations.

Bourdieu argued that embodied practices such as posture, gestures, modes of comportment, and styles of adornment both signal and actively produce social position, particularly in relation to class and gender, which are the central axes of inequality explored in this chapter (Bourdieu, 1984, 1p. 84, p. 187, p. 193, pp. 200–207, 2001, 2020). Other social axes, such as age, ethnicity, race, and migrant status, also shape how individuals are socially recognized or misrecognized through their bodies (Craig, this volume; Farrer, 2010, 2022; Ojala & Pietilä, this volume). Social differences and similarities are thus enacted and perpetuated through bodily appearance and conduct, influencing how individuals and whole groups are evaluated, categorized, and positioned by others. This process of class making, both visible and invisible, underscores the enduring role of embodied practices in the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1984).

Recent research building on Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital has explored how physical appearance, beauty, and attractiveness contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities, particularly in relation to gender dynamics in both labor and relationship markets. While much of this scholarship recognizes the significance of sexiness, sex appeal, and erotic allure in shaping gender relations within these social spheres, phenomena that Catherine Hakim (2010, 2011, 2012) famously conceptualizes as *erotic capital*, it nevertheless leaves an important

D. Kaplan (✉)
The Open University of Israel, Ra'anana, Israel
e-mail: danaka@openu.ac.il

gap. Specifically, there remains a lack of a systematic and expansive sociological account of how not only desirability, but sex itself, may play a role in class-making processes within the current capitalist economy. In *What is Sexual Capital?* (2022), Eva Illouz and I addressed this gap by proposing a tripartite typology of sexual capital¹ that conceptualizes sex as a resource that can be accumulated, deployed, and converted into future social and economic advantages. Drawing on historical and sociological analysis, we traced how various aspects of sex, from prostitution and sexualized labor to sexiness and sexual subjectivities, are intertwined with capitalist institutions and logics. Building on this framework, the present chapter argues that the sexual sphere, encompassing physical attractiveness, sexual desire, and sexual experiences, plays a constitutive role in broader processes of class formation. From this perspective, the sexual realm is not external to capitalism but integral to its operation, particularly insofar as sex has historically been alternately purified from the market, or increasingly incorporated into it, a dynamic that has intensified under neoliberal capitalism.

2 Sexual Capital Beyond Mere Commodification

Sexual capital encompasses three key dimensions: prostitution, attractiveness, and sexual experience (Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). Prostitution involves the direct commodification of sexual acts, attractiveness refers to the value placed on physical appearance specifically within the sexual realm; and sexual experience encompasses sexual desires, affects, and perceived competence or desirability in intimate encounters. While these elements are often treated as analytically distinct, there is considerable value in exploring how they intersect and

mutually shape one another under specific political, social, and cultural conditions. Under the neoliberal logic all three dimensions are structured by the prioritization of the self as human capital. This logic fosters a highly individualized orientation toward social life, centered on self-optimization, individual agency, and the understanding of all personal attributes as resources to be regulated, enhanced, and commodified through market mechanisms (Breu, 2024; Feher, 2009). In a competitive social environment in which access to social and economic goods depends on the ability to perform, project, display, and self-brand inner traits such as resilience, empowerment, and confidence, it is hardly surprising that sex, both sexual attraction toward others and the affects, fantasies, and desires involved in sexual experience, becomes incorporated into individuals' human capital.

In this chapter, I examine how sexual capital operates today by distinguishing between sexual attraction and sexual experience. While these two are clearly connected, much of the research has focused on the social and sexual dividends of attractiveness, and with good reason. However, less attention has been given to how sex itself factors into the accumulation of human capital. This dimension lies at the core of what can be described as *neoliberal sexual capital*. As mentioned, sexual capital also intersects with prostitution, sex work, and sexualized labor, where sexual capital is produced as a surplus value of the body. Although the relationship between sex work and capital accumulation has been widely examined (e.g., Bernstein, 2007; Jeffreys, 2009; Jyrkinen, 2016), this anthology primarily centers on attractiveness. Thus, this chapter will focus on attractiveness and sexual conduct, with only occasional references to the sex trade.

In the section on *Embodiment, Appearance, and Attractiveness*, I explore how beauty, sexiness, and sex appeal can generate social and economic advantages. This form of capital refers to the way various industries, under what Eva Illouz (2019) terms *scopic capitalism*, extract surplus value from the sexualized body and sexual identity. Scopic capitalism is a system that generates economic value by transforming sexuality into a

¹ We are, of course, not the first to coin this term. For a non-exhaustive list of earlier uses across various disciplines, see Bajos (1997), Britzman (1997), Collins (2000), Gonzales and Rolison (2005), Inglis (1997), Martin and George (2006), and Michael (2004). For an elaborate review of the different understandings of the term see Pieters (this volume).

spectacle, converting it into images that circulate across multiple markets. Within this system, the body is commodified and reduced to an object shaped by consumer desires, becoming a tradable asset whose image is sold through visual industries and spread across media platforms. Driven by an economy of attention and reputation, individuals are incentivized to cultivate specific appearances as a form of self-investment. In this context, beauty and sex appeal “sell” not only within the sex industry but also through cultural representations and media productions, reinforcing broader processes of sexualization in contemporary culture. Yet erotic capital extends beyond the commercial sphere into the realm of relationships, where attributes such as sexual attractiveness and desirability, or what (Srinivasan, 2022) terms “fuckability,” as well as sexual know-how, become crucial for forming and sustaining relationships. The phenomenon of incels (involuntary celibates) further illustrates how some individuals, particularly men, may feel excluded and marginalized within these relational and sexual markets (Menzie, 2022; Srinivasan, 2022).

In the section on *Neoliberal Sexual Capital*, I argue that under contemporary neoliberal conditions, where individuals are expected to constantly “lean in,” self-brand, and capitalize on their skills, life experiences, and personalities, sexual conduct itself becomes a form of human capital, providing a competitive advantage (Feher, 2009). Neoliberal sexual capital refers to the ways in which certain sexual experiences can enhance social competence, self-efficacy, and self-appreciation, fostering a proactive and empowered self-image. This dynamic, however, is often more accessible to the middle- and upper-class individuals, who are better positioned to cultivate and leverage such capital.

Previous research has explored how neoliberal governmentality reshapes sexual and intimate desires, identities, and aspirations (Jung, 2024). A central theme in this discourse is the commodification of sex. According to the commodification thesis, as modern capitalism increasingly shifts toward a consumption-driven economy, a new “desiring subject” emerges, whose libidinous impulses are harnessed to drive consumer

demand. In this process, sex functions not only as a commodity in its own right but also as a tool for promoting other consumer goods (Illouz, 2012; Seidman, 1991).

Ken Plummer (2007) identifies key markets for sexual consumption, including prostitution, pornography, sexualized technologies and objects, and the “relationship market” (e.g., tantric sex workshops, seduction communities). Anthropologist Nicole Constable (2009) defines sexual or intimate commodification as the process by which “intimacy or intimate relations are treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices [...], echoing a global capitalist flow of goods” (Constable, 2009, p. 50). The commodification of sex, along with the increasing visibility of various forms of sexual expression, has contributed to broader societal shifts, reshaping how individuals manage and capitalize on both their sexual bodies and their sexual well-being (Anciones-Anguila & Checa-Romero, 2024; Barker et al., 2018; Choi & DeLong, 2019; Crewe & Martin, 2017; Lupton, 2015). The proliferation of sexual commodities and services has led some scholars to argue that sex is losing its non-commodified, “gifted,” and authentic form. According to these critiques, sexuality, rather than serving as a site of personal liberation, has been absorbed by market forces, which may also exacerbate hyper-sexism and violence against women and sexual minorities (Breu, 2024). Others, however, view the sexualization of culture as potentially democratizing and empowering, particularly for women who actively self-sexualize (Blake et al., 2020; see DeWilde et al., 2021 for a review on this approach). Yet, scholars such as Bernstein (2007), Crewe and Martin (2017), Constable (2009), DeWilde et al. (2021), and Erchull and Liss (2014) offer more nuanced perspectives, emphasizing that the commodification of sexuality and with it, notions of sexual empowerment, involves complex dynamics, with impacts that tend to be domain specific. The sexualization of culture may therefore produce new forms of agency that simultaneously empower and constrain sexual subjects:

The commercialization and commodification of sex consumption to women are increasingly being used to signal status and distinction (Tyler, 2004). It is thus both deeply classed and profoundly gendered. Good sex becomes a commodified set of practices and competences that demonstrate the increasingly significant interweaving of consumption with a sexual lifestyle. [...] The challenge for female consuming subjects is increasingly one that requires a degree of agency over the creation of their sexual selves (Crewe & Martin, 2017, p. 593, p. 594).

Hence, beyond market mediation, what is particularly striking in the neoliberal era is the way in which sex becomes a vehicle for reinforcing logics of responsabilization, self-actualization, and competition (Woltersdorff, 2011). These logics and the ability to fulfill them are deeply classed.

In this context, neoliberal sexual capital emerges as both a tool for personal autonomy, promoting self-ownership, empowerment, and freedom, and a potentially convertible asset. In a neoliberal society, where sex have become more visible than ever, quantified, and commodified, sexual capital enables individuals to generate value that extends beyond the sexual domain itself (e.g., enhancing sexual pleasure by attracting suitable partners). Beyond amplifying the visibility and influence of certain social actors, this form of capital shapes access to opportunities and positions within society, often perpetuating entrenched inequalities, especially those structured by class (Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). Sexual attractiveness is a key component, though not the sole element, of neoliberal sexual capital. The ability to present oneself as sexually attractive becomes a valuable currency, tied both to self-worth and human capital, while simultaneously reinforcing the competitive dynamics of neoliberalism. It is this notion of *erotic capital* that I now turn to.

3 Embodiment, Appearance, and Attractiveness

According to the Bourdieusian framework, bodily markers such as facial features, demeanor, and style of dress are often misrecognized in everyday interactions as innate individual traits, when, in

fact they are socially constructed and shaped by class. This misrecognition obscures the ways in which these embodied features function as markers of privilege, thereby perpetuating social inequality. For example, individuals from privileged backgrounds are frequently perceived as naturally possessing desirable traits, masking the social conditions that produce these characteristics (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024). Inequality is reproduced through the misrecognition of classed, gendered, and raced bodies as well as through the aesthetic judgments that determine which appearances are valued and which are devalued (Dowrick & Holliday, 2022; Kaplan et al., 2020; Kuipers, 2015). These evaluations reinforce symbolic and social class boundaries, shaping who gains access to opportunities and who faces marginalization.

Research consistently shows that physical attractiveness affects a wide range of life outcomes, including wealth, relationship quality, social credibility, and political success (Berggren et al., 2017; Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2024; Gründler et al., 2024; Monk et al., 2021). In labor markets, attractiveness is associated with higher wages and greater promotion prospects, with particularly strong effects in the cultural, creative, and service industries, where appearance plays a crucial role in career advancement (Alkusari et al., 2024; Craig, this volume; Elfving-Hwang, 2021; Hakim, 2011; Mears, 2011; Shtudiner et al., 2024). The concept of *aesthetic labor* (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009) captures how individuals actively manage their appearance to secure competitive advantages, specifically in the service economy (Sarpila et al., 2024). This has intensified under what Kuipers (2022) calls the “expanding beauty regime,” particularly in neoliberal capitalist contexts, where both men and women face pressure to conform to beauty standards, often through consumer products and cosmetic procedures (Widdows, 2021). Those who cannot, or choose not to engage in these practices often encounter social disadvantages.

While much research has documented appearance-based discrimination, particularly along gender lines, it often overlooks the deeper,

structural mechanisms that sustain these inequalities, especially in relation to class (McClintock, this volume). Although the evaluation of physical appearance has been extensively studied through a gender lens, recent research indicates that attractiveness is also profoundly shaped by class (Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2024; Francombe-Webb & Silk, 2016; Kukkonen et al., 2024). Individuals from lower-class backgrounds, regardless of gender, frequently face greater challenges in meeting bodily ideals associated with specific occupations or upward social mobility (McDowell, 2009; Sarpila et al., 2024; Skeggs, 1997, 2005; Vandebroek & Kuipers, this volume). In contrast, individuals from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are more likely to conform to dominant aesthetic ideals, enabling them to use their appearance as a form of social and cultural capital. This highlights the need to address the ways in which appearance-based inequalities are both gendered and classed (Kaplan, 2017).

Beyond mere economic implications, appearance also plays a key role in the intimate sphere, particularly in partner selection (Kuipers, 2022; Hakim, 2011; McClintock, this volume; Montemurro & Hughes, 2024; Shmitz, 2017). Eva Illouz (2012) introduces the concept of the “architecture of choice,” referring to the culturally coded mechanisms that shape how individuals select partners. While short-term sexual encounters are often driven primarily by physical attraction and sexual chemistry, long-term relationships tend to prioritize emotional and other forms of compatibility, such as educational attainment and health habits (McClintock, this volume). Illouz further suggests that, over the past century, sexual attraction has become increasingly central in both short and long-term relationships. In modern society, particularly for women, sexual attractiveness, often framed as “sexiness,” has become a defining component of gender identity. Women are frequently encouraged to modify their bodies and behaviors to elicit sexual desire, with prevailing beauty ideals shaped by consumer culture (Illouz, 2012). This process of sexualization has linked attractiveness

to enhanced sex appeal and even self-esteem, positioning it as a central factor in partner selection (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Kuipers, 2022).

To understand how beauty, attractiveness, and sex appeal contribute to social and sexual status, Catherine Hakim introduced the concept of *erotic capital*. According to Hakim, erotic capital functions similarly to other forms of capital, providing individuals with greater access to romantic and sexual opportunities (Hakim, 2010, 2011, 2012). Erotic capital can be understood as a form of power, whereby individuals consciously leverage their sexual attractiveness to gain advantages in other areas, such as economic, social, or cultural fields (Yuxin, 2011). Hakim also suggests that people with higher levels of physical attractiveness and sex appeal tend to enjoy more fulfilling romantic and sexual lives. As she states, “attractive people have more partners, greater choice of partners, more sexual activity of all kinds, more sexual adventures, more bargaining power and control in sexual liaisons, and almost certainly the greatest amount of sexual pleasure as a result” (Hakim, 2012, p. 40).

This aligns with earlier theories in health economics, where *sexual capital* is defined as “the present value of the flow of benefits from sexual enjoyment over the remaining lifetime” (Michael, 2004, p. 644). Both Hakim and Michael emphasize how sexual success, whether based on perceived or actual attractiveness, serves as a source of personal benefit, self-worth, and social affirmation. For Hakim, a central idea is that sexual desirability can yield what Montemurro and Hughes (2024, p. 6) term as “sexual dividends,” including “sexual activities, satisfaction, intimate relationships, social status, validation of desirability, and psychological rewards,” all of which contribute to self-esteem and empowerment (Erchull & Liss, 2014). Similarly, Michael (2004) highlights how investing in sexual skills and behaviors enhances sexual well-being, encompassing both sexual health and the psychological benefits of intimate connections (Bajos, 1997; Lupton, 2015). It is therefore crucial to recognize the significant role of sexual desirability in the intimate sphere, especially in

today's highly sexualized culture. Sexual desirability, whether real or perceived, increasingly shapes self-image and self-esteem, particularly for women (Blake et al., 2020; Choi & DeLong, 2019).

Unlike the economic concept of erotic capital, which treats sexual attractiveness as an individual utility, the sexual fields approach, which is grounded in Bourdieu's field theory, sees it as relational, defined by one's position and power within structured social fields. This framework examines the social organization of sexual life and the disparities in sexual power, focusing on factors such as erotic attention, gendered sexual scripts, "fuckability," and sexual prowess, all situated within "local" and context-specific systems of touch (Christensen & Malae, this volume; Green, 2014; LaFleur, 2022; Montemurro & Hughes, 2024). A sexual field is constituted by the relationships among differentially desirable and differently empowered actors in a sexual scene, determining which forms of desire and action are legitimate, who holds the power of sexual initiative and refusal, and what is conventionally at stake in sexual interactions. In short, a sexual field represents a socially constructed account of the rules of the "sexual game," in which some players have the power to set the rules to their advantage, while others may comply with or contest them. There are multiple geographically and socially bounded sexual fields, ranging from mainstream heterosexual dating scenes to minority sexual subcultures, each operating according to distinct norms and expectations (Farrer, 2022, p. 27). In this context, sexual capital is defined as "a person's resources, competencies, and endowments that provide status as sexual agents within a field" (Farrer, 2010, p. 75). Sexual capital operates within specific social subcultures or environments such as gay bars, swinger clubs, speed dating events, the college sex scene, or dating apps, where resources like physical appearance and sexual desirability are unequally distributed, both sexual status and access to sexual partners (Christensen & Malae, this volume; Gonzales & Rolison, 2005; Green, 2008, 2014; Haywood, 2024; Martin & George, 2006; Yuxin, 2011).

By framing sexual capital through the lens of autonomous sexual fields, or discrete economies of desire, this approach recognizes that each field, from small local scenes like a punk nightclub, to broader national sexual cultures (Inglis, 1997), has its own criteria of desirability, while still being shaped by overarching societal norms. Within these fields, individuals with greater sexual capital, manifested in field-specific forms of attractiveness related to body type, gender norms, or other culturally valued attributes, attain higher status and increased access to sexual opportunities. For example, in the queer "bear" subculture, larger, hairier bodies and masculine traits are highly prized (Weinberg & Williams, 2014), whereas in Manhattan's gay scene, hegemonic masculinity may foster sexual success but hinder long-term relationship prospects (Green, 2014). Similarly, in exclusive venues such as upscale clubs, women who meet specific beauty standards—tall, slender, and youthful—are deemed most desirable (Mears, 2020).

This Bourdieusian framework emphasizes that sexual desirability is not merely an individual trait, but a social construct shaped by power dynamics, hierarchies, and status within diverse sexual fields. Sexual capital operates within specific economies of desire, where physical appearance and perceived desirability elevate one's status within a given field. Examining sexual capital within these fields reveals how desirability allocates social value and structures power relations. As individuals accumulate sexual capital, they often become even more desirable, further reinforcing their position within the field (Christensen & Malae, this volume; Wade, 2017).

While the sexual fields approach foregrounds micro-level dynamics of desirability and the "sexual dividends" generated by embodied or psychological attractiveness, it also raises the question of whether these dividends extend beyond the specific field in which they are accrued (Montemurro & Hughes, 2024). A fuller understanding of sexual capital therefore requires examining not only how desirability functions within particular sexual contexts, but also how sexual encounters themselves can augment one's sexual capital. Moreover, it is necessary to consider

the extent to which this capital can be transferred, accumulated, and mobilized across different social and cultural domains. As the next section will argue, sexual capital is not merely a mechanism for negotiating desirability within bounded sexual fields; it also reveals how neoliberal capitalism transforms sexual activity into a form of class-based capital.

4 Neoliberal Sexual Capital

So far, we have explored how sexual capital, as a form of social currency, functions both in the labor market and in personal relationships. Sexual capital is closely tied to sex appeal and physical attractiveness, with attributes like facial beauty (rather than overt sexiness) serving as assets that yield tangible returns in terms of social standing and economic success. Much of the existing literature has therefore focused on the ways in which physical attractiveness shapes individual outcomes, especially within labor and mating markets. At the same time, a growing body of research shifts attention toward the broader structural roles that attractiveness plays, particularly in service and creative industries, and disproportionately so for women (Craig, this volume; Kuipers, 2022; Mears, 2011, 2020).

A key contribution in this context is Ashley Mears' ethnography of the elite global party circuit, which illustrates how women's attractiveness is mobilized by wealthy men to enhance social status and facilitate business networks (Mears, 2020). In high-end settings such as yachts, private parties, and exclusive social gatherings, physical beauty becomes more than a personal attribute. Mears shows that women's beauty, understood as a form of sexual capital, is central to the organization of these events, where hierarchies of desirability determining the women's relative social value. Women deemed "model-like"—tall, well-groomed, and beautiful—are primarily valued as aesthetic "decor," enhancing the luxurious atmosphere and signaling elite status. Crucially, they are expected to remain visually appealing yet sexually restrained, serving as a backdrop to men's performances of wealth,

power and elite masculinity. In this configuration, women's beauty functions as an aesthetic asset that elevates the social capital and symbolic power of the men they accompany (Mears, 2020).

In contrast, women whose appearance is perceived as "plainer" or misaligned with "fashion" beauty standards are often viewed through a more explicitly transactional lens. Rather than being valued as aesthetic assets, these women are assumed to be compensated for their presence, with their beauty treated as a commodity exchanged for financial gain. This distinction reinforces the tight coupling between physical attractiveness and economic value, positioning beauty within a logic of exchange. Here, sexual capital is not simply about attractiveness itself, but about how beauty is classified, interpreted, and strategically deployed within broader structures of wealth, power, and social capital (Mears, 2020).

Mears' ethnography further underscores the broader structural significance of sexualized labor, especially in roles such as cocktail waitressing. In these positions, women are expected to perform sexualized labor by engaging in continuous flirtation and carefully balancing the service of drinks with the cultivation of desirability aimed at male clients. Within such service contexts, the boundary between professional service and sexual performance is often blurred. Women are not merely providing a service; they are performing sexuality itself, thereby complicating conventional understandings of labor. This dynamic illustrates how sexual capital operates not only as an aesthetic asset but as a form of labor that demands sustained emotional and sexual performance (Mears, 2011, 2020).

Yet beyond the role of physical beauty and sexualized labor, we must ask: what is the place of sexual experiences themselves in this framework? I propose that in today's neoliberal economy, sexual capital operates in ways that extend beyond conventional notions of beauty or sexual desirability. While physical attractiveness and sex appeal remain central (Craig, this volume), sexual capital is increasingly embedded in wider structures of inequality through neoliberal imperatives such as resilience, self-branding,

risk-taking, confidence, autonomy, creativity, and self-expression (Breu, 2024; Dardot & Laval, 2014; Kaplan, 2016; Whitmer, 2019; Woltersdorff, 2011). These qualities closely align with contemporary understandings of employability, that is, the assemblage of personal achievements, skills, and attributes that render individuals attractive to potential employers within a highly competitive, unstable, and precarious labor market. This dynamic is especially pronounced in sectors where personal branding is essential, including entertainment, media, and the creative industries.

Sociologists of labor argue that under neoliberal capitalism, the boundaries between the private and public spheres have become increasingly blurred (Shukaitis & Figiel, 2020). Workers are now expected to operate as one-(wo)man brands, selling not just their labor power but their entire existential being, and extracting economic value from all aspects of their identity, affect and psyche. To succeed in this environment, workers must “manage the risks of neoliberalism by taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self” (Whitmer, 2019, p. 6). Beyond merely promoting their skills, workers engage in ongoing affective labor, developing their social networks, their lifestyles, and coping mechanisms for employment.

To some extent, sexiness and physical appearance can confer advantages for certain women, not only in industries explicitly centered on display work, such as beauty, sex, glamor, and fashion (Mears, 2011, 2020), but increasingly also in more conventional occupations. However, as Mears shows, women’s beauty is frequently commodified and exploited by others rather than controlled by women themselves. Still, the question remains: can personal sexual experiences, rather than public displays of physical attractiveness, be leveraged for professional gain? At first glance, it may seem counter intuitive to suggest that sexual conduct, often viewed as private and non-market, aside from contexts such as prostitution and sex work, could be converted into resources yielding returns beyond psychological benefits. Moreover, dominant workplace norms generally prescribe professional comportment, including the avoidance of sexualized behavior, banter or harassment.

How, then, can the ostensibly private sphere of sexual experience intersect with the public sphere of occupational life?

One pathway linking sexual experience to employability lies in its potential to enhance self-esteem, which in turn fosters self-confidence and the projection of competence. As Dana Kaplan (2016) notes, individuals who are sexually experienced, or engage in less normative sexual lifestyles, often develop a sense of self-assurance, a disposition that can be mobilized across various contexts, including the workplace. A second connection concerns the association between certain sexual practices, such as casual encounters or one-night stands, and feelings of domination, control, or autonomy. As Eva Illouz (2019) argues, such practices can enable individuals to experience themselves as agentic subjects, a sensibility that may translate into greater professional assertiveness. A third linkage involves the role of sexuality in exercising social competence, a key asset in today’s service economy. Sexual encounters require individuals to navigate complex social dynamics and, at times, employ seductiveness. These relational and social skills can easily be transferred to professional settings, where the capacity to interact effectively with others is highly valued.

Sexual capital can therefore be understood as the accumulation of sex-related affective states that foster self-worth and promote self-determination, particularly those associated with risk-taking, uniqueness, creativity, and ambition (Feher, 2009). These states reflect a broader sense of personal empowerment and autonomy, resonating with Dardot and Laval’s (2014) concept of the neoliberal “performance/pleasure apparatus.” This apparatus compels individuals to continuously experiment, seek enjoyment, and express creativity, pressures that parallel those driving the cultivation of sexual capital. Both sexual capital and neoliberal imperatives emphasize self-expression and the development of individualized subjectivities as central to personal success and social value. In this sense, neoliberal capitalism reconceptualizes desirability: it is not limited to conventional markers of beauty or sex

appeal, but encompasses the capacity to articulate one's desires, autonomy, and sexual subjectivity in ways that align with neoliberal ideals of individuality and self-realization.

However, only a subset of individuals can convert their sexual experiences and capacities into economic returns. While most able-bodied people encounter few barriers to engaging in sexual activities, not all sexual subjects are able to transform these experiences into entrepreneurial dispositions or marketable skills. In most workplaces still, women's sexual experiences remain more readily stigmatized, often gossiped about, scrutinized, or deemed inappropriate, whereas men's sexual experiences are typically construed as advantageous (see section on *future directions* below). Beyond the influence of gender and age, which already structure access to neoliberal capital, this pathway is primarily accessible for those with a middle- or upper-class habitus. As Beverly Skeggs (2005, p. 971) argues, the middle class is uniquely positioned to engage in displays of being "a good, interesting, adventurous, risk-taking person." For these individuals, embracing danger, adventure, and risk can augment their personal exchange value and accelerate career advancement. This observation underscores the importance of personal uniqueness in the labor market, where individuality and the capacity for risk-taking and self-expression have become pivotal to employability.

One promising avenue for understanding the relationship between sexual self-appreciation, class, and employability comes from research on college sex. Studies have shown that both men and women actively strategize their sexual encounters during their undergraduate years, though women more negatively affected by hookup culture than men (Christensen & Malae, this volume; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). In their study of casual sex at an American university, Hamilton and Armstrong found that upper-class students were less likely than lower class students to pursue long-term romantic relationships with men. For upper-class women, participating in hookup culture allowed them to

enjoy sexual experiences, experience psychological empowerment, and, most importantly, focus on academics and career aspirations, rather than investing emotional energy in romantic entanglements. This dynamic highlights how sexual capital operates differently across class lines, with upper-class women using their sexual experiences to enhance personal autonomy and social mobility, thereby supporting their long-term professional goals.

5 Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This chapter has explored the concept of sexual capital by identifying two key dimensions. The first concerns physical attractiveness, the set of bodily qualities that render individuals desirable to themselves and to others (Tiidenberg, 2020). Industries such as plastic surgery, fitness, beauty apps, or fashion are designed to enhance attractiveness, sexual confidence, and perceived sexual success. Being recognized as sexy or beautiful can increase sexual visibility, popularity and opportunities for pleasure. The second dimension relates to sexual experience and modes of sexual expression themselves. Although these two dimensions are deeply intertwined in our sexual subjectivity (Breu, 2024; Tiidenberg, 2020; Wood, 2017), they remain analytically distinct in important ways.

Future research on sexual capital should examine how class background shapes the ability to convert sexual capital into economic advantage. To substantiate claims that the relationship between sexual capital and the neoliberal labor market varies by class, empirical studies are needed to explore how sexual experiences, autonomy and self-presentation are linked to middle-class employability. Further investigation is especially necessary in competitive sectors such as media, entertainment, and corporate leadership. Research could explore how middle-class habitus enables individuals to perform the adventurous, flexible, and risk-taking dispositions increasingly valued in contemporary labor market, compared to

those from working-class or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who may lack the networks, cultural resources or social legitimacy to translate sexual subjectivities into economic value. Comparative research across different cultural contexts would further illuminate how sexual capital operates within diverse labor markets and social settings, thereby enriching our understanding of intersectional inequality under neoliberal capitalism.

Beyond class hierarchies, further research is needed to examine how sexual capital is accumulated and mobilized at the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, race, and age. In particular, future studies should attend to the gendered dimensions of sexual capital by investigating how it is differently valued for men and women (see Pieters, this volume). While this chapter has demonstrated the centrality of women's attractiveness and sexualized labor in service and creative industries, additional research is necessary to better understand how gender intersects with sexual capital across diverse occupational fields. Research could also explore how men's sexual subjectivities, whether expressed through physical attractiveness, confidence or risk-taking behaviors, affect career trajectories, particularly in leadership positions within corporate, political, or media fields. Further, examining the roles of race, age, gender, and sexual orientation in the valuation of sexual capital could illuminate how these intersecting identities shape access to and exploitation of sexual capital. For example, how does the sexual capital of a cisgender white woman evaluated relative to that of a queer or trans woman of color?

Future research should also investigate how the digital sexual arena may be democratizing sexual expression, particularly by reducing class-based barriers to sexual self-presentation. The ability to engage anonymously in online sexual practices or to disclose sexual identities can enable individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to navigate digital spaces on more equal terms, potentially leveling the playing field for those constrained by offline social or economic inequalities. At the same time, this shift raises important questions about how digital spaces are redefining sexual experience itself.

Research could explore how online interactions, such as virtual sex, sexting, or the production and consumption of sexual content, reshape norms of sexual conduct and intimacy (Lahav Raz & Kaplan, forthcoming). Does the digital realm alter what is understood as authentic, meaningful or valuable sexual experiences, and how might this transformation affect the accumulation and conversion of sexual capital? Moreover, how do digital platforms challenge or reproduce conventional norms of attractiveness, and what new forms of sexual capital emerge in these contexts? Investigating these dynamics would clarify how digital platforms simultaneously democratize access to sexual self-expression while reshaping the cultural and economic value of sexual experience under neoliberal conditions.

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Dr. Dana Kaplan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Political Science, and Communication at the Open University of Israel. Her expertise lies in cultural class analysis and critical sexuality studies. Her research explores how social and symbolic boundaries are constructed within neoliberal capitalism and examines patterns of valuation in various social contexts, including human beauty, sexual capital, and ethical consumption. Her publications on Jewish-religious renewal and poverty among Israeli women have received best paper awards. She has been awarded two grants from the Israel Science Foundation. Dr. Kaplan's book, *What is Sexual Capital?* (co-authored with Eva Illouz), published by Polity in 2022, has been translated into eight languages.

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Evolutionary Approaches to Beauty

Linda H. Lidborg and Lynda G. Boothroyd

1 Introduction

Within Evolutionary Psychology, it is often-times claimed that certain traits are universally considered as beautiful. These alleged universals include having symmetrical facial and body traits, thick hair, and smooth, youthful, blemish-free skin. In men, ‘beautiful’ traits may furthermore include having a strong jawline, being tall, and possessing a muscular physique with broad shoulders. In women, feminine and youthful features are claimed to be preferred, such as large eyes, high cheekbones, an oval face shape, full lips, and a curvaceous yet slim body shape. Here, ‘beautiful’ is understood to encompass both ‘beauty’ and ‘hotness’; evolutionary discourse rarely distinguishes between the two, as is sometimes done in the ‘manosphere’, discussed in this volume by Pieters (note also that we use the terms ‘beautiful’ and ‘attractive’ interchangeably in this chapter). According to many evolutionary scholars, humans have evolved attraction to ‘beautiful’ traits because those traits signal important information about the individual’s biological condition; for example, that this individual is particularly healthy or fertile.

L. H. Lidborg (✉) · L. G. Boothroyd
Durham University, Durham, UK
e-mail: linda.h.lidborg@durham.ac.uk

L. G. Boothroyd
e-mail: l.g.boothroyd@durham.ac.uk

In this chapter, we review extant evidence for evolutionary-driven hypotheses about the universality of beauty, highlighting that the central tenet which these hypotheses rely on—that beautiful traits reliably signal fertility or health—is not as well researched or well supported as is sometimes claimed in the literature. We further raise the issue that while beauty perceptions are typically argued to be ‘universal’, universal evidence is oftentimes missing as the majority of research is conducted in Western and urbanised samples. Such samples often share access to the same global visual media, which might result in beauty perceptions converging across cultures. Furthermore, when small-scale societies *are* sampled, observed beauty perceptions in those may differ from perceptions observed in urbanised samples, suggesting that learning through culture plays a strong role in the development of beauty perceptions. We further discuss common misconceptions and misuses of the evolutionary approach and make recommendations for future research into this area.

1.1 Definition of the Evolutionary Approach to Studying Beauty

To understand how evolutionary-derived beauty perceptions are suggested to work, it is necessary to first define the basis of the evolutionary perspective. The evolutionary approach involves examining human psychology and behaviour with

the purpose of identifying evolved psychological and behavioural adaptations. Such adaptations evolved in response to survival or reproductive challenges in the past, if possessing those adaptative traits increased the likelihood that a particular individual survived and acquired a mate they reproduced with. Importantly, a psychological or behavioural adaptation evolves in the same way as a physiological adaptation (e.g., the physiological trait *fur* has evolved in many species for warmth and isolation, since it facilitates survival). For a trait to be considered an adaptation, it must be underpinned by genes rather than completely learnt or copied from other individuals. In addition, the trait must also be heritable so that it is passed from parent to offspring. As an example, sexual attraction is an adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioural trait, since being sexually attracted to a potential mate motivates one to pursue that mate, underlies sexual arousal and mating, and thereby facilitates reproduction. Some of the adaptations that we observe in humans evolved many millions or even billions of years ago and we therefore share them also with other species (such as the ability to experience sexual attraction and sexual arousal). Other adaptations evolved in ancestral humans after we split from other species; these are then specific to us (purportedly the specific traits we find attractive and beautiful in other humans, which we will come back to later in this chapter).

There are two main mechanisms of evolutionary change, the process by which inherited traits arise or change within a species: 1. natural selection, whereby traits are selected (i.e., increase in frequency in the population) if they increase the survival chances of an individual (which in turn increases the chances that this individual reproduces and thus passes its genes on to the next generation), and 2. sexual selection, whereby traits are selected if they increase the chances that an individual acquires a mate which they then reproduce with. Sexually selected traits sometimes evolve because they are advantageous in competitions with same-sex mating rivals. For example, in species where males compete physically with each other for mating rights with

females, it might be advantageous for males to be physically strong and imposing. This type of sexual selection is referred to as intrasexual selection and typically does not involve attraction *per se*; instead, it is the winners of physical competitions that get to mate and reproduce. Such competitions can take the form of direct physical fights where the winner immediately gets to mate with females. However, they can also come in the form of indirect physical competitions (e.g., hunting), where the male who outcompetes other males (e.g., a hunter that kills more game to bring back to the group) gains higher status in the group; this elevated status can then allow that male to mate with more females.

Alternatively, sexually selected traits sometimes evolve because they are sexually attractive to opposite-sex mates, such as the peacock's eye-catching train of tail feathers which is sexually attractive to peahens. Here, individuals that possess more attractive traits are more likely to secure a mate and are therefore more likely to reproduce, relative to less attractive individuals. This type of selection is called intersexual selection. A central tenet of this type of process is that it is not only attractive traits that are under selection in a particular sex, but also the evolved attractiveness perceptions and preferences in the opposite sex. This is the mechanism by which many evolutionary scholars suggest that evolved beauty perceptions have arisen in humans, although the extent to which this is true is under debate. One reason for this is that, while it is typically easy to identify physiological adaptations, it can be considerably more difficult to identify psychological and behavioural adaptations. This is because although psychology and behaviours sometimes are genetically underpinned, they can also be highly flexible and subject to learning from other individuals. This is particularly true for humans, since we are extremely adept social learners. Humans also live under tremendously varying conditions across the world—in many cases very far removed from the conditions under which ancestral humans evolved—and we sometimes exhibit incredibly varied behaviours across different cultural contexts. Culture therefore also

shapes human psychology and behaviour, sometimes in a way that actually overrides the influence of our genes. In the case of beauty perceptions, this means that it can be challenging to disentangle to what extent these perceptions are truly evolved and to what extent we have instead learnt to consider particular traits as beautiful through cultural practices. As we will see in this chapter, this challenge has not always been fully addressed in the evolutionary narrative.

2 Research on Beauty from an Evolutionary Perspective

2.1 Early Theories and Predictions

Evolutionary Psychology developed as a scientific discipline in the 1900s and started to gain traction in the 1990s and the early 2000s. The question of whether beauty perceptions might be evolved psychological adaptations immediately garnered attention among evolutionary scholars. The argument was that if particular facial and/or body traits signal that a certain person is in good genetic condition (for example, that they are highly fertile or genetically disease-resistant and healthy), it would be adaptive for us to be physically attracted to those traits. This is because reproducing with such an individual might increase our own reproductive success by allowing us to have more children overall and/or have children that are more disease-resistant and thereby more likely to survive and reproduce themselves, thus passing on our genes to the following generation, and so on (Hamilton & Zuk, 1982). If this notion were true (which we will come back to later in this chapter), we would expect beauty perceptions to be largely universal among humans—Sect. 2.2 will show that this is not always the case.

Nonetheless, considerable research attention—largely sampling urbanised populations in the global West—around the turn of the millennium was devoted to identifying traits that are perceived as highly beautiful. In both men

and women, proposed beautiful traits included smooth, blemish-free skin, and thick and lustrous hair (Symons, 1979). Symmetrical features (i.e., that the two halves of the face or body look the same) and ‘averageness’ (i.e., a lack of unusual, distinctive traits, for example a much larger than normal facial or body part) were further suggested to be beautiful (Langlois & Roggman, 1990; Rhodes et al., 1998; Scheib et al., 1999). In women, purported beautiful facial traits included having a highly feminine and young-looking (neotenous) facial shape, with an oval face, a relatively high forehead, large eyes, a small nose, full lips, and a small chin (Perrett et al., 1994, 1998; Rhodes, 2006; Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002). The female body shape that was argued to be perceived as maximally beautiful was a slim yet curvaceous figure with medium-to-large breasts, a slim waist, and round hips/buttocks (Henss, 2000; Singh, 1993; Singh & Young, 1995; Tovée et al., 1999). The prevailing explanation for these traits being preferred in women was that they are supposedly associated with high levels of the sex hormone oestrogen (Jasińska et al., 2004; Law Smith et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2006); namely that women with a more feminine and attractive facial structure, and a more curvaceous body shape with a smaller waist, would presumably have higher oestrogen levels on average. Since oestrogen is highly important for female fertility (Baird et al., 1997; Lipson & Ellison, 1996), being attracted to traits signalling high oestrogen levels in women was thus argued to be beneficial for straight men since that might increase their own reproductive success. Section 2.2 will show that actual empirical evidence for these predictions regarding women’s beautiful traits is often lacking.

In men, traits suggested to be beautiful included having a masculine facial shape with a strong, square jawline and a prominent brow ridge (the bone underlying the eyebrows; Johnston et al., 2001; Rhodes, 2006; Scheib et al., 1999). A purported beautiful male body shape included having masculine traits such as a tall stature, a V-shaped upper body with broad shoulders, and an overall lean, muscular physique (Dixson et al., 2003; Shepperd & Strathman, 1989; Tovée

et al., 1999). The development of such masculine traits is influenced by developmental exposure to testosterone (particularly during puberty; Marečková et al., 2011; Verdonck et al., 1999), and testosterone has also been argued to suppress immune functioning in men (Folstad & Karter, 1992). Testosterone has therefore been proposed to have dual properties: masculine trait development *and* immunosuppression. Based on this notion, it was suggested that if a man was able to develop highly masculine traits during puberty, that signalled that his testosterone levels must have been high during development, but that his immune system must also have been robust enough for him to withstand those high testosterone levels without suffering poor health. Thus, it was argued that masculine traits advertise that a man has ‘good genes’ that contribute to him being fit and healthy. Straight women should therefore have evolved attraction to masculine traits in men, since reproducing with such men would increase the chances that their own children would inherit their father’s genes and be fit and healthy, too. This Immunocompetence Handicap Hypothesis (Folstad & Karter, 1992) garnered enormous scholarly attention and inspired a wealth of research focussing on women’s preferences for facial masculinity in particular (DeBruine et al., 2006; Little et al., 2001, 2002; Penton-Voak et al., 2003; Waynforth et al., 2005). One prominent strand of this research suggested that straight women show stronger attraction to masculine traits in men when they are in the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle (Johnston et al., 2001; Little et al., 2008; Penton-Voak et al., 1999; Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000), supposedly reflecting adaptive preferences for ‘good genes’ (i.e., masculinity) when the chances of conception are highest. In Sect. 2.2, it is discussed how recent evidence largely refutes the Immunocompetence Handicap Hypothesis, and how it is increasingly argued that masculine traits in men more likely evolved because they help men compete for status against other men rather than because they are considered beautiful by straight women.

2.2 Empirical Evidence

While early research into the evolved nature of beauty perceptions largely appeared to support the hypotheses that ‘beautiful’ traits are universal and that they indeed signal fertility (in women) and health (in men), more recent work has challenged some of these notions.

Firstly, as mentioned above, the argument that beauty perceptions are evolved is largely based on the two notions that ‘beautiful’ traits *i.* advertise the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone, and *ii.* signal underlying condition, such as fertility or health. Recent research disputes some of these claims. Focussing firstly on women’s traits, early evidence suggested that women’s facial traits do indeed advertise oestrogen levels. In a widely cited study from 2006, Law Smith and colleagues (2006) reported that in a sample of 30 white UK women, women with higher oestrogen levels during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle were rated as more facially attractive without make-up than women whose oestrogen levels were lower (this relationship was not observed for 24 women whose attractiveness was rated while wearing make-up). Similar findings were also reported by Durante and Li (2009) and by Żelaźniewicz and colleagues (2020) as recently as 2020. However, the two most highly powered studies to date—each sampling more than 200 women—found no evidence to suggest that more facially attractive women have higher oestrogen levels (Jones et al., 2018b; Puts et al., 2013). These findings suggest that the relationship between women’s facial beauty and their hormone levels is not as straightforward as some evolutionary discourse has suggested. Since women’s faces become more masculine-looking after menopause—when oestrogen levels decrease—we can plausibly conclude that oestrogen plays some role in women’s facial structure. However, at present we do not have strong evidence suggesting that pre-menopausal women with a more feminine or beautiful facial structure on average have higher oestrogen levels compared to less beautiful women.

In addition, the evidence for women's body shape advertising their oestrogen levels is similarly mixed, with some studies supporting this notion and some observing no relationship (Durante & Li, 2009; Grillot et al., 2014; Jasieńska et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2018b; Mondragón-Ceballos et al., 2015; Rilling et al., 2009). It should also be noted here that no studies to date have assessed the association between women's facial or bodily beauty and hormone profiles outside of industrialised contexts. This lack of cross-cultural evidence is a limitation, since people's hormone profiles can differ significantly between different populations, depending on, e.g., exercise load and nutritional status (Bribiescas, 1996; Ellison & Lager, 1986; Matthews et al., 2012; Pinheiro et al., 2005).

A key question here is also whether more beautiful women do actually have more children, but this association is not well understood at this point. At present, the available literature shows limited evidence supporting the notion that 'beautiful' traits in women are associated with fertility, but this question is not sufficiently tested to draw any firm conclusions (Jokela, 2009; Kalick et al., 1998; Lidborg & Boothroyd, 2025; Pawlowski et al., 2008). Furthermore, while the evolutionary literature has focussed mostly on female beauty signalling fertility, the possibility that it might signal health has also been raised. However, evidence to date does not in any consistent way suggest that more facially beautiful women are healthier or have stronger immune systems than less beautiful women (Cai et al., 2019; Foo et al., 2017, 2020; Gray & Boothroyd, 2012; Kalick et al., 1998; Żelaźniewicz et al., 2020). Whether women's beautiful body traits are associated with better health is largely unexplored (but see Pawlowski et al., 2014). It should be noted here, however, that immune functioning is highly complex, and it is unlikely that a single study measuring an isolated aspect of immunity will be able to provide any comprehensive picture of an individual's overall health profile. Taken together, we currently do not have a clear understanding of what women's facial or bodily beauty actually signal.

Turning to the relationships between men's facial traits, testosterone levels, and immunity/health, much of the work in this area has focussed on the role of facial masculinity. The issues here are manifold. For example, while it is well established that testosterone masculinises the male face during pubertal development (Bulygina et al., 2006; Marečková et al., 2011; Verdonck et al., 1999; Whitehouse et al., 2015), meaning that there is a relationship between *developmental* facial masculinity and *developmental* testosterone, there is however no conclusive evidence suggesting that a man's facial masculinity in *adulthood* reliably advertises his *adult* testosterone levels. Some earlier studies indicated that there was a positive relationship between facial masculinity and testosterone in adulthood (Penton-Voak & Chen, 2004; Pound et al., 2009; Roney et al., 2006), although this was not observed by Neave et al. (2003) or by Peters et al. (2008). Again, however, more recent and higher-powered studies observed no significant association (Kordsmeyer et al., 2019; Lefevre et al., 2013), although this has only been tested in industrialised samples. Thus, much like for the putative relationship between women's facial traits and their oestrogen levels, it cannot at this point be concluded that facial masculinity advertises testosterone levels in men after puberty.

Furthermore, there are mixed findings as to whether masculinity is actually considered beautiful in men's faces, with some research even showing that facial femininity, rather than masculinity, is preferred (Alharbi et al., 2020; Boothroyd et al., 2013; DeBruine et al., 2010; Fiala et al., 2021; Kočnar et al., 2019). While cultural variation and methodological differences are both possible, non-mutually exclusive explanations for some of these diverging findings (DeBruine et al., 2010; Rennels et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2010), people overall do not appear to be strongly or uniformly attracted to masculinity in men's faces. On a related note, recent literature also does not support the previously held notion that straight women exhibit an adaption making them more strongly attracted to masculinity during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle (DeBruine et al., 2019; Dixon

et al., 2018; Havlíček et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018a; Marcinkowska et al., 2018, 2018; Zietsch et al., 2015). Instead, straight women appear to find men more attractive *in general* when they are maximally fertile and sexual desire reaches its peak (Jünger et al., 2018).

Moreover, despite some earlier evidence suggesting a possible link (Rhodes et al., 2003; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006), neither testosterone nor facial masculinity have recently been found to reliably index health or immune responses in men, as evidenced by mixed results (Boothroyd et al., 2013; Foo et al., 2020; Phalane et al., 2017; Zaidi et al., 2019). Aside from facial masculinity, men's facial attractiveness has also not been consistently linked to better health (Boothroyd et al., 2013; Foo et al., 2020; Phalane et al., 2017; Rhodes et al., 2003; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006; Zaidi et al., 2019). At present, there is also no evidence suggesting that facially masculine men produce more children than less masculine men do (which is what we would expect, if facial masculinity was under selection: Lidborg et al., 2022). However, men who are stronger and more muscular do appear to produce more children than less strong men, although the difference is quite small (Lidborg et al., 2022). Such findings could suggest that masculine traits in men—such as strength and muscularity—evolved through intrasexual selection; that is, because they have helped men gain status and dominance among other men (Scott et al., 2013) rather than because they are considered beautiful as such. Collectively, these findings contest the claim that humans have evolved beauty perceptions for facial traits in men due to a link with testosterone and, in turn, heritable health and immunocompetence. Instead, recent research using large online samples suggests that simpler metrics such as proximity to the population average in facial structure may be the only core element of facial attractiveness for men (Kleisner et al., 2024).

Secondly, if it were the case that beauty perceptions are evolved and universal, we would expect them to be highly similar both across different people within the same culture and between people of different cultures. For facial beauty, there is some degree of truth to this:

when people are asked to rate the beauty of various faces that are unfamiliar to them, their ratings tend to show moderate-to-strong correlation coefficients around 0.30–0.50 (Hönekopp, 2006; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). There might also be a degree of consensus between different cultures. For example, when asking British and Filipino observers to rate the attractiveness of facial photographs of indigenous Filipino men, Boothroyd et al. (2017) found that ratings were similar both within and between cultures. However, some scholars have argued that claims of agreement in facial beauty perceptions are somewhat overstated (Hönekopp, 2006; Kramer et al., 2018), and ratings are indeed never identical neither within nor between cultures (e.g., Boothroyd and colleagues observed a correlation coefficient of 0.46 for between-culture ratings; see also Kočnar et al., 2019). This still allows for non-negligible variation in what is considered a beautiful face, which suggests that facial beauty perceptions are not entirely evolved but that they are to some extent *learned*.

Furthermore, we also observe some cross-cultural variation in preferences for feminine and masculine traits in women and men, respectively. The majority of research to date supports the notion that feminine facial traits are considered beautiful in women across a number of cultural contexts (Cornwell et al., 2006; Fiala et al., 2021; Kleisner et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2014). However, the overreliance on Western, urbanised samples again limits the conclusions we can draw about the universality of such preferences. In the case study in Sect. 3, we describe research by Lynda G. Boothroyd in a rural Nicaraguan sample which challenges the literature above. Similarly, as already discussed above, evidence to date actually suggests that facial masculinity is generally not considered beautiful in men's faces, although there appears to be some degree of variation in this across cultures (DeBruine et al., 2010; Fiala et al., 2021; Kleisner et al., 2024; Marcinkowska et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2014).

When it comes to beautiful body traits in women, there is similarly cross-cultural variation in preferences. The hypothesis that more curvaceous women with smaller waists are considered

more beautiful was initially developed based on urban American and European student samples, viewing very simplistic line-drawn stimuli. Later research, however, suggested that body weight may be more important than body shape in beauty ideals both in Western samples shown real photographs of real women (Tovée et al., 1999), hunter-gatherers (Wetsman & Marlowe, 1999), and urban Ugandan men (Furnham & Baguma, 1994), viewing the simplistic line-drawings. Importantly, such cross-cultural work has sometimes demonstrated contrasting weight preferences, with Western men showing a clear preference for slimness and some samples of non-Western men preferring considerably heavier bodies (Wetsman & Marlowe, 1999). Preference for thinner, or smaller-waisted, female figures can also be seen in South African participants who have moved to the UK vs those still in South Africa (Tovée et al., 2007), and hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists living closer to urban or tourist routes than those living further away (Sorokowski et al., 2014; Sorokowski & Sorokowska, 2012). Generally, observations of the most beautiful waist size in women often cluster around the lower end of the population average (Furnham et al., 1997; Singh et al., 2010; Sorokowski et al., 2014; Thornborrow et al., 2018) although this was not found in the culturally isolated Matsigenka population of Peru (Yu & Shephard, 1998) nor in Bakossi Cameroonian men (Dixon et al., 2007). Indeed, while a generally curvaceous female body shape with a relatively thin waist is thus often considered the most beautiful, the preferred *exact* waist size varies both between cultures and within the same culture over time (Bovet, 2019), just like preferred body weight appears to differ between cultural contexts. Similarly, the perceived ‘ideal’ female breast size also shows cross-cultural variation (Pawłowski & Żelaźniewicz, 2021; Thornborrow et al., 2018). This has led some authors to suggest that culture teaches us local cues to evolutionarily important nutrition and status cues. For instance, in contexts where health and status are indicated by higher weight, we would expect to see a preference for high BMI, while those in contexts where health and status are linked to thinness, we should see a lower preferred BMI (Tovée et al.,

2007). In most of these cases, however, access to Western culture (via direct interaction or living there) is confounded with many other factors such as migration stress, socioeconomic status, and urbanisation. In the case study in Sect. 3, we present an example of when rare natural experiments in media access can help to tease these issues apart in a stationary population undergoing technological transition.

As of yet, relatively little empirical work has investigated what body size and shape is considered most beautiful in men across different cultures. As mentioned above, evidence from the West generally suggests preferences for tall, lean men with a strong-looking, V-shaped upper body and a greater-than-average degree of muscularity (Dixon et al., 2003; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Furnham & Nordling, 1998; Tovée et al., 1999; Sell et al., 2017; Swami & Tovée, 2005). This Western notion of a beautiful male body has become increasingly muscular over time (Law & Labre, 2002). Similar preferences for male muscularity and leanness have been observed in Sri Lankan university students (Dixon et al., 2003), Bakossi women of rural Cameroon (Dixon et al., 2007), and urban but not rural Malay women, where the latter preferred men with a less muscular and heavier body shape (Swami & Tovée, 2005). Likewise, urban Chinese women might be attracted to less muscular men on average (Dixon et al., 2007). Evidence also suggests that preferences for tallness in men might not be a universal phenomenon (Sear & Marlowe, 2009; Sorokowski et al., 2015). Typically, earlier studies into beauty preferences for men’s body shape relied on the same kind of line-drawings as mentioned previously. More recent studies benefit from improved methodology, such as high-resolution images or whole-body scans of real men, or high-quality digital manipulations, rather than line-drawings. Overall, the findings to date can be seen as broadly consistent with the observation that stronger and more muscular men report having somewhat more sexual partners and they also have more children in non-contracepting contexts (Lidborg & Boothroyd, 2022), suggesting that they are more attractive on the dating market. These traits also show a more

reliable correlation with adult testosterone levels than facial masculinity does (Bhasin et al., 2001; Gettler et al., 2010; Lukas et al., 2004). As previously discussed, however, this could also be due to muscularity and strength being associated with greater status and rank (which in men mediates access to romantic/sexual partners) rather than those traits being perceived as beautiful as such (Kordsmeyer et al., 2018). In any case, the lack of cross-cultural research—particularly from small-scale societies without access to Western media—again means that we do not know to what extent beauty perceptions regarding men's bodies are actually universal.

3 Case Study

As we already noted, one of the critical problems with our understanding of how beauty ideals relate to underlying condition (or not) of the individual is the overwhelming reliance on Western samples, tested by Western researchers, using Western stimuli. In this sense, not only may Western beauty standards be privileged (i.e., a source of inequality) within globalised media and power structures, but that inequality is replicated within our knowledge base about human beauty and attraction as a whole. This has implications both for scholarship and the impacts of our understanding of beauty on diverse communities. In this section, we use research conducted in rural Nicaragua by Lynda G. Boothroyd and colleagues as an example of how attention to low-income, marginalised communities can challenge or elucidate human beauty ideals. In rural Caribbean Nicaragua, factors such as migration stress, socioeconomic status, and urbanisation (mentioned above) vary independently to some degree. Here we summarise how these factors played out in respect of: female body weight and shape ideals, facial masculinity/femininity, and visual aspects of ethnicity.

The present research was conducted in communities on or near the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, in the South Autonomous region. This area is comparatively remote; at the time data collection commenced there was only one tarmacked road to

the southern coast from the capital, and access to most communities where we worked was via small motorboats. Residents of the communities who did not have a motor would travel by dugout canoe, which would take considerable time even to travel between neighbouring villages. The region is also ethnically diverse, with indigenous, afro-descent, and European-indigenous mixed ethnicities all present. Although larger towns were mixed, the smaller communities where we worked tended to have one dominant ethnic group per village. There are implicit status inequalities between ethnic groups, in terms of political power (the European descent Mestizos are more represented in the national government, while Creoles historically had more power in Bluefields, the regional capital). Within the rural communities, the bulk of residents engage in farming and fishing, but there were early stages of stratification due to external sources of income such as work on cruise ships, or opportunistic drug hauls. Most importantly for our purposes, due to the government programme of expanding electrical infrastructure, sometimes very close communities had very different levels of media access. As there were no magazines available in the region, and when we commenced data collection there was insufficient mobile signal for video or picture downloads, access to television via a satellite dish was for most participants the only means of accessing visual media.

These circumstances create an important natural experiment in how beauty ideals may be affected by evolutionary cues, such as nutritional stress or status, and evolutionarily novel factors like media.

Although individuals in this region can move between communities for work, marriage, or education, they are not undertaking significant migration as seen in the previously mentioned studies of Zulu migrants to the UK (Tovée et al., 2007). Furthermore, access to television was largely driven by whether a community was on a convenient route for electricity roll out. As such, communities could be relatively close together, and have similar subsistence and economic profiles, and differ only in terms of media access. Across our research we worked with

eight rural communities representing indigenous, afro-descent, and Mestizo (European/indigenous) ethnic groups, with high and low media access represented within each group. Participants were typically shown images of female bodies ranging in weight from emaciated to very large bodied (BMI ranges from 11 to 42) and asked to indicate how attractive they were on a 5-point scale. We found that a preference for thinner female bodies was specifically associated at both the community and individual levels with increased consumption of television (Boothroyd et al., 2016, 2020) but not, as evolutionary approaches would suggest, with reductions in nutritional stress (Jucker et al., 2017). Furthermore, we could experimentally induce changes in what body size viewers considered most attractive by showing high levels of low weight or plus size models and asking them to create an attractive woman on an interactive computer programme before and after viewing the models (Boothroyd et al., 2020). Preferences for low weight female figures, then, seem to be driven not by an evolutionarily critical factor such as the nutritional surplus of industrialised contexts, but by the media environment.

Similarly, as discussed above, facial masculinity preferences have been hypothesised to derive from evolved preferences for health or dominance (male masculinity) or fertility (female femininity). However, earlier anthropological research had cast some doubt on the idea that these were consistently preferred traits across all cultures (Scott et al., 2013). We therefore tested preferences for facial femininity and masculinity in participants in our communities and in urban Nicaraguans in the capital city of Managua. Participants viewed pairs of male or female faces, based on photographs from relatively nearby El Salvador, which had been manipulated to exaggerate or reduce their sex-typicality (i.e., masculinity vs femininity) in terms of shape. We tested whether preferences for these faces were linked to evolutionarily important traits such as the age or status of the viewer, as well as their acculturation via education and television. We found, to our own surprise, *absolutely nothing*. Participants in the rural communities did not show shifts in preferences for facial masculinity

or femininity that could be linked to supposedly important evolutionary factors like whether or not they were already in a relationship, whether or not they were of reproductive age, nor the norms within their ethnic group regarding casual sexual relationships. None of the evolutionary hypotheses tested in this sample yielded significant or even close to significant results. We also did not find, within the rural communities, that community size or participant economic status affected facial preferences. In fact, there simply were no preferences for masculinity or femininity in faces in our rural participants. Only the urban participants showed a preference for femininity in female faces. These data therefore suggest that masculinity and femininity preferences may be evolutionarily novel (as per Scott et al., 2013), and driven by high levels of urban or global acculturation (see also Batres & Perrett, 2014, in El Salvador).

Finally, we also investigated beauty ideals in terms of the aspects of facial shape and colour which are linked to ethnicity (Jucker et al., 2024). Individuals with more European descent have higher status within Nicaragua (e.g., Mestizos vs all other groups, and lighter skinned Creoles vs other afro—and indigenous Nicaraguans). Furthermore, television watched by our participants was overwhelmingly Hollywood films (which are over 90% white casts) and Mexican or Colombian telenovelas (which are also filled with light skinned actors with more European features). When viewing Black and Mestizo faces which had been manipulated to look more or less European, we found that those with more education or who watched more television showed stronger preferences for ‘whiteness’ when colour had been manipulated (although not when shape had been manipulated). This again shows that even in contexts where we expect colourism linked biases, visual media can reinforce and exaggerate these biases.

The collected lesson of these studies is that when evolutionary and cultural predictors are pitched against each other in trying to understand beauty ideals, cultural factors consistently ‘win’. Furthermore, our understanding of beauty itself, outside of the dominant Western cultural

envelope, is severely underdeveloped; qualitative responses from participants in the facial masculinity study showed they could not even identify the manipulations that had taken place in the stimuli, while broader qualitative research showed an interest in body motion rather than static features, and a conception of beauty that was very differently focussed than in Western samples (Thornborrow et al., 2018). What actually counts as ‘facial beauty’ for rural Nicaraguans, for instance, is still completely unknown, and this is true for wider groups as well. Likewise, it leaves us not knowing what the underlying adaptations driving ‘beauty’ itself are, since visual media are a modern epiphenomenon.

4 Concluding Remarks/New Avenues for Research

In the last 30 years, Evolutionary Psychology has become a hugely influential subdiscipline of Psychology. As a discipline, it unquestionably has enormous scope for increasing our understanding of our own species’ psychology and behaviour. As we have seen throughout this chapter, however, early research conducted on beauty from the evolutionary perspective sometimes overstated the strength of support for certain hypotheses in the absence of sufficient empirical evidence. We have also seen that more recent evidence sometimes refutes earlier findings (for example, that straight women’s attraction to masculinity in men change over the menstrual cycle). This is likely at least in part due to methodological improvements. For example, whereas earlier researchers were constrained to using line-drawn stimuli, technology now allows us to create highly realistic-looking computerised stimuli that we can manipulate with a very high degree of accuracy to assess how certain traits influence beauty judgements. Increased research funding also allows researchers to collect data with considerable larger samples, which improves the reliability of the results, as does preregistration of the analyses which has become more common. With such improvements, it is perhaps not surprising that new research has challenged previously held beliefs.

Furthermore, we have also discussed throughout the chapter that evolutionary research on beauty perceptions has overwhelmingly relied on data from Western samples, which risks biasing our understanding not only of what our perceptions look like but also where they originate from. The fact that most researchers conduct research in Western contexts is not surprising, nor is it necessarily intentional. Instead, this follows from globally unequal financial structures where universities and researchers in the global West have research and funding opportunities that far exceed those in the rest of the world, meaning that the vast majority of published research is conducted in that particular cultural context. As a Western researcher, it is considerably easier, more convenient, and cheaper to conduct research ‘at home’ than in a remote, rural location abroad. Similarly, conducting cross-cultural research is easiest and most cost effective if it can be done online—which inevitably means that even non-Western samples oftentimes also consist of people in urbanised contexts with access to global visual media, which thus systematically excludes important populations from participating in most studies on beauty perceptions. Overall, this has likely biased our understanding of how we as a species view beauty. The limited extant research from rural, culturally isolated populations has shown more nuanced findings than early evolutionary discourse predicted. Although cross-cultural research on beauty perceptions is still not common, with a better understanding of beauty perceptions in different cultures, we are starting to see that cultural pressures might override evolutionary explanations. This suggests that learning plays a bigger role in forming our beauty perceptions than previously believed. This does not necessarily mean that beauty perceptions are 100% learnt and that genetic precursors to beauty preferences do not exist at all—but since humans are highly social beings for whom learning and culture play a huge role in forming our beliefs and behaviours, it appears that these influences might override or counteract possible evolutionary influences. The evolutionary perspective can still provide novel hypotheses to investigate and explore in attempting to understand our

perception of beauty, but it is equally important not to overstate this explanation and to also acknowledge the influence of cultural pressures.

Acknowledging the limitations of the evolutionary perspective is perhaps particularly pertinent given that in recent years, Evolutionary Psychology has increasingly been drawn upon by online communities such as the ‘manosphere’ (see Pieters in this volume). Subcommunities within the manosphere—such as the ‘red pill community’—often draw on specific findings within Evolutionary Psychology to justify arguments that beauty is biologically determined and unequivocally signals a person’s ‘quality’. Here it is important to note that the evolutionary discourse does sometimes portray physical beauty as an inherent trait. However, while certain aspects of physical appearance of course are genetically inherited, beauty in itself can often be manipulated through grooming, styling, cosmetic procedures, and lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise (Dixson & Rantala, 2016; Hönekopp et al., 2004, 2007; Jones & Kramer, 2016; Kowal et al., 2022; Lefevre & Perrett, 2015; Swami et al., 2008), just like our perceptions of what beauty actually entails can be manipulated and changed. This is not always well acknowledged in the evolutionary literature. Here it also becomes even more important to acknowledge that we do not at this point have a good understanding of what ‘beauty’ actually communicates about an individual. And, of course, if perceptions of beauty to a large extent are culturally derived, beauty *cannot* be completely biologically determined.

The evolutionary perspective is sometimes further drawn upon by the ‘manosphere’ to justify sexism and inequality between the sexes, where women are often relegated to the reductive role of ‘baby makers’ whose primary responsibility (aside from rearing children and caring for the home) is to maintain physical attractiveness, and those who fail to meet these standards facing discrimination. In a similar vein, men who do not conform to certain ‘masculine’ standards (such as being a physically strong, masculine ‘alpha male’) are portrayed as unsuccessful or inadequate. In the most extreme cases, such views have contributed to several tragic mass killings in recent years by

individuals inspired by the manosphere. While it is challenging to completely mitigate the potential for research to be misused by the public, it is nonetheless crucial that evolutionary discourse does not overstate the importance of evolutionary explanations and that cultural/learning influences are acknowledged more widely than is sometimes done.

Finally, we would observe the following: that as a field we are still woefully lacking an understanding of how humans evolved to have cultural conceptions of beauty in the first place. Did pre-existing, more ‘hard wired’, sexually selected visual preferences in pre-human ancestors become weakened as cultural learning became more important in our psychology? Or are there in fact core aspects of how our brains function which yield positive emotional responses to particular kinds of features? And do we have an underlying motivation to create hierarchies of appearance in our social group, regardless of other forms of status? New research avenues can allow us to start investigating the interaction of these kinds of processes.

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Linda H. Lidborg is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Psychology at Durham University. She does research on sexual selection in humans, investigating how and why humans have evolved sex-typical traits (masculinity vs femininity) and what role such traits play in attraction and other social interactions. She also studies face recognition, namely how the brain stores and processes familiar faces.

Lynda G. Boothroyd is a Professor of Psychology at Durham University, investigating evolutionary and cross-cultural understandings of interpersonal attraction and sexual selection. She has recently focused on body ideals in rural Nicaragua alongside experimental work both in the laboratory and field on the impacts of visual experience on body size preferences. She is currently principal investigator of a cross-cultural project on body image education in the global south.

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Beauty as Gendered Inequality

Outi Sarpila, Luuc Brans, and Giseline Kuipers

1 Introduction: Beauty and Inequality in Times of Shifting Gender Systems

Gender is one of the lenses, if not *the* main lens, through which beauty and inequality have been most commonly examined. There is no chapter in this handbook that does not address gender in some way. The chapters offer a wide range of perspectives on how and why beauty is gendered, and how this impacts gendered as well as other inequalities. Different disciplines and perspectives foreground different aspects of beauty: beauty standards, norms, and ideologies related to gender performance and appearance, practices related to beauty work and enhancement, gendered differences in ‘returns’ to beauty, and various mechanisms that produce (gendered) beauty-based inequalities. However, all approaches agree on one issue: beauty is primarily associated with women and femininity.

O. Sarpila (✉)
Department of Social Research, INVEST Research
Flagship Centre, University of Turku, Turku, Finland
e-mail: outi.sarpila@utu.fi

L. Brans · G. Kuipers
KU Leuven, Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality,
Sociology department, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: luuc.brans@kuleuven.be

G. Kuipers
e-mail: giseline.kuipers@kuleuven.be

Across paradigms, there is widespread agreement that beauty is primarily about women: beauty is associated with female gender/sex, or with femininity as a style of performance or representation. Some fields, like feminist/gender studies, sociology, anthropology, (consumer) culture studies, and psychological body image research offer socio-cultural explanations for the association between women and beauty: beauty is primarily expected from women, it signals femininity, and therefore affects women more (see Ojala & Pietilä, this volume; Craig, this volume; Guest & Daniels, this volume; Monier & Mears, this volume). Biological and evolutionary psychological explanations have also emphasized that beauty is gendered, though for different reasons. Especially in earlier and popular evolutionary approaches, beauty is primarily seen as a trait valued by men in a potential female partner. This drives women to care more about their appearance than men (Etcoff, 2011; Kowal et al., 2022; Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume; McClintock, this volume).

In stressing the central connection between gender and beauty, existing scholarly work reflects a cultural belief that is widely shared in most (and certainly most dominant) contemporary societies: that beauty is about gender, and that gender is binary. Women are expected to ‘do beauty’; men are not. Men should not pay attention to, or receive attention for their appearance, as this threatens to diminish their masculinity. In the English

language, even the word ‘beauty’ is felt to be inappropriate for male human beings, although it can be used to describe aesthetically pleasing appearances of anything from art works to landscapes to sentences and academic articles.

Recently, academics have started to rethink such gendered views on appearance and inequality. Partly, this results from radical changes in the gender system in the past century, particularly since the second feminist wave of the 1960s (Kuipers, 2022). The various feminist waves have witnessed increasing empowerment for women, critiquing how women were held back by gender ideologies that centrally feature the idea of feminine beauty. Changing gender systems have enabled new definitions of masculinity that create space—or, according to some, pressure—for men to care about their appearance in ways traditionally associated with femininity (see Sarpila, 2021, for a review). Consumer culture, pop culture, fitness culture, and social media have played a key role in reformulating the relationship between masculinity and appearance (Foster & Baker, 2022; Kaplan et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Moreover, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the binary logic of the traditional gender system has also been challenged by social movements, pop culture, and academics (Butler, 2002; Halberstam, 2005), creating space for the cultural production of beauty beyond a strictly feminine/masculine binary.

Yet research on beauty and inequality has been slow to catch up with recent, more critical understandings of gender. For instance, until recently the field of (sociological) stratification research held the conventional notion that beauty is indeed more beneficial for women (cf. Hakim, 2011), or that it is a general asset, which equally improves both women’s and men’s opportunities to succeed in life (Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Smith & Hamplova, this volume). Recent research has critiqued this by uncovering the uncertain and detrimental consequences of beauty for women, arguing that men may actually benefit more from their appearance (Bahamonde & Sarpila,

2024; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Kukkonen & Sarpila, 2021; Kühn & Wolbring, 2024).

With the advent of more fluid understandings of gender beyond the heteronormative matrix, appearance and beauty take on a new, and newly important role in the shaping of gender and gendered inequalities. There has been little scholarly attention for this, which is surprising as aesthetic styles have been argued to be an essential element of queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and other non-heteronormative identities (Bergling, 2013; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2014). Shifting gender systems create new interplays between gender, appearance, and inequality, but these shifts are also increasingly politically contested. Over the past decades, people with non-heteronormative identities have acquired more rights and better social and economic positions. In response, cultural and political counterforces promote a return to binary heteronormative views on gender and sex, in which traditional gender norms are often connected with ideas about embodied aesthetic styles (see Pieters, this volume). Thus, gender norms related to appearance take on a political dimension.

Against this backdrop of cultural change and political contestation, this chapter discusses how beauty and appearance are gendered, and how this is related to inequalities of gender and beyond. Rather than giving an exhaustive overview of this huge literature, we focus on bringing together perspectives presented in this volume. We examine the gendered nature of beauty, highlighting beauty standards, beauty practices, and the social norms surrounding them. After that, we discuss unequal gender outcomes of beauty/appearance, and the mechanisms suggested to explain them. Finally, we ask what might be lost or overlooked in the current literature, which examines beauty and inequality solely from a binary gender perspective. We suggest that future research can break new grounds in our understanding of beauty, gender, and inequality by paying more explicit and critical attention to the shifting gender systems (and the resistance this

sparks), by analyzing beauty and gender in intersectional terms, and by going beyond the gender binary.

2 The Gendered Beauty Standards Behind Gendered Inequalities

Many studies have shown that beauty standards differ for women and men. Such beauty standards inform evaluation processes through which people are unequally treated based on their appearance (Kuipers, Chow, Chong & Zhou, this volume). Such gendered standards manifest themselves on two levels. First, standards shape how people evaluate the appearance of *others*. Second, beauty standards inform how people evaluate and try to modify, the appearance of *themselves*. Body image research in psychology and communication science has combined these levels by examining how gendered beauty standards for others impact the image people have of their own body (Paterna et al., 2021; Guest & Daniels, this volume). Similar two-level analyses have emerged in cultural sociology, but from the perspective of embodied gendered and classed taste (Vandebroec, 2016).

Gendered evaluations of the appearance of *others* have traditionally been studied from two perspectives that are often seen as opposing: evolutionary theory on the one hand and gender theory on the other. Evolutionary approaches hold that beauty is gendered because it plays a key role in sexual selection (Etcoff, 2011). Because men and women pursue different ‘mating strategies’, men are more interested in female beauty than vice versa: men tend to pursue women on the basis of appearance, whereas women want to invest in long-term stable relationship and therefore pursue men with resources (for a critique, see McClintock, this volume). For both genders, however, traits perceived as beautiful or attractive are assumed to signal an individual’s genetic fitness or reproductive potential. Thus, beauty is supposed to be universally associated with health (e.g., symmetry, good skin) and pronounced sex characteristics. However,

the most recent research literature has challenged many of these fundamental assumptions (Jones & Jaeger, 2019; Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume). For example, the universality of beauty standards and the idea that women find masculine traits attractive have been called into question. While masculinity isn’t clearly associated with attractiveness in men (and sometimes femininity comes out as most attractive), research mostly supports a connection between femininity and attractiveness (for reviews, see Little et al., 2011; Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume).

Gender studies, by contrast, understand beauty as a cultural system that enforces gender-specific modes of control (see Craig, this volume). Because of the widespread association of beauty with women, an attractive, sexualized appearance is a central element in the representation or performance of femininity across cultures (cf. Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Caldeira et al., 2022). In contemporary (Western) societies, the appearance of men is less aestheticized, and beauty or beautification is often seen as conflicting with masculinity (Barber, 2016; Barry, 2018; Black & Sharma, 2001). Consequently, beauty standards became a way to hold women back, both by disciplining them into rigid norms and penalizing them when they fail to conform and by marking them as a distinct category that is mainly there to be looked at, the subject of the so-called male gaze (Bordo, 2023).

Two opposing scientific fields, drawing on distinct theoretical explanations, reach the same conclusion: beauty is primarily associated with the female gender. However, gender studies are more inclined to point to historical and cultural exceptions. From the perspective of inequality, we conclude, first, that beauty places women in hierarchical positions relative to one another, and that this may be less so for men. Moreover, the gender perspective also suggests that the beauty regime places women *as a group* hierarchically below men.

This resonates with the few sociological studies that have examined the gendered nature of beauty standards. As Kuipers (2015) found in an empirical study of beauty standards, men do not ‘have

appearance' in the same way as women do: male beauty is generally interpreted as a reflection of inner qualities and personality traits, rather than being subject to purely aesthetic judgments. When assessing women's appearance, people more easily see women as aesthetic objects. Respondents in this study routinely complained that judging male beauty was difficult, even offensive, while everyone was comfortable with assessing women's beauty. When female beauty standards also were found to be more consistent across different cultures, male beauty standards are more culturally specific (Kuipers, 2015).

Additionally, quantitative studies have provided evidence suggesting that when examining large datasets, women are generally rated as more beautiful (or more gender-neutrally, as better-looking) than men (Sarpila et al., 2021; Wong & Penner, 2016). This also supports the idea that physical appearance, or at least good looks, is more commonly attributed to women and as something that is easier to assess in women.

Studies also show that across cultures, girls are socialized from a young age into a 'feminine' beauty ideal that states that beauty is women's most important asset to be cultivated (see Craig, this volume). Culturally shared stories play an important role in this, for example in media representations through advertisements, television, film, and social media platforms (Döring et al., 2016; Marwick, 2010; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). But the association of femininity with beauty in cultural representation dates back further. For example, in an analysis of the classic Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) have shown that fairy tales' female characters are defined by their beauty more often than male characters by their handsomeness. Furthermore, it is precisely those fairy tales with a strong emphasis on female beauty (Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty) that have been more likely to be reproduced again and again, most recently as Disney princesses. Likewise, in animated cartoons, female characters are more often portrayed as attractive compared to male characters (Klein & Shiffman, 2006). However, the masculine ideal introduced to boys is not separate from appearance either.

But, it is defined in a different way—typically through muscularity and dominance (e.g., Boyd & Murnen, 2017)—and requires different kinds of maintenance to conform. Overall, it seems that children's media content continues to reinforce stereotypical gendered expressions of appearance along conventional gender binaries (Walsh & Leaper, 2020), even when the number of young people identifying outside the binary has simultaneously been found to be increasing (Lehtonen et al., 2024; White et al., 2018).

Beauty standards are gendered not only in the evaluation of others but also in the evaluation of *ourselves*. Psychological body image research has uncovered how individuals react to assumed macro-level body ideals (see Guest & Daniels, this volume). This research shows that especially women feel addressed and pressurized by beauty as a (gendered) ideal. As the term body ideals suggests, this research focuses specifically on body physique, particularly a thin ideal, although more recently it also focuses on muscularity. While thinness has long been regarded as a body ideal primarily for women, today's body ideals place pressure on both women and men to be not only thin but also to have a toned body (Grogan, 2016). In this research tradition, gendered body ideals reflect in women's and men's experiences of their own bodies, such that women feel more pressure to become thin, and men, compared to women, feel more pressure to be muscular (for reviews, see Karazsia et al., 2017; Paterna et al., 2021).

A meta-analysis using standardized measures for temporal comparison found that men's desire to be thinner or more muscular has remained relatively unchanged over recent decades. In contrast, the pursuit of thinness among women appears to have declined, which researchers have interpreted as a shift in body ideals toward a female body ideal that is less focused on extreme thinness (Karazsia et al., 2017). Yet, this interpretation should be approached with caution, as it concerns women's own body perceptions rather than how others view women's bodies. If we consider that beauty standards are double embodied (Kuipers, 2015), meaning they reflect not only the beauty

ideals applied to oneself and one's own body but also the evaluations directed at others, then muscularity is increasingly becoming a body ideal for women (Grahn, 2024).

Body image research has mainly focused on gender comparisons, mostly ignoring intersections of beauty standards and gender, with class, race/ethnicity, or other axes of inequality (for discussion see Guest & Daniels, this volume). Meanwhile, cultural sociological research has provided indications of differences in views regarding the ideal body at the intersection of gender and social class. For instance, Vandebroek (2016) found that regardless of class status, men consider a toned physique as the ideal body, while for women, the ideal body becomes slimmer the higher one moves up the social class hierarchy.

Beauty standards related to gender are not only classed but also racialized. For example, American studies show that Black women may be perceived as more masculine than White women, and therefore less attractive (Monk, this volume). In contrast, Asian men may be stereotyped for their femininity, which in turn is associated with being less attractive (for discussion see, Monk et al., 2021; Monk, this volume). Such scattered studies suggest a need for intersectional studies of beauty.

Research on beauty standards typically approaches gender as binary. However, we see in actual practice that androgynous or gender-fluid looks and other beauty approaches that play with the gender binary are increasingly valued and legitimized by institutions that play an important role in the reproduction of standards, such as high fashion: new 'non-binary' or 'gender-fluid' role models garner millions of followers in social media and appear on high-fashion catwalks and in avant-garde fashion magazines (Beyer, 2022; Crepax, 2017; Kuipers et al., 2017). Kuipers (2015) found that gender-bending appeals to some women and younger people, but less to men and older people. Even the traditional premise of traditional aesthetics and feminist art theory—the assumption that the gender binary is the dominant dividing line in the ways people view images of others—has been challenged

(Miscenà et al., 2024). This demonstrates the need for empirical studies of beauty standards, as applied to self and others, beyond the gender binary.

3 The Role of Gendered Beauty Practices in Perpetuating Inequalities

Another way that beauty is gendered is through beauty practices, or 'beauty work'. The norms associated with these practices support, but sometimes challenge the gendered system of beauty and inequality. In the same way that beauty standards are gendered, so too are the social norms concerning taking care of one's appearance. Although we argue in this handbook that the demand to look good has become a prevailing norm, this does not affect all genders to the same extent. Instead, in the contemporary West, for example, women are still expected to engage in a greater number of body management practices, invest more time and money in engaging in beauty and body work, and in general, be more concerned about their appearance than men (Gimlin, 2007; Sarpila et al., 2020; Åberg et al., 2020).

Although popular accounts and research often stress that gendered norms of beauty are produced in media representations, from fairy tales to social media, beauty norms are also, and maybe primarily, (re)produced in everyday beauty practices undertaken by adults. One traditional and widely discussed theme in gender differences in such practices, especially in the media, has been appearance spending. While there is little research based on representative samples, reliable data do suggest that spending on beauty remains highly gendered. For example, official household consumption expenditure data show that single women spend more money on personal care and hygiene products than single men, and from a time-based comparison perspective, these gender differences have remained surprisingly consistent from the 1990s to around 2020¹ (Sarpila, 2021).

¹ It should be noted that household consumption data, as the name suggests, refer to household-level data, and

Women also buy more clothing (Joanes et al., 2020; Kukkonen et al., 2019) and cosmetics—and not always just for themselves, but also for their family members (Sarpila, 2013). Related to this, there seems to be a significant difference even in the number of products used on a daily basis. A comprehensive French study focusing on exposure to cosmetics found that women use an average of sixteen different hair, face, and body care products daily, while the corresponding figure for adult men was eight (Ficheux et al., 2015). Moreover, the same gendered consumption pattern seems to apply to more extreme ways of altering one's appearance: although the increasing prevalence of cosmetic surgeries for men has been discussed for decades, the vast majority of cosmetic surgeries are still performed on women (Menon, this volume).

Yet, spending money provides only a limited view of the gendered nature of beauty and body work, since 'enhancing' one's appearance also requires another scarce resource: time. By examining time use, we can gain insight into everyday practices like bathing and dressing, which everyone must engage in, regardless of gender. Intuitively, one might think that gender differences are less pronounced in these practices. However, an exemplary examination of the time spent on personal washing, dressing, and sport activities in selected European countries in 2010,² namely Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Finland, shows that across countries, women spend about ten minutes more per day on washing and dressing themselves than men, except in Italy, where we find no gender difference. Conversely, men spend more time on sport activities in all countries. In Finland and Belgium, the difference was found to be over 10 minutes, while elsewhere the difference was smaller (Eurostat, 2018; for a review see Kowal et al., 2022). These gaps naturally raise the question of how gender differences have changed over the years. Looking at the

time use in one country, Finland, the difference in personal washing and dressing has remained constant from the 1980s to the 2020s or even increased slightly, as the time women spend on this activity has increased slightly more than that of men. The gender gap in time spent on exercising has narrowed over time, as women engage in sports more (Statistics Finland, 2024).

Women's increased engagement in beauty work is understandable, considering the contemporary value of good looks and slim and toned body as an indicator of a disciplined and attractive individual (Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume; Widdows, 2018). Men likely have not widely adopted beauty work because it is traditionally considered feminine. Tseïlon (1995) argued that beauty work is easily moralized in society because these practices are associated with the artificial construction of femininity involving an element of 'deception'. While femininity emanates as artificial, linked with vanity and even foolishness, men are more easily perceived as 'ready-made' and genuine (Black & Sharma, 2001). Masculine or gender-neutral body modification techniques are also more clearly linked to the concept of 'hard work' (Sassatelli, 2010), which is generally valued in contemporary societies (see De Keere et al., this volume). By contrast, plastic surgery is easily moralized as 'a quick fix' that doesn't require individual effort, and is thus considered morally inferior (Widdows, 2018). This not only affects the value given to different practices, but also their normative approval as practices engaged in by men and women (Sarpila et al., 2020).

The gendered nature of beauty standards mirrors the framing of beauty work as more feminine than masculine. However, there are indications that this is changing, as moral barriers for men to engage in beauty work such as skin and body care, or more extensive dressing and grooming, appear to be lowering (Kuipers, 2022). Similarly, muscularity is strongly associated with male appearance, which may prevent women from engaging in certain sports that visibly build muscle (Vandebroeck, 2016). Yet, younger cohorts of women have been shown to go to the gym increasingly with the motivation to build muscle, while

consumption within households cannot be compared by gender. Therefore, the only option to examine consumption from a gender perspective is to compare the consumption of single-person households.

² The latest EU-harmonized data are from the year 2010.

younger men are nowadays more motivated by weight management—a motivation traditionally considered feminine (Mishina et al., 2024).

Studies of the general population often obscure the beauty practices that are part of the everyday lives of many LGBTQ+ people, which challenge the boundaries of normative femininity and masculinity. Qualitative research, by contrast, has thematized the diversity of queer beauty practices and their consequences for relation between beauty, gender, and inequality, also beyond these communities (Barry & Martin, 2016; Jenzen, 2022). For example, Chen and Kanai (2022) demonstrate how male gay influencers perform femininity in beauty work on social media, influencing beauty work practices among women within and beyond the queer community. Drag queen culture has, for decades, been associated with breaking the norms of heteronormative society and shaking up gender roles and appearance-related expressions (Feldman & Hakim, 2023). Social media offers new affordances to show and spread these alternative beauty practices. Studies have shown how various minorities successfully use these social media platforms to challenge heteronormative, gender, and racial norms related to perceptions of how people ‘should’ look and what kind of beauty and body work they should engage (Jenzen, 2022; Kim, 2023; Maddox 2021).

Yet, it is interesting how mostly men—especially those with considerable status—benefit from this challenge to gender normativity, as they are able to express and experiment with appearances traditionally perceived as more feminine while women are not afforded the same leeway in adopting appearances traditionally perceived as more masculine. Thus, while drag queens have become cultural icons, it is hard to think of examples of ‘butch’ or similar more masculine-coded queer female appearances entering the mainstream. Vandebroek (2016) has analyzed how, as one moves up the class hierarchy, traditional masculine physicality and, conversely, a lean body type are more common than in the working class, where masculinity has traditionally been built around a strong and capable (and thus ‘bigger’) appearance. The idea is familiar from Veblen,

who also saw aesthetic taste and the responsibility for the family’s overall appearance as specifically the task of the upper-class man (Veblen, 1994 [1899]).

In later analyses of heteronormative masculinity and beauty practices traditionally perceived as feminine (for example, in the context of the metrosexual phenomenon), it has also been emphasized that the adoption of ‘new’ ways of caring for appearance by men who are already higher in the status hierarchy does not undermine the traditional gender system but rather reinforces the already strong position of high-status White heterosexual men (Foster & Baker, 2022; Kaplan et al., 2017; Sarpila, 2021). A similar gendered setup can be seen in the following, as we move on to research about the gendered *outcomes* and *mechanisms* underlying gendered inequalities.

4 Gendered Outcomes and Mechanisms Driving Gendered Inequalities

Who benefits from beauty? To understand the relation between beauty and inequality, it is essential to consider the extent to which appearance *outcomes* are gendered and what mechanisms drive these outcomes. On an aggregate level, a convincing argument can be made that the (near-)universal association of women and beauty has not helped women much. However, if we look at the individual level, the outcomes are less clear. Existing research does not offer conclusive answer to the question whether women or men (let alone, other genders) ultimately benefit from more appearance, and how this works.

Individual studies have yielded divergent conclusions on whether men or women benefit most from good looks. Instead of focusing on individual studies, further insights can be gained from systematic literature reviews and meta-analysis. Such reviews collect studies that meet specific criteria, typically sourced from databases, to synthesize findings on a particular topic, such as socio-economic outcomes of beauty.

Interestingly, however, not all systematic literature reviews on the outcomes of beauty have included the gendered consequences of beauty. For instance, the otherwise commendable review of the perks and penalties associated with beauty by Anderson et al. (2010) does not explore how these benefits and disadvantages vary between genders. Over the years, most systematic literature reviews fail to provide a systematic perspective on whether the outcomes of beauty are gendered, and if so, how. Some have concluded that the outcomes are not gendered, while others have concluded that they are.

Reviewing the reviews, we find that the argument for non-gendered or ‘gender-neutral’ socio-economic rewards/penalties for beauty is primarily made in literature reviews that cover research until the turn of the twenty-first century. For instance, the meta-analysis on attractiveness and job-related outcomes by Hosoda et al. (2003) concludes that beauty provides similar benefits to women and men. A similar conclusion has been reached in what is likely the most cited meta-analysis in psychology in this field: Langlois et al. (2000)³ found that people tend to judge and treat individuals deemed attractive more favorably than those perceived as less attractive. Although this meta-analysis does not directly address unequal treatment based on beauty, it has often been cited to offer a mechanistic explanation for beauty-based unequal treatment, in psychology but also economics and social stratification research.

The argument or research hypothesis regarding the non-gendered nature of the consequences of appearance is often grounded in evolutionary

psychology (Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume) and, to some extent, sociological status characteristics literature (Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). Both fields have traditionally provided researchers studying beauty and inequality with reasons to assume that, due to biological and sexual selection-related factors (evolutionary psychology) and/or various learned associations and stereotypes linked to attractive individuals (social psychology, status characteristics approach), people tend to treat (all) attractive individuals better than others (Hamermesh, 2011; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Raudenska, this volume; Smith & Hampolova, this volume; Wolbring, this volume). These explanations often form the basis of research on lookism, or discrimination or unequal treatment of people based on physical appearance (Hamermesh, 2011; Kühn & Wolbring, this volume).

However, recent literature reviews have identified an interaction between beauty outcomes and gender, meaning that the outcomes of beauty are not nearly always gender-neutral, at least when it comes to socio-economic consequences. Specifically, it seems that beauty does not (always or automatically) bring benefits, especially for women (see reviews by Frevert & Walker, 2014; Kukkonen et al., 2024). Recent individual studies also support this view, suggesting that good looks more consistently bring benefits to men than to women, at least in the context of labor markets (Hellyer et al., 2023; Kühn & Wolbring, 2024). The analysis of these results has pointed to gender stereotypes, particularly how attractiveness in women, when associated with male-dominated professions and contexts, leads people to question women’s suitability for certain fields or roles (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). However, systematic literature reviews have not provided clear support for this explanation alone. It has been suggested that women may benefit less from beauty for various contextual factors (Kukkonen et al., 2024), and additional traits beyond just attractiveness and gender (Frevert & Walker, 2014).

One of the most commonly discussed ‘confounding’ or intersectional factors between

³ This meta-analysis by Langlois et al. (2000) exclusively draws on studies from APA databases. It focuses solely on psychological research on the topic, specifically on judgments and treatment based on attractiveness. In other words, it examines, first, the associations (e.g., friendliness) linked to attractive versus unattractive individuals and, second, the treatment effects—namely, the likelihood of outcomes such as cooperation or helping behavior based on attractiveness. Due to the nature of the psychological research tradition, the connection to inequality is mostly indirect, making it distinct from other frequently cited literature reviews, albeit still important. It should also be noted that this meta-analysis did not find any gender differences in the effects of attractiveness on individuals’ judgments or treatment.

beauty outcomes and gender is race/ethnicity. As repeatedly argued in this handbook, both evaluations and valuations of attractiveness are often embedded in race, ethnicity, and gender (Craig, this volume; Kuipers, Chow, Chong & Zhou, this volume; Menon, this volume; Monk, this volume). Despite this, a surprisingly small amount of research has systematically compared appearance outcomes at the intersection of attractiveness, gender, and race/ethnicity. However, as Monk and colleagues' (2021) analysis suggests, examining these intersections is crucial—particularly in the United States, where beauty of Black women and Black men leads to higher earnings. Monk and colleagues suggest that attractiveness signals atypicality relative to stereotypes associated with a racial category, which provides a particular advantage to the individual. Yet, such mechanisms are complex and depend on culture-specific understandings of minority groups, which intersect particularly with gender (Monk, this volume). For example, in Germany, which has a large Turkish minority, attractiveness was not found to be associated with how trustworthy men belonging to this minority were perceived to be (Hellyer et al., 2023). Yet, the recent study by Fernández-Reino and Rovira (2024) indicates that when men and women from ethnic minorities are compared, the outcomes for women are once again more unpredictable and inconsistent. For men, including or omitting a photo in the resume does not affect employers' responses. For women, however, whether an attractive photo on the resume benefits or hampers call-backs depends on the country context (the Netherlands vs. Germany), the minority group, and the visual cues provided (headscarf or not).

Additionally, in relation to the outcomes of beauty and gender—or appearance more broadly—there has been debate in the research literature about the role of class hierarchies in determining who benefits from appearance. Bahamonde and Sarpila (2024), for example, show that looking like the stereotypically 'right kind' of representative for one's occupation in the eyes of others is more likely to bring advantages to men than to women. It seems to be particularly disadvantageous for women to fit the stereotype of

a working-class professional, whereas no similar class-based appearance penalty has been observed for men.

Research on beauty outcomes and the underlying mechanisms has traditionally been very quantitatively oriented, using either surveys or experiments. Consequently, there has been little attention for outcomes beyond classical 'demographics': gender, race/ethnicity, and class. Little has been done to lift the veil on non-binary perspectives, which often are not specifically included in such analyses, and probably require more focused and fine-grained research designs. Next, we will discuss what we can conclude based on previous research and what unexplored areas remain for those interested in gender-related inequalities in beauty.

5 New Avenues: Gendered Beauty, Gender Diversity, and Other Axes of Inequality

This chapter critically reviews research on beauty and inequality from the perspective of gender, and particularly gendered inequalities. In summary, we find that beauty is mostly recognized as a feminine issue and obligation. Across cultures, beauty standards and beauty work are subject to highly gendered norms, which usually place higher demands on women. This is related to the fundamental connection, across many societies, between gender and beauty. As a result, when men engage in beauty work, they are more easily rewarded for something that is taken for granted or seen as obligatory for women (Adkins, 2001 makes a similar argument in another context). Thus, beauty does not appear solely as an uncertain resource for women (see Craig, this volume), but it also becomes a resource that men may actually benefit more from than women.

On the basis of this review, we find some support for the claim that beauty and body work and good appearance are increasingly expected from men. At the level of individual behavior, we find that individuals—regardless of gender—are doing more for their appearance than before, which is in line with Widdows (2018) analysis

of beauty as an ‘ethical ideal’ for everyone, or Kuipers’ (2022) suggestion of ‘an expanding beauty regime’. However, on the basis of the limited evidence, we do not find strong support for a closing gender gap in beauty and body practices. When women undertake beauty and body work that was traditionally more seen as masculine, for example rigorous sports and exercise, they do so in addition to existing traditional beauty work, not as a replacement to it. Available European data suggest that men have not adopted more feminine beauty practices to the same extent. Indeed, it seems that the input-output ratio of beauty and body work also appears better from men’s perspective, as men generally spend less time and financial resources on beauty body work, and at the same time, appearance is more likely to benefit them, for example, in the workplace, than it does women. The forms of body work practiced by men are also considered inherently more acceptable and valuable than the beauty work traditionally practiced by women. However, no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn yet because of the lack of proper statistics and systematic comparisons beyond individual country cases.

In addition to more systematic comparisons, existing research should try to look at beauty standards, practices, and outcomes beyond the gender binary. As non-binary and queer identities are increasingly prominent, and increasingly contested, there is an urgent need to understand how beauty can express and mobilize non-heteronormative identities, and how it can reproduce beauty-based inequalities. Moreover, this will also shed light on how beauty and appearance can be politically thematized and even weaponized in political projects. The current literature has made great advances in demonstrating the gendered nature of beauty within the binary heteronormative gender system. But as we saw in our discussion of studies on queer challenges to this system, looking beyond the gender binary will provide a better understanding of the relation between gender and beauty (cf. Weißflog & Grigoryan, 2024).

Similarly, future research can expand on the promising previous work of research on class and race and its intersection with gender, and beauty

to further develop intersectional approaches to gendered inequality. This can also draw in additional intersections with inequalities, such as age, health, and national or cultural differences. Taken together, the future of the study of gendered beauty inequalities looks promising as the current scholarship provides an excellent base to further study these intersections, develop more systematic studies, include insights from smaller cases studies, and look beyond traditional understanding of gender that seem increasingly irrelevant or outdated in light of shifts to the gender system.

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Otti Sarpila is a Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Centre at the University of Turku. Between 2023 and 2026, she is serving as a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku. Sarpila has led two externally funded research projects focused on themes of appearance and inequality. The most recent of these, funded by the Research Council of Finland, has partially facilitated this handbook project. Sarpila's background is in economic sociology, and she has specialized in quantitative research on appearance. Her research on these themes has previously been published in journals such as *Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, and *European Societies*.

Luuc Brans is a Postdoctoral Researcher at KU Leuven with a background in Political Science and Cultural Sociology. In his PhD (KU Leuven, 2024), he investigated the ideologization of fashion, in particular how powerful players in the European cultural field of fashion navigate the climate crisis and sustainability. His research interests are at the intersection of culture, politics, and sustainability. Luuc earned his degrees at the universities of Amsterdam and Edinburgh, and was twice a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University, where he was an affiliate of the Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs. His work has been published in *Cultural Sociology* and *Journal of Consumer Culture*.

Giselinde Kuipers is Research Professor at the Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven University. She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural standards and their consequences for social interactions, identities, and inequalities. She has published widely on the relation between culture and inequality, as well as beauty, fashion, media, humor, popular culture, and cultural industries, often from a comparative or transnational perspective. Currently, she directs a large comparative study on beauty and inequality funded by the European Research Council.

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Beauty as Evaluation

Giselinde Kuipers, Yiu Fai Chow, Gladys Pak Lei Chong,
and Wanying Zhou

1 The Eye of the Beholder?

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Usually, this cliché is taken to mean that beauty is purely subjective, a matter of taste that people cannot reach agreement on. However, as many chapters in this book show, this is not how beauty works. While there is never complete consensus, there are many reasons—social, cultural, psychological and biological—why people have similar positive or negative aesthetic responses to a person or object. The cliché gets something else right though: beauty does indeed happen in the eye, as well as the ear, nose, touch and (who knows) taste of the person experiencing beauty. Beauty is not an intrinsic or objective quality of a person or a thing, but instead the outcome of a *process of evaluation*.

When physical appearance contributes to social inequalities, this is because people *evaluate* someone as beautiful or not, and act upon it. Good-looking persons have better chances in

the job market (Kühn and Wolbring, this handbook) because the people who evaluate their CVs or job interviews are somehow convinced or mollified by their beauty, and offer them a job rather than someone with similar or better qualifications. When a person of colour has fewer matches on a European or American dating app (Potârca & Mills, 2015; Ranzini et al., 2022), this is because other users evaluate them as less desirable or attractive. Over time, such moments of exclusion or inclusion add up to durable inequalities.

Although the dominant approach in the study of beauty and inequality suggests that “beauty pays” (Hamermesh, 2011), the effects of beauty are not straightforward. For instance, various studies have shown that for women, beauty can be a disadvantage. Hamermesh (2011, p. 48) suggested a “bimbo effect”: people perceive beautiful women as less competent. Ruffle and Shtudiner (2015) offer an evolutionary explanation: women see beautiful women as competition and therefore exclude them. Kukkonen et al. (2024) argue that good-looking women can be morally judged and penalized for looking (too) good. Although different in kind, these explanations suggest that modes of evaluation are weighed against each other: a bias against women trumping a bias for beauty; a negative moral evaluation trumping a positive aesthetic evaluation. Moreover, different criteria for evaluation may be applied to different people, or in different situations.

In this chapter, we propose that the mechanisms determining when and how “beauty pays” are

G. Kuipers (✉) · W. Zhou
KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: giselinde.kuipers@kuleuven.be

W. Zhou
e-mail: wanying.zhou@kuleuven.be

Y. F. Chow · G. P. L. Chong
Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China
e-mail: yfchow@hkbu.edu.hk

G. P. L. Chong
e-mail: gladyschong@hkbu.edu.hk

more easily understood when we think of beauty as evaluation: an open-ended, non-deterministic process in which a person's appearance is assessed as more or less aesthetically pleasing. Although some individuals are (much) more likely to be seen as beautiful or attractive,¹ if and how someone is experienced as beautiful depends on many psychological, sociocultural and situational factors. The consequences of such evaluations are also open-ended: even a similar *evaluation* (that is, assessment) of "good looks" may lead to a different *valuation*, that is: attribution of worth and value based on this assessment (Lamont, 2012). As sociologist Michele Lamont (2012) has argued, evaluations—aesthetic but also moral, economic, etc.—mark symbolic boundaries between who is more or less worthy, thus creating and reproducing social inequalities, for instance related to class, race and ethnicity.

After a brief survey of research on the evaluation of beauty, we discuss various approaches to beauty and inequality, dividing up the literature into two broad categories. We distinguish, first, "aesthetic capital" approaches, which assume that all people generally agree in their evaluations of appearance. The "beauty standards as distinction" approaches, in contrast, foreground disagreement about beauty. However, both approaches show that evaluations of beauty lead people to draw social boundaries: between beautiful or less beautiful people; or between people who have the same beauty taste, and those who see beautiful differently. Following the cultural process model of social inequality (Lamont et al., 2014), we argue that this process of boundary-drawing is a central mechanism underlying beauty's inequality effects across domains of life.

We illustrate the usefulness of this approach with a case study. Using novel data, we show that evaluations of beauty in Hong Kong mark various social boundaries, in which judgements of beauty

are entangled with wider assessments of gender, class, race and ethnicity. We found both consensus and variation; in both cases, social inequalities are made and remade in distinct ways. Thus, seeing beauty as evaluation process allows us to bridge existing approaches to beauty and inequality into a new integrated model.

2 Studying the Evaluation of Beauty: A Long Research Tradition with Diverse Goals

Researchers have studied the evaluation of human beauty for various theoretical reasons. The largest tradition is based in (evolutionary) psychology and biology, where research subjects are asked to rate or rank people's appearance in order to uncover the nature of beauty. Asking large numbers of people, ideally from different cultures, to assess human beauty, enables researchers to identify universal features of beauty, and variations across theoretically relevant categories like gender or age (Jones & Jaeger, 2019; Kleisner et al., 2024).

This paradigm mostly relies on experimental and survey designs, typically with images selected or manipulated to foreground specific, theoretically informed aspects of appearance. In its early years, this tradition has produced strong claims for universal aspects of beauty, like symmetry, averageness, indicators of health or fertility, or pronounced masculine or feminine traits. These findings have made their way into conventional wisdom, but meanwhile the field has moved on. The chapter by Lidborg and Boothroyd (2026) in this Handbook gives an up-to-date review from evolutionary psychology, showing that many (though not all) claims for universal beauty traits have been called into question. Although these null findings may disappoint some people, they highlight the strength of this research tradition: the strong focus on methodological validity makes true falsification possible.

A second tradition, from the social sciences and humanities, has studied evaluations of beauty in specific institutional and sociocultural contexts. Often, these studies focus on "beauty-centric"

¹ In this chapter, we use "beauty" as a general term for a positive appreciation of people's appearance. We realize that in English, beauty is commonly associated with women, but we also use it for men. We sometimes refer to "attractive (ness)", which is the preferred term in evolutionary studies, psychology and part of stratification sociology.

institutions like salons, beauty pageants or sex work (Balogun & Hoang, 2018). Using ethnographic or historical methods, these studies show that beauty is more than a matter of “pure” physique: assessments of beauty happen in interactions in which people take into account grooming, styling, clothing and expression. In her study of beauty salons, Ossman (2002) shows how evaluations of beauty are embedded in practices of improvement and care, with standards varying both across cultures and types of salons. Recently, Menon (2023; see also Menon, 2026) theorized evaluations of beauty in the context of improvement, though with more durable effect: in cosmetic surgery.

These studies foreground diversity in beauty standards. Evaluations of beauty vary because they are part of practices with a specific purpose: improving one’s appearance, or choosing a fashion model, beauty queen or sex worker. In her work on fashion modelling, Mears (2011) showed how the beauty of models is evaluated according to “industry standards”, which are specific to the cultural field of modelling, and within this field to the subfields of “editorial” versus “commercial” fashion. Within the editorial field, beauty standards converge towards highly specific tastes that differ considerably from everyday beauty standards. However, when “zooming out”, these field-specific evaluations echo and reproduce wider understandings of beauty, and inequalities based on gender, class, race or age: models are generally thin, white, young and female. Similarly, Menon (2023) concludes that although evaluations of beauty are open-ended, involving considerable negotiation between doctors and patients about appropriate standards, they ultimately reinforce (nationally specific) understandings of race and ethnicity.

A third approach to evaluation of beauty is directly grounded in research on beauty and inequality. Studies of the beauty premium (or plainness penalty, cf. Peng et al., 2020) rely on evaluations of beauty to investigate whether “beauty pays”. Panelists are asked to rate pictures of participants (Jaeger, 2011), or interviewers rate the beauty/attractiveness of survey participants (Schneickert et al., 2020; Gugushvili & Bulczak,

2023). These evaluations are used to study how beauty creates inequalities in income, education, health or well-being. These methods typically show considerable consensus on attractiveness/beauty (within a given population)—generally taken to mean that beauty is a real feature of individuals with lasting consequences, similar to education or intelligence.

These different perspectives lead to insights that seem hard to reconcile. Is beauty universal, specific to a society, or varying between settings? Is beauty about “pure” appearance, or about grooming and styling? We suggest these approaches complement rather than contradict each other, because they foreground different evaluation processes. In more naturalistic or “everyday” settings, people evaluate real persons with a range of looks, and evaluations are influenced by many factors, including taste and mood, the personal relation to the person they are evaluating, and the purpose of the evaluation. In the evolutionary and beauty premium traditions, research participants are prompted to make “contextless” evaluations of standardized images, often in a lab-like set-up or taking on a “neutral” role as interviewer or expert panelist. However, before we set out to bridge these perspectives, we review existing approaches to the relation between beauty and inequality, distinguishing approaches that assume agreement versus disagreement on beauty.

3 Foregrounding Consensus in Evaluations: Beauty as Aesthetic Capital

The most prominent approach in the study of beauty and inequality holds that appearance creates inequality because *beauty functions as aesthetic capital*. This approach, discussed in many chapters in this handbook, foregrounds consensus. If most people in a given setting or society agree what makes a person attractive, appearance becomes a resource that can be converted into benefits: money, a job, connections, relationships, well-being, a successful mate or healthy children (Raudenska, this volume; Hamplova and Smith, this volume).

Figure 1 summarizes this approach as an evaluation process, in which a micro-process of evaluation leads people to mark a social boundary between people they consider beautiful or less so, ultimately building up to cumulative advantage or disadvantage (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). The model shows evaluation schematically, as a binary yes/no, but in practice, of course, evaluations take different forms such as a continuum (more/less beautiful) or comparison (A is more beautiful than B). Most beauty premium/aesthetic capital scholars see the advantage of beautiful people as a form of bias, resulting in discrimination and exclusion. Some, however, have argued that good looks may be a real asset (Wolbring, 2026).

A second, critical tradition in the study of beauty and inequality that assumes (relative) consensus looks beyond the level of individual advantage: feminist/gender theory (Bordo, 2003; Craig, 2006) and its recent offspring intersectional theory (e.g. Elias et al., 2017). Since the 1960s, gender scholars have tried to understand why the universal association of women with beauty has not benefited women. Different mechanisms have been proposed to explain why beauty often harms women. Ultimately, all argue that evaluations of appearance reflect ideologies and power structures that see women as less important or powerful (Craig, 2026).

This suggests a different connection between beauty and inequality: beauty may benefit individuals, but still harm them as a group. Hakim (2011), a quantitative sociologist working in the beauty premium tradition, has suggested that if normative constraints for women on exploiting their “erotic capital” are lifted, women can benefit directly from their aesthetic capital. However, most researchers argue that beauty and gender inequality are linked by social mechanisms that cannot be simply lifted because they operate on many levels. Social psychological processes “prime” people to see gender, with the concomitant low status, when they see a beautiful woman (Ridgeway, 2014). Cultural patterns confront women with double standards leading to conflicting, ultimately unsolvable demands regarding appearance (Sarpila et al., 2020).

Social patterns of exclusion and exploitation lead (powerful) men to reap the benefits of female beauty (Mears, 2020).

Feminist insights on beauty and gender inequality have been adopted and adapted to explain how appearance reinforces other structural inequalities, notably race/ethnicity (Craig, 2006; Hunter, 2013, 2021; Tate, 2009). People from marginalized groups are often stigmatized because their appearance does not conform to dominant standards. But like women, members of disadvantaged groups can be set apart by and through “exotic” beauty. Even when these evaluations are flattering, they still mark these groups as different (Kuipers et al., 2014; 2026).

Recently, various scholars have integrated insights from aesthetic capital and critical approaches. In this approach (see Fig. 2), evaluation is preceded by categorization: to decide whether someone looks good, people first need to “pigeonhole” this person. For instance, classification as female activates different expectations related to beauty or appearance as compared to men, non-binary or otherwise gendered persons. However, people usually belong to more than one category. Fig 3 shows an intersectional situation with two intersecting categories. An example would be gender vs. race (in the relatively binary Black/White US system).

In these models, the rewards to appearance are not straightforward anymore. We discussed this above in the context of gender: women do not necessarily benefit from their good looks. This can be reformulated as a general principle: for less privileged groups, the rewards for beauty vary more and are more unpredictable. This is a testable hypothesis, which is echoed in a recent study by Monk et al. (2021) that looks at the returns to beauty for Whites and Blacks in the US context. While most extant work on race and beauty suggests that the dominant (usually white) group benefits most from appearance, this particular study showed a “winner takes all” pattern for the less privileged group, with economic advantage for the best-looking Black people, and disadvantage for Black people whose appearance is rated as average or below average. In line with the intersectional model, this effect

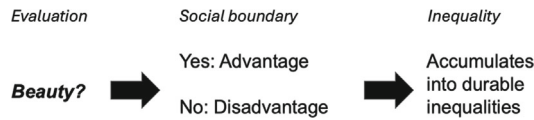


Fig. 1 Aesthetic capital as evaluation process

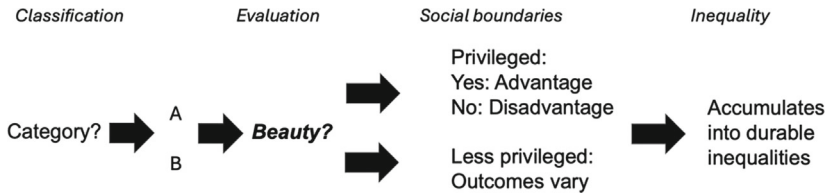


Fig. 2 Integrated aesthetic capital or critical approach: classification informs evaluation

is somewhat more pronounced for Black women than for Black men: In other words: race and gender intersect, producing unequal outcomes for people belonging to different social categories.

Importantly, while these classification-evaluation models see the social consequences of evaluation process as open-ended, they assume consensus on evaluations. Overall, people are expected to agree that some women, Black people, or for that matter large-bodied, older, Asian, or non-binary persons are better looking than others. Moreover, these models assume that people (roughly) recognize the same categories, ranked along a similar hierarchy. But because of the intersectional logic, the same evaluation has uncertain outcomes: people may be rewarded, but they may also be penalized for their good looks.

4 Foregrounding Variations in Evaluation: Beauty Standards as Distinction

Scholars from the social and cultural sciences have critiqued the aesthetic capital approach, observing that even within a single society, people often don't agree who is beautiful. They suggest another process by which evaluations of beauty shape inequality: appearance re/produces disadvantage because *the standards by which people evaluate beauty are a means of social distinction*.

A long research tradition on cultural capital, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), has argued

that people set themselves apart from others through taste and aesthetics. Although Bourdieu was remarkably silent on appearance, preferring to focus on music, food and art, appearance is a particularly useful way to express taste, because people wear their beauty taste “on their sleeves”. People signal their social position, especially class, through their bodily shape and posture, and through grooming and adornment (Skeggs, 1997; Vandebroek, 2016; Kukkonen, 2021; Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2024). This approach puts the eye of the beholder front and centre, arguing that inequality results from “judgement of taste”.

Figure 4 shows how beauty standards function as a form of cultural capital. When people evaluate others' appearance, or when they groom and style themselves according to their standards, they signal their social position, and the status attached to this position. People draw boundaries based on beauty taste: they seek out people with similar taste, and scorn or avoid those not sharing their beauty taste. The right beauty taste facilitates access to social networks (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2018; Monier & Mears, 2026). This process reproduces social segmentation and reinforces status hierarchies.

Beauty standards of high-status people are more influential and more “exclusive”: rarer and harder to attain. Elites often have dress codes that are hard to read or emulate for people not socialized into these dress codes (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; De Keere et al., 2026). This also works at the deeper level of the body itself. For instance,

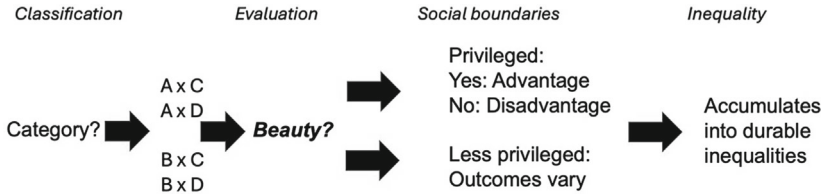


Fig. 3 Intersectional model: intersecting classifications inform evaluation

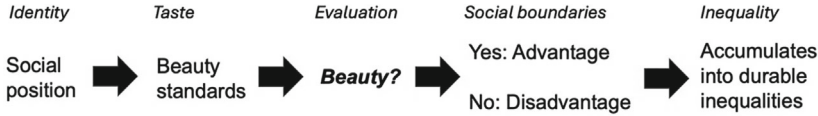


Fig. 4 Beauty standards as distinction: Evaluations of beauty reflect group-specific, unequally valued beauty standards

the current ideal of thinness is not a natural or universal preference but a culturally specific standard, reflecting Euro-American middle-class ideologies of bodily restraint (Saguy, 2012). This “thin” ideal is widely shared, also by bigger-bodied people, and especially difficult to attain for people with less cultural capital (Groeniger et al., 2020; Vandebroek & Kuipers, 2026).

In a stratified taste system, privileged groups accumulate advantage through their high-status beauty standards, and less privileged groups are penalized for their so-called bad taste. In a study in five European countries, Kuipers (2015) finds that beauty tastes are indeed stratified, especially for women. Evaluating sets of 25 women and men’s faces, more educated urban people preferred more “interesting” or “authentic” women, while less educated and rural people preferred “pretty” or “attractive” women that educated urbanites tended to dislike and dismiss for being “fake” or “uninteresting”. For male faces, evaluations were not class-related. Since people style and groom themselves according to their beauty standards, women of low-status backgrounds are likely to be evaluated negatively by high-status people. The ultimate consequence of this is that lower-class (or generally, lower status) people are likely to be less beautiful by dominant standards. This is indeed what Schneickert et al. (2020) find: they conclude that in Germany “all forms of capital [economic, cultural and social] decrease unattractiveness.”

Figure 5 shows what the “beauty standards as distinction” model looks like when we start from

people with less privileged positions. Since the late 1990s, scholars in this (post-)Bourdiesian tradition have studied the beauty standards of less privileged groups, notably working-class women (Bettie, 2014). As Skeggs (2005, p. 965) summarizes, working-class women find themselves in a “no-win situation” because they experience continuous clashes between the standards and demands for femininity and respectability. Craig (2006) shows similar clashes between dominant and subordinate standards in her work on Black beauty culture in the US, again with particularly damaging results for women. This is the fundamental conflict for low cultural capital groups: less legitimate (beauty) tastes often benefit people within their own circles but create disadvantage in society as a whole. But as Craig (2026) notes, this effect is more pronounced for beauty as a form of “subordinate capital”. This, again, makes the outcomes of beauty more unpredictable for people with less power, but in the long run produces cumulative disadvantage.

However, there is an alternative process at work, too: beauty standards can empower low-status groups to express oppositional tastes. Youth cultures and other oppositional groups can signal resistance through unusual beauty styles, as Hebdige (1979) showed for the punk aesthetic in the 1970s. Like the (post-)Bourdiesian perspective, the subcultural approach identifies evaluations of beauty as a site of cultural conflict, but with more open-ended results. This perspective seems increasingly relevant in contemporary

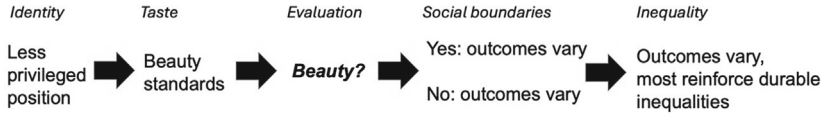


Fig. 5 Beauty standards as distinction, part 2: starting from less privileged positions

societies, as social hierarchies are increasingly contested, and beauty has become a central domain of meaning-making (Kuipers, 2022). Many new forms of “beautyvism” (Brans & Pieters, 2026) promote non-hegemonic beauty standards, by confident representations of marginalized groups like large-bodied women (Lazuka et al., 2020), trans or non-binary people (Marques, 2019) or Black people with “natural hair” (Johnson, 2024). Such “countercultural beauty standards” represent oppositional repertoires of evaluation and explicitly aim to challenge societal inequalities. To our knowledge, this literature has not been connected explicitly to research on beauty and inequality, but it can be integrated seamlessly into the model shown in Fig. 7.5.

5 The Evaluation of Beauty as Boundary-Drawing: Beauty, Consensus and Disagreement in Hong Kong

In our view, the “beauty as aesthetic capital” and the “beauty standards as distinction” approaches are complementary rather than conflicting: they foreground different evaluation processes, leading to different forms of boundary-drawing based on appearance. When there is consensus, people distinguish presumably “objectively” beautiful from non-beautiful people and will treat them differently. When there is less consensus, boundaries are drawn along lines of beauty standards: people are drawn to people with similar beauty tastes, and shun those whose tastes don’t match theirs. We illustrate this with findings from an exploratory study of beauty standards in Hong Kong. Concretely, we ask: 1. What patterns of consensus and disagreement are there in people’s evaluations of beauty? 2. What boundaries are marked by these evaluations? 3. How is this related to social inequalities?

Hong Kong is a strategic case for putting our perspective to the test. Insights on beauty and inequality are based almost exclusively on European and North-American studies. The East-Asian, postcolonial context can complement and correct existing insights. Hong Kong has a distinctive aesthetic style, reflecting its well-established cultural industries, neoliberal consumer ethos and its mix of sociocultural influences (Chow et al., 2020). Although Hong Kong is a prosperous (though very unequal) global city, Hong Kongers are relatively underprivileged from a global perspective: British colonial subjects until 1997, subsumed under Beijing rule since 1997. Our study was conducted just before the 2019 protests against a proposed extradition bill that many saw as a sign of political integration into China (Zhao, 2021). Thus, our study is a snapshot of a city in flux, with both social hierarchies and cultural regimes shifting quickly.

For this study, we used the visual Q-sort method developed for the study of beauty and distinction discussed above (Kuipers, 2015). Trained research assistants interviewed a group of twenty respondents, asking them to sort 25 images of men’s and women’s faces from most to least beautiful on a pyramid-shaped grid (see Fig. 6), and to think out loud during the sorting. This method simultaneously yields qualitative data on evaluations of beauty and quantitative data as people (unwittingly) sort the images on a scale from +4 to −4.

We developed new Q-sets of women’s and men’s faces, combining images from the European study with “Asian” faces, from Hong Kong, mainland China and other Asian countries. We used the same procedure as in the European study: images were selected to show a range of physical types, grooming, styling and expression, within an 18–35 age range. We used a quota sampling method to capture the main social variations. The final sample included eleven men and nine women,

Fig. 6 Q-sort grid: people are asked to sort images from most (+4) to least (−4) beautiful

The diagram shows a Q-sort grid used for sorting images. It consists of a pyramid of boxes. The horizontal axis is labeled from -4 to +4, with 'Least beautiful' at -4, 'Neutral' at 0, and 'Most beautiful' at +4. The vertical axis represents the number of boxes, with 5 boxes at the top and 9 boxes at the bottom. Labels on the left include 'Picture pile:', 'Respondent category:', and 'Date:'. A label on the right says 'Interviewer:'.

from 21 to 70 years old (mean 38.5). Thirteen were home-owners, and seven did not own property, which is a proxy for socio-economic status. All interviews were done in Cantonese, which means the study focuses on “native” Hong Kong residents, excluding residents from mainland China, migrants and expats.

The quantitative results of the Q-sorts give a first indication of consensus versus disagreement in evaluations of beauty. As in the European study, we found no obvious consensus on which face was the most beautiful. Respondents converged in their appreciation of professional-looking photos of conventionally beautiful, smiling, unobtrusively styled faces, but this left enough room for taste variations. Strikingly, the best-liked male face was also the best liked among European respondents: a smiling, Mediterranean-looking man was the favourite of 7 respondents, but also received two low ratings of −2. The best-liked female image showed a young Asian woman with a large smile and a fresh, open face. Her overall rating was higher than for the favourite male face, as she received no negative responses. This reflects a general pattern, in line with the intersectional approach: women’s faces get more extreme evaluations (see Sarpila et al., 2026). There was considerable agreement on who was least beautiful, which confirms other studies showing that people agree more about ugliness than about beauty (Sorokowski et al., 2013).

Zooming out, we can discern points of agreement in evaluations of beauty. These do not point to possibly universal beauty traits like symmetry, averageness or gender-typicality, but instead are

sociological in nature, relating to shared beliefs about beauty and boundaries of gender, race, ethnicity and class. Without exception, respondents agreed that beauty is capital and looking good is essential in finding one’s way in the society. Alex (21, student) cited his visit to a K-pop girl group: “When you see how beautiful these girls are in real life, you will know, well they will never fail. That is, whatever you do, when others see how good-looking you are, they already have good will towards you.” Many respondents, like Alex, equated beauty with success. Another shared belief relates to the importance of faces, particularly the eyes, as a sign of character. Many respondents referred to the Chinese saying *xiangyouxinsheng*, literally “our faces grow from our hearts”. Large, round eyes were evaluated as beautiful and good, while the least-liked images were dismissed for having “bad”, small or narrow eyes.

Unsurprisingly, respondents agreed that beauty is more important for women, and evaluated female beauty easier and harsher. Jan (31, F, designer), sorting the female faces: “she does have features, but they are not quite right, look, all the bones, so protruding. You know the [horror] film *Saw*? Like the character there.” Women were held more accountable for looking ugly. As Nicole (26, kindergarten teacher) said: “There are no ugly women, only lazy ones”. Respondents were milder and more hesitant when evaluating men. Consequently, boundary-drawing on the basis of appearance was harsher for women than for men, echoing the “classification precedes evaluation” model (Fig. 2).

The most striking pattern of consensus is related to race. Across the board, informants evaluated men and women with darker skins negatively, while white people, usually called “foreigners”, were placed on the better end. Blending aesthetic and moral evaluations, Lung Yeah (70, retiree) put aside the portrait of a woman with a darker complexion: “looks like a *chamui* [derogatory term for Indian women] ... probably someone who would keep on taking selfies. She should consider herself lucky [to live here], in India she would be raped and dumped to a river.” Although his words are unusually harsh, this racialization of beauty was unexceptional. Nic (31, M, IT worker), disliked images of darker men and women: “it’s the skin colour”, he explained, “Blackness” made him feel “uncomfortable”. He preferred white faces: “their features are more pronounced, more attractive”. Mon (32, F, art administrator) found the long, curly hair of a man in one portrait very appealing: “some romantic feeling of a French guy.” Jorji (32, M, engineer) concluded: “the facial features of foreigners [white people] are really more elegant.” This association of whiteness with beauty can be explained from the colonial history of Hong Kong, and the presence of many high-status white expats.

Respondents contrasted white beauty with (in their evaluation) less beautiful faces of Black people, and “darker” South and South-east Asian people, many of whom live in the city and suffer from racial stigmatization (Chiu & Siu, 2022). As Felix (27, marketing) commented on one of the images: “she looks like a Filipino maid”. Manfred (42, financial analyst) commented on a South Asian face: “The skin colour, so dark, and in a not attractive way, a bit dull, actually it’s brown. I also find the lips too thick.” Comparing to the “sharp” features of white faces, Jan considered facial features of South-east Asians “usually not outstanding, they need make-up to help, otherwise you won’t see their noses or eyes”. Anson (29, F, musician) connected her sorting with wider patterns of prejudice: “Perhaps I am rather easily influenced by other people, say, when people around me tell me dark skin is not good, then I would follow, and consider dark skin not good, and white

skin good, it’s been implanted in me since young.”

This racialized pattern suggests a simple link between beauty and inequality, again in line with the “classification precedes evaluation” model: high-status racial groups (Whites) are beautiful, and low-status racial groups (Blacks, South-Asians) are ugly. This is a consensual pattern that applies to men and women, and likely consolidates ethno-racial hierarchies.

However, the patterns look less consensual when we include all racial groups in our comparison. In both the interviews and the Q-sort, we find two distinct patterns of most preferred images: some informants preferred White beauty, and others preferred East-Asian (esp. Hong Kong, Korean and Japanese) faces. Respondents often separated beauty standards for white and Asian faces, claiming categorical incomparability, as Kevin (42, banking worker) did: “It’s difficult to compare foreigners and Hong Kong people... It’s just difficult to rank them side by side, well, how could you compare a foreigner with a Chinese?”

Our sample is too small to say something definitive about the sociodemographic difference between people who prefer Asian versus “foreign” beauty. We hypothesize this produces two distinct patterns of boundary-drawing, privileging either Asians or Whites, pointing to the “beauty standards as distinction” model (Fig. 3). The interviews showed that evaluations can be context dependent. Even respondents who articulated their beauty preference for white faces did not consider them potential partners for themselves or their children. “Girlfriendable”, for instance, is a local English coinage to describe desirable, though not stunningly beautiful, female faces. The centrality of this term helps us see why a fresh, open Asian face was the best-liked female face. As Mr. Wong (57, warehouse worker) explained: “I can’t see the personality behind the foreigners’ faces.” For men, evaluations were more generic and contextless, which explains why the high-status, less familiar white face was chosen as most beautiful. Thus, evaluation depends on intersecting categories of race and gender (matching the intersectional model in Fig. 4), but also, in line with the ethnographic approach, on imagined

context: imagining beauty in a concrete setting leads people towards more familiar Asian faces.

A striking point of consensus in our sample relates to ethnic boundaries: without prompting, respondents drew firm aesthetic boundaries between local Hong Kong people and “mainlanders”. Astonishingly quickly, they categorized images as *dailukmei*, literally “mainland flavour”, criticizing, occasionally ridiculing people they identified, based on styling and pose, as coming from mainland China. Taikin (32, M, theatre worker) called a male portrait: “very mainland”, describing the gelled hair: “looks like sea urchin.” Nic drew a disapproving parallel between a female portrait and “the kind of selfies made by mainland tourists in Hong Kong.” Kaying (22, F, university worker) dismissed the lowest ranking image: “she has seen too much mainland Chinese kind of make-up... eye lines too long, lips too thick, eyebrows too thick... her look is too contrived, perhaps it’s a bit racism, but she has strong mainland style.” Manfred, talking about the least-liked male image: “he looks like a mainland Chinese star, or a mainland Chinese masseur... this type of looks, how to I say, *tohei* [earthy and rustic, suggesting peasant-like backwardness]? Or maybe not *tohei*, but *dailukmei*. That is, the kind of style popular in mainland China, not in Hong Kong.”

Dailukmei, or mainland style, is a taste-based distinction. In line with the “beauty standards as distinction” (Fig. 4–5) model, people draw boundaries on the basis of beauty standards. Their styling and pose mark “mainlanders” as old-fashioned, vulgar, loud, out of sync with the local Hong Kong culture, and therefore as unwelcome outsiders and inferior others. Despite the consensus in our sample of native Hong Kongers, this reflects a wider pattern of disagreement and social division: the growing, and growingly powerful, group of recent immigrants from elsewhere in China would certainly judge these “mainlanders” more positively.

This sharp boundary-drawing is related to the political context (Lowe & Tsang, 2017). After the 1997 handover, many mainlanders moved to Hong Kong. Along with the increasing political dominance of Beijing, this led to concerns about

cultural and political assimilation. Maybe because direct protest is difficult, beauty has emerged as a key domain for expressing social and political discontent. The boundary-marking is clear, but the relation with wider social inequalities much less so. During the interviews, in 2019, our respondents probably thought of themselves as the dominant group. Since then, the symbolic power of mainlanders has grown. In retrospect, it makes most sense to think of this disdain for mainland beauty as an oppositional beauty taste (see Fig. 5), associated with a dominated social position.

Finally, our study showed several smaller patterns of disagreement on beauty standards, connected to various social divides within the “native” Hong Kong populations. First, several more prosperous respondents associated less appealing looks with lower-class work. Manfred considered several women rather “mediocre”, imagining them to be “OLs [office ladies] working in Central”, the Hong Kong business area, and described less attractive men as “insurance agents”. Felix negatively evaluated a woman without make-up: “no confidence, like a dish cleaner, or a waitress.” Assessing a man wearing a suit and tie, Felix said: “This looks like someone working in sales, he can be my employee.”

Two other negative aesthetic stereotypes highlight locally specific intersections of gender and class. First, some people negatively evaluated men for looking too “MK”, referring to the area Mongkok, which local young people frequent for shopping, entertainment, and style consumption of a more financially accessible sort. Kaying described a male portrait this way: “he’s too MK... MK boys are those who want to catch people’s attention, and you see his hair dyed in such a way. He looks like he’s just been beaten up.” The second stereotype is *gonglui*, literary Hong Kong girls, a derogatory term for demanding, spoiled young women (Chan, 2018). Felix identified one portrait as a *gonglui*: “She looks like my former girlfriend. She will beat her boyfriend up, will bite him, will have temper, and stay silent, and is demanding.” In both cases, informants use beauty styles to identify social style and position: lower-class young men and (aspirant) higher-class young women. Thus, beauty standards are used to draw

social boundaries against people seen as undesirable because of a specific intersecting combination of appearance, gender and class. In other words, in these evaluations we see elements of various existing models: the intersecting model associated with aesthetic capital approaches, and the beauty standards as distinction model.

6 Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

How does beauty affect or reproduce social inequalities? This chapter offers an integration of the various answers that scholars have given to this question. Inspired by the sociology of valuation and evaluation (SVE, Lamont, 2012), we conceptualize beauty as an open-ended evaluation process that sparks social boundary-drawing: people make distinctions between persons they see as more or less good-looking, and (may) act on this. This results in social dis/advantage, which may reflect or reinforce durable inequalities. We reformulated existing approaches to beauty and inequality, distinguishing two broad approaches: “beauty as aesthetic capital” and “beauty standards as distinction”. When there is consensus on beauty standards, people distinguish so-called objectively beautiful from non-beautiful people and will treat them differently. When there is less or consensus on who is beautiful or not, boundaries are drawn along lines of beauty standards. People are drawn to people with similar beauty tastes, and shun those whose tastes don’t match theirs. This leads to boundary-drawing on aspects of styling, grooming, bodily posture and size, but also specific “beauty types”, including “biological givens” such as racial features, hair structure, or length, which may be liked or disliked by certain groups.

We put this model to the test in a Q-method study of evaluations of beauty in Hong Kong. Even in our small sample, we found many different evaluation processes—from collective, hegemonic admiration of white beauty to gender/class-based rejections of insurance workers, *gonglui* and MK boys, and from Hong Kong natives’ aversion to “mainland flavour” to collective appreciation of

“girlfriendable” women. Seen from the vantage point of evaluation, existing approaches to beauty and inequality are indeed complementary: rather than finding support for a single mechanism, we see different mechanisms, reinforcing different, often intersecting, inequalities. Moreover, our case study highlighted how important beauty is in how people see and evaluate others. Our respondents’ evaluations of beauty paint a revealing image of societal cleavages and tensions. In retrospect, our study provides a snapshot of Hong Kong society just before it would change forever.

The integrated model presented here opens up many avenues for further research. Most importantly, it could foster exchange between different traditions in the study of beauty and inequality. In recent years, sociologists have combined insights from stratification sociology with more critical intersectional and feminist theory (e.g. Monk et al., 2021; Sarpila et al., 2020; Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2024). We see more opportunities for cross-fertilization, for instance including insights on taste-based distinctions in work on aesthetic capital, or by combining insights from ethnographic work on beauty as situated process, with lab or survey studies on the social or economic “returns” to beauty. It is particularly important to study the advantages or disadvantages of beauty for less privileged groups. All existing theories predict that for the socially and economically well-off, good looks often pay off, while the outcomes for less privileged groups (women, non-dominant ethnic/racial groups, queer people, people in the global periphery, etc.) are more open-ended and unpredictable.

Our new integrated model could be used to shed new light on the consequences of evaluations of beauty. How do *evaluations* become *valuations*, in other words: when and how do evaluations of appearance lead to gain and rewards? To understand this, we first need more research on evaluation as a situated process. What do people look at when they assess appearance? How does this vary across people and situations? Too often in existing research, the evaluation process remains a black box. Opening this black box could explain contradictory findings of existing research, and help us see under what conditions beauty pays and

ugliness is penalized, or vice versa. This would help us understand how different axes of inequality intersect (cf. Monk, 2026; Monier & Mears, 2026; Sarpila et al., 2025), and how situations matter in shaping evaluations (De Keere et al., 2025). Moreover, to understand when and how “beauty pays” we also need to understand how micro-processes of evaluation contribute to more durable inequalities.

To understand lasting consequences of beauty, we also need to understand how repertoires of evaluation of beauty are shaped. Our Hong Kong case study shows how evaluations reflect culture-specific repertoires of evaluation: “girlfriendly”, “mainland flavour” or *xiangyouxinsheng*. Further research could uncover how institutions and actors create and legitimize such repertoires, and how and when they are contested. It is particularly relevant to study the shaping of repertoires in relation to aesthetic capital approaches: how is consensus on beauty standards created? Under what conditions can people develop counterhegemonic beauty standards, and how can alternative repertoires gain legitimacy?

By answering such questions, we can contextualize and correct the rather simplistic claims of the “beauty premium” approach. Insights on the beauty premium, aesthetic or erotic capital have huge appeal because they resonate with neoliberal beliefs about self-optimization. Around the world, people increasingly believe that beauty is a form of capital—we saw this in our Hong Kong study. In this context, beauty premium studies may be used to legitimate discrimination, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The insights on beauty and inequality offered by our integrated model may not be as satisfyingly snappy or intuitive. But ultimately, we believe it will produce better, though more complicated answers to the question how beauty reinforces social inequality.

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- Giselinde Kuipers** is research professor at the Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven University. She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural standards and their consequences for social interactions, identities and inequalities. She has published widely on the relation between culture and inequality, as well as beauty, fashion, media, humor, popular culture and cultural industries, often from a comparative or transnational perspective. Currently, she directs a large comparative study on beauty and inequality funded by the European Research Council.
- Yiu Fai Chow** (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is a Professor at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Metropolitan University. Chow's research fields include gender and sexuality, creative practices and cultural studies at large. He has published numerous articles in top-tier journals and his books include *It's My Party: Tat Ming Pair and the Postcolonial Politics of Popular Music in Hong Kong* (Palgrave 2024, co-authored); *Caring in the Time of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Palgrave 2019); and *Sonic Multiplicities: Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image* (Intellect 2013, co-authored). Next to his academic work, Chow is also an award-winning writer in lyrics and prose, penning more than 1,500 lyrics for artists in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.
- Gladys Pak Lei Chong** (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is Associate Professor at the department of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. She is the author of *Chinese Subjectivities and the Beijing Olympics* (2017), co-editor of *Trans-Asia as Method: Theory and Practices* (2020) and *Critiquing Communication Innovation* (2022). She has published in a variety of outlets such as *Men & Masculinities*, *interconnections: journal of posthumanism*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. Her research on youth aspirations, and technology, security, and risk are funded by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council. She is an academic fellow in the Study of the U.S. Institute (SUSI) on U.S. Culture, Identity, and Society, funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the Joint Center for Advanced Studies "Worldmaking from a Global Perspective", funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) at Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
- Wanying Zhou** a PhD candidate at the Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequalities – KU Leuven, Belgium, working on the Beauty and Inequality (BINQ) ERC project. Focusing on Hong Kong, she is investigating self-transformation and self-presentation through beauty in her PhD project. Holding a Bachelor's degree in English from Beijing Foreign Studies University, she graduated Magna Cum Laude from Master of Sociology in KU Leuven with an exchange to Waseda University in Japan. Prior to her PhD, she worked in the local and international non-profit sector, including NGOs in China and the United Nations.

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Beauty and Meritocracy

Outi Sarpila and Iida Kukkonen

1 Introduction: A System of Beliefs that Maintains and Produces Beauty-Based Inequalities?

For decades, economists, (social) psychologists, and sociologists have analysed the outcomes of beauty, and shown how beauty is related to different kinds of economic and symbolic rewards (for reviews, see Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen et al., 2024; see also Raudenska, this volume; Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). Additionally, several social scientists have been able to shed light on the social processes through which beauty translates into these perks and penalties (e.g. Mears, 2020; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume). In this chapter, we zoom out from the consequences of beauty and the everyday social practices through which people end up being treated differently based on their appearance. Moreover, we also depart from existing research on what people consider beautiful in other people. Instead, we focus on beauty as a belief system. We argue that the belief in

beauty as, to a certain extent, an achievable merit legitimizes beauty-based social inequalities.

But what exactly constitutes merit and how should it be defined in relation to beauty? Meritocratic characteristics are generally understood as ones that relate to personal achievements through individual effort and talent and consequently, deservingness. A clear example of this is: hard work. Non-meritocratic characteristics, on the other hand, pertain to various ‘inherited’ attributes, mostly related to group memberships, such as gender, ethnic minority status, being born into a (non)wealthy family or knowing the right people (e.g. Lindner et al., 2024; Mijs, 2021). However, applying such categorizations of merit versus non-merit to the study of beauty and inequality is far from straightforward. This complexity is linked to what the entire handbook at hand portrays: the varying views on what beauty entails and the extent to which it is determined by ‘innate characteristics’ acquired at birth, as opposed to being the result of people’s own efforts in beauty and body work.

Daniel Hamermesh—a widely cited economist also in this handbook and a certain kind of pioneer in the study of beauty and inequalities—has argued that beauty is first and foremost an inherent trait that cannot be significantly improved through beauty work practices (Hamermesh, 2011). However, some other scholars have

O. Sarpila (✉) · I. Kukkonen
INVEST Research Flagship Centre/Department of Social
Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland
e-mail: outi.sarpila@utu.fi

I. Kukkonen
e-mail: iltkuk@utu.fi

been more receptive to the possibilities of altering one's appearance, seeing it as a combination of good genes and individual investments of time, money and effort (e.g. Hakim, 2010; see also Raudenska, this volume; Smith & Hamplova, this volume). In contrast, in the field of cultural sociology as well as race and gender studies, several researchers argue that beauty should be considered primarily an ascribed characteristic. This is because beauty and body work are gendered, classed, raced and sexualized practices. As a result, beauty standards often reflect dominant standards, and especially for marginalized social groups, 'beauty' as defined by dominant cultural groups can be very hard to attain (e.g. Craig, 2021; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; see also Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume).

If scholars do not agree on the meritocratic nature of beauty, lay people may not either. Additionally, beliefs about individuals' control over their appearance are likely to vary depending on whether discussing, for instance, body weight or facial features. Such belief systems about the social world matter because they help to sustain the existing social order, legitimize social inequalities and even hamper social mobility (e.g. Markovits, 2019; Mijs, 2021; Piketty, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Therefore, it is important to examine what people actually believe when considering beauty through the lens of a meritocratic belief system.

We have structured this chapter as follows. First, we briefly introduce the ideas of merit and meritocracy, drawing on previous literature in socio-economics. After that, we review prevailing approaches to beauty and merit. First, we will outline debates on beauty as an achieved versus ascribed characteristic, followed by existing discussions on beauty as a meritocratic belief system. Following this, we will examine Finnish beliefs through a brief empirical case. Finally, we will discuss how the prevailing belief system can support and perpetuate beauty-based inequalities, and propose ideas how research on the topic could be continued in future.

2 The Idea of Merit and Meritocracy

The idea of meritocracy, where merit determines, for example, the educational and occupational opportunities available to an individual, was originally coined by Michael Young in 1958. In his novel, he described a dystopian society governed by the meritorious. While Young's intention was actually to warn against the dangers of meritocracy (Young, 2001), the concept has been instead adopted as a societal ideal and part of political rhetoric. This idea of 'equality of opportunity' and merit-based rewards has been particularly enthusiastically embraced in the realms of education and labour markets (e.g. Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Sandel, 2020; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume).

Over six decades after Michael Young's (1958) seminal novel, the discourse on meritocracy seems perhaps more relevant than ever. The increasing inequality has been widely reported, and one might think that people's critical attitudes towards meritocracy would have also grown. However, the reality seems to be quite the opposite. For example, Jonathan Mijs's study (2021) covering 23 countries over a 25-year period shows that belief in meritocracy and increasing income inequality paradoxically go hand in hand. A similar finding was obtained in a study conducted by Mijs and Mike Savage (2020), which examined belief in meritocracy and income inequality over 80-year period in the UK. In other words, as inequalities increase, people are also more likely to believe that they are justified. Everyone gets what they deserve depending on how hard they have worked (Benabou & Tirole, 2006). The results just 'happens' to be that some get more and some get less.

The same research shows that people not only have learned to tolerate the inequalities present in their society and social environment, but also to legitimize their own privilege and achievement as the result of merit. Researchers have found that both members of the elite and so-called ordinary people tend to justify the advantages they have gained with their own talent and personal efforts (Friedman et al., 2024; Kantola & Kuusela, 2019;

Mijs & Savage, 2020). Neither does the general belief in meritocracy consider people's societal position. At least in the US and the UK, belief in meritocracy has grown among both the middle class and the working class, for the latter group even more so than the former (Mijs, 2022).

However, the well-recognized problem with meritocratic justifications is that the things considered as merits are never solely the result of an individual's own efforts. A good example of this is intelligence, which Young (1958) originally identified as the second key component of merit along with 'effort'. Indeed, both historically and nowadays, intelligence has often been regarded as something for which individuals can be fairly rewarded (Friedman et al., 2024; Mijs, 2016). At the same time, it is acknowledged that intelligence is both achieved and ascribed, although there is ongoing debate about the emphasis on these two aspects (for discussion see, e.g., Guo & Stearns, 2002; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2023).

The analogy of intelligence may clarify the issue of beauty. Both concepts, intelligence and beauty, can be considered both ascribed and achieved, i.e. both acquired at birth and achieved by one's own efforts. Additionally, there is ongoing debate about whether ascribed or achieved qualities are more relevant. For example, just as intelligence can be perceived as developed through practice and learning, beauty can be thought of as something that can be enhanced and improved through various beauty treatments and products. While meritocracy research has largely ignored the significance of beauty in its examinations, the field of beauty and inequality research has at least to some extent debated the nature of beauty as merit versus non-merit characteristics. Next, we will delve into these discussions.

3 Beauty as an Ascribed Versus an Achieved Characteristic

In sociological stratification research, beauty has traditionally been seen as a characteristic that people can somewhat modify through their own efforts. Already in the 1980s, Webster and Driskell (1983) argued in their publication 'Beauty and

Status'—which has become one of the classics in the field—that beauty differs from other traditional status characteristics precisely because it is partly given and partly achieved. Unlike gender and race, beauty is, according to them, a characteristic that can be subject to minor adjustments, for example, through clothing and cosmetics, and major modifications through cosmetic surgical procedures. Referring to the rapidly growing beauty and body work industry at the time, they argued that the significance of attractiveness as a source of inequality would increase in future, while the importance of traditional status characteristics would diminish (Webster & Driskell, 1983). When the study of beauty and inequality truly came to life among stratification researchers in the 2000s, numerous stratification researchers were clearly inspired by this idea. Catherine Hakim (2010) has made the achievement perspective particularly well known. She has even argued that beauty and sexuality can be meritoriously worked on, and women, in particular, should engage in working on their 'erotic capital' to gain upward mobility. According to her, 'Beauty and sex appeal, and female beauty in particular, are a creation, a work of art, which can be achieved through training' (Hakim, 2010, p. 504; see also Pieters, this volume). Along these lines, beauty as a combination of acquired and achieved attribute has been emphasized in many recent stratification studies that have examined different outcomes of beauty (e.g. Anýžová & Matějů, 2018; Wong & Penner, 2016; see also Raudenska, this volume; Smith & Hamplova, this volume).

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, economist Daniel Hamermesh, who has inspired many stratification researchers with his beauty studies, has been rather doubtful about people's chances to improve their looks. Based on his own research, he has actually suggested that individuals' investments in their looks do not pay off, and that beauty work neither significantly increases an individual's attractiveness ratings nor their salary. In fact, he claims that a one-dollar 'investment' in beauty is more likely to be just one dollar of pure spending, and there is reason to be sceptical about people receiving actual rewards from

their beauty work (Hamermesh, 2011; Hamermesh et al., 2002). For some reason, Hamermesh has, however, been more inclined to define ugliness rather than beauty as an ascribed characteristic. He has defined lookism specifically as discrimination against ‘ugly’ people, who are born and grow up ‘bad-looking’. Similarly, some philosophers have also ended up reflecting on the meritocratic nature of beauty in relation to appearance-based discrimination, specifically through the lens of ugliness. In these reflections, ugliness is inevitably more ‘given’ than beauty because it is linked to direct disabilities with which some people are born or that may result from events during their lives, altering their appearance regardless of their will (Mason & Minerva, 2020). At the same time, matters related to external style are framed as people’s choices or something individuals can control. However, punishing people for these ‘choices’ is not clearly justified mostly because people should have right to individual self-expression. From the perspective of discrimination, legal scholars and philosophers have interpreted this to mean that even if certain aspects of appearance can be considered modifiable and under individual control, placing people in unequal positions based on these aspects can still violate the ‘merit principle’ (Mason & Minerva, 2020; Rhode, 2010; see also Mason & Midtgaard, this volume).

However, from the perspective of cultural and gender studies, the idea of appearance as a merit seems absurd. This stems from the understanding shared within these fields that, most importantly, what is ultimately valued as an achievement in one’s own and others’ appearance is deeply embedded in social hierarchies and societal power structures (e.g. Craig, 2021; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; see also Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume). In cultural sociology, these hierarchies are primarily considered class based as both the beauty practices individuals engage in and the ways in which people appreciate or evaluate others’ beauty and body practices are shaped, at least in the European context, primarily by their social class. In other words, the way people modify their appearance and interpret others’ modified appearances is cues

of social class helping individuals locate themselves and others in class hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Vandebroek, 2016; Kuipers, 2015; see also Kuipers, Chow, Chong & Zhou, this volume). This means that from a cultural sociological perspective, the modifiable aspects of appearance are never entirely under individual control or freely chosen, as they are rooted in structural factors, namely the opportunities provided by cultural and economic capital to modify one’s appearance. Additionally, several scholars have emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach, where not only social class but also gender and race-related hierarchies define what is considered the ‘right’ appearance, which is predominantly white, middle class and feminine (Mears, 2014; Menon, this volume; see also Craig, this volume). Thus, not all people can inherently have equal opportunities to achieve an appearance that is valued as a merit. Therefore, labelling external style as a merit has been seen as a way to legitimize inequalities and even discrimination based on these social categories, especially in the workplace (Vonk, 2024; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume).

This brings us to the point that, from the perspective of social inequalities, it is not necessarily that essential to what extent beauty is ‘factually’ ascribed and to what extent it is achieved, but rather to what extent people believe in beauty as a merit and thus justified. Before we proceed to examine through our empirical example to what extent people believe in beauty as a merit, we will look at how the issue has been approached in previous research literature on beauty and inequalities.

4 Beauty as a Meritocratic Belief System

Beauty as a belief system has also been touched upon in previous research on beauty and inequality (Forbes et al., 2007; Kukkonen, 2021; Sarpila & Erola, 2016; Widdows, 2018). This perspective differs fundamentally from those presented in the previous subsection in that it does not attempt to address the extent to which beauty can actually be

achieved and to what extent it cannot. Instead, it is essential to consider how *beliefs in beauty* as at least some form of merit help maintain the system where beauty shapes social inequalities.

Vandebroeck (2016) has analysed how the meritocratic belief in education (in its broadest sense) has extended to body size and shape, which can be worked on through hard work to achieve the desired outcome. Indeed, for people to be willing to ‘invest’ in beauty, it is crucial that they believe beauty matters, can be worked upon, and is worth striving towards (Widdows, 2018). It is through similar beliefs that, for example, physical markers of class (such as body shape and size) come to be naturalized and treated as simple lifestyle *choices* of individual responsibility (Vandebroeck, 2016; see also Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume). In a similar vein, Widdows argues in this volume that beauty and the pursuit of it have become a kind of ethical ideal. This means that it is an absolute virtue to strive towards the beauty ideal through beauty and body work, and this ideal is supported by a widely shared belief system: ‘We believe that if we conform to the four features of the beauty ideal—thinness, firmness, smoothness, and youth—we will have a better life, we will succeed, we will be good’.

In feminist literature, the ideology of beauty as a woman’s asset (and responsibility) has been discussed and contested by strands of feminism throughout the history of feminism (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1974; Peiss, 1998; Rhode, 2016; see also Craig, this volume). According to this understanding, women have been schooled to invest in their bodily demeanour and looks; pages and pages of manuals have been written on the topic of how women could and should strive towards beauty and thus embody higher status as well as ‘better’ femininity (cf. Lennox, 2016; Stewart, 2001). Feminist writer Naomi Wolf (2013) famously claimed this myth of beauty as a meritocratic means of success for women is consuming women and standing in their way as they strive for higher positions in society and working life. According to her idea of the ‘beauty myth’, the stress put on female beauty increases whenever women gain more access to power in society.

Arguably, the stress that culture puts on beauty as a feminine investment strategy has increased in recent decades with the rise of so-called postfeminist culture (Gill, 2007, 2017), in which feminism is at the same time accepted yet repudiated (McRobbie, 2009). Postfeminist culture celebrates empowered and flawless ‘bossgirls’ and ‘bossladies’, who *choose* to work on themselves and succeed, due to their ‘merit’ as *aspirational individuals* (Gill, 2007, 2017; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Winch, 2013). The (female) self is regarded as an entrepreneurial project, the proceeding of which is hypervisible and focuses on appearances as much as subjectivity (ibid.). Critics of postfeminist culture suggest that such a focus on individual feminine empowerment obstructs social change towards gender equality. Indeed, this line of cultural criticism mirrors Naomi Wolf’s beauty myth thesis by pointing out how the quest for success by means of appearances may stand in the way of women’s flourishing (cf. Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017). In sum, feminist scholars have expressed considerable wariness about beauty as a meritocratic road to female success and pointed out how beliefs about beauty can matter for social (in)equality.

While the belief system surrounding beauty and inequality has indeed interested scholars in the field, the beliefs of people themselves have not been studied. At the same time, in the field of meritocracy research the nature of appearance and the meanings attributed to it have been overlooked. In the following section, we aim to bridge these two fields: we examine the beliefs that ordinary people associate with appearance, both as an inherent and as an achieved characteristic. In addition, we analyse to what extent the idea of deservingness connect with different aspects of appearance as a merit.

5 Empirical Case: Beauty and Meritocratic Beliefs in Finland

Finnish society is an interesting context for the study of meritocratic beliefs. In comparison with other societies, even within Europe, Finns

have traditionally idealized equality (Kangas, 1995; OECD, 2021) and avoided self-promotion (Sarpila et al., 2021). For example, previous studies among the adult population reveal not only a notably elevated proportion of Finns identifying as working class compared to other affluent European nations (Reeves, 2019) and a tendency to downplay rather than accentuating their own social standing, for instance, through lifestyle preferences (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019; see also Purhonen et al., 2010). Regarding beauty and body work, moderateness is expected not only from oneself but also from others (Sarpila et al., 2020).

This is the context in which we decided to study people's beliefs about beauty as a merit through a quantitative survey. However, operationalizing the central concepts was not straightforward, as, to our knowledge, this has not been done before. We also encountered a double challenge: what do we mean by appearance, and secondly, what do we mean by merit?

In our empirical example, we approach this problem by deconstructing the concept of appearance into various dimensions. We assume that appearance consists of aspects that can be understood in fundamentally different ways from the perspective of modification. Previous research has mapped beauty outcomes for a range of such aspects of appearance, ranging from cleanliness (easily modified), weight (modified but with difficulty) to height (very difficult to modify) (see, e.g., Anderson et al., 2010). In addition, we simplify the analysis by adopting a perspective in which respondents are initially asked to express their views on the extent to which individuals can influence different dimensions of appearance, and secondly, how much value should be assigned to these dimensions of appearance. The questions themselves were presented as part of a broader online survey on appearance-related themes. For the survey, a random sample of individuals aged 18 to 64 was drawn from the Finnish population register, who were approached via regular postal letters. The survey received responses from 1007 participants.¹

First, we asked the respondents to what extent they believe that other people can modify their own appearance. We asked separately about (1) height, (2) skin colour, (3) body weight, (4) muscularity, (5) cleanliness and neatness, (6) facial traits, (7) facial attractiveness and (8) style. Figure 1 illustrates these findings. As depicted, Finns perceive cleanliness and neatness, as well as style as aspects of appearance that people can significantly influence. Over 90 per cent of Finns are positive that people can impact their cleanliness and neatness, and more than 80 per cent think people can impact their style at least quite much. More than half of Finns also believe weight and muscularity can be at least quite much worked upon and achieved, whereas less than 10 per cent of Finns believe weight and muscularity cannot be impacted very much or at all. In contrast, facial traits, height and skin colour are believed to be largely given traits. Facial attractiveness clearly divides opinions.

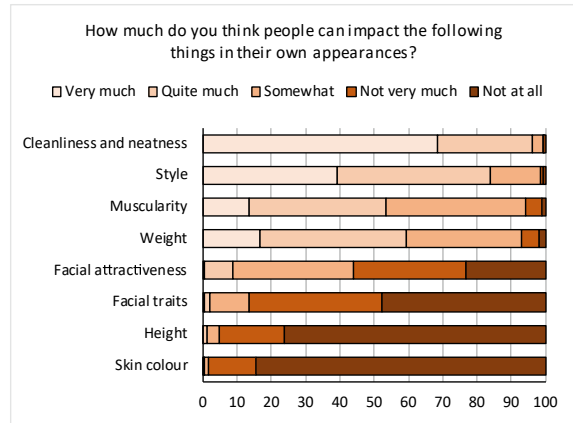
Particularly in the context of facial attractiveness, but also in terms of muscularity, the question arises as to what kind of person the respondents were thinking of when answering the question—primarily a woman or a man? It is well known that the possibilities for modifying muscularity are fundamentally different between women and men due to biological reasons. On the other hand, modifying facial attractiveness might be closely linked to people's perceptions of female beauty practices. This may partly explain the distribution of the responses into different response categories.

Overall, it seems that Finns consider external style something largely under individual control. The same applies to body shape and size, as in fact, very few think that these cannot be worked upon at

appearance, as well as a section focusing on respondents' backgrounds. A simple random sample of 5000 Finnish-speaking Finns aged 18–64 was obtained from the Finnish population register, and invitations to participate in the survey were sent out by mail. We also sent out reminders to participate in the survey by text message as well as by postal service. The final total of respondents was 1007. The response rate hence reached just above 20 per cent. Women and people with higher levels of education are overrepresented among respondents. In order to improve the representativeness of our results, we utilize population weights based on gender, age and education level in all analyses.

¹ The survey included a quasi-experimental section with six vignettes, a section with beliefs about inequality and

Fig. 1 Finns' perceptions of ascribed and achieved appearance-related traits (N = 971)²



least to some extent. However, these are precisely the aspects of appearance that the tradition of cultural sociology sees as highly class-related; styles on grooming and clothing (see Karademir, this volume; De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume) but also corpulence mark class boundaries (see Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume). This may partly relate to the country context in which the research was conducted as in previous studies it has been argued that Finns, in general, are not necessarily very sensitive to identifying differences related to social classes (Sarpila, 2021; cf. Purhonen et al., 2010). One explanation for this blindness may lie in the strong national narrative among Finns of being a country of equality and homogeneity. Yet, this contradicts, for example, the internationally significant wealth disparities (Pfeffer & Waitkus, 2021) and the strong presence of an elite (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019) in Finnish society.

However, people's perceptions of the extent to which appearance can be considered modifiable and under individual control do not directly indicate the extent to which they are considered merits. To examine this, we used the idea of legitimacy and asked to what extent different aspects of appearance *should* affect people's success in life. We used people's perception of 'hard work' as a benchmark, which has been employed in previous

studies as a measure of traditional meritocratic belief (Friedman et al., 2024; Mijs, 2021).

Figure 2 indicates that the order of the dimensions of appearance as justified means of getting ahead in life follows the 'achievement-based hierarchy' of the same dimensions presented in Fig. 1. In other words, the more a dimension is perceived as something an individual can influence, the more it is also accepted as a legitimate factor contributing to 'deserved' success. The figure also reveals that although hard work is at the top, some of the appearance-related factors, notably cleanliness and neatness, are not far from this traditional measure of merit in their acceptability as factors influencing success.

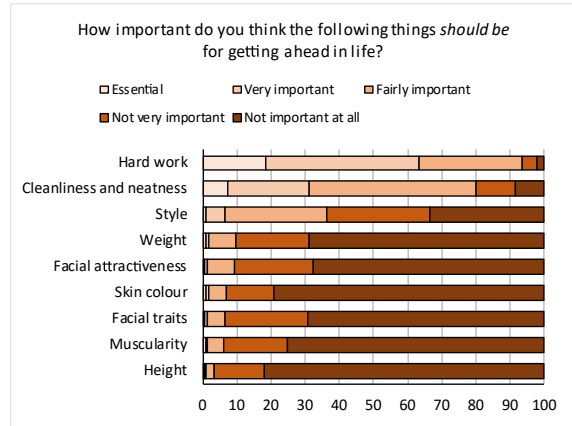
In sum, our descriptive empirical case suggests a belief system that perpetuates social inequalities not only between social classes but also between men and women. Previous research has shown that expectations regarding beauty and body work still predominantly target women more than men, although increasingly also men (Sarpila et al., 2020; see also Sarpila, Brans & Kuipers, this volume). At the same time, our examination raises many follow-up questions and the need for further research, which we will address at the end of this chapter.

6 New Avenues for Research

In this chapter, we asked to what extent beauty is believed to be an individual merit and how these beliefs can contribute to beauty-based

²All the analyses presented in the chapter are based on a random sample of individuals aged 18 to 64 drawn from the Finnish population register, with 1007 participants responding to the survey as part of a broader online survey on appearance-related themes.

Fig. 2 Finns' attitudes towards various aspects of appearance as legitimate sources of success in life (N = 946)



inequalities. To approach this question, we have brought together two research traditions that, to our knowledge, have not been cross-pollinated before: socio-economic meritocracy research and research on beauty and inequality. We have also introduced a new angle to empirical research by approaching beauty from the perspective of merit and provided a concrete suggestion for how this can be studied.

It is clear that the relationship between beauty and merit *merits* more attention in future. This message is directed at both meritocracy researchers and those interested in the study of appearance and inequality. From the perspective of socio-economic meritocracy research, it is actually quite astonishing that the research field has not addressed beauty and appearance in any way. This seems particularly strange in the light of the fact that the topic of beauty and meritocracy brings together two current megatrends: the increasing focus on appearance and the rise of belief in meritocracy in contemporary societies. Additionally, excluding beauty and appearance from the examination of meritocratic beliefs means overlooking an entire axis of inequality, as this handbook demonstrates. Thus, paradoxically, researchers studying beliefs that perpetuate inequalities may inadvertently contribute to maintaining the status quo when areas affecting the everyday lives of all people are left unexamined. Our empirical analysis suggested, for example, that considering certain aspects of appearance as merit based may help to obscure and therefore (re)produce

class- and gender-based inequalities in contemporary appearance-focused societies. This is also an important message for those social stratification researchers interested in 'tackling the inequality of opportunity', who have increasingly reached towards meritocracy research but simultaneously shown no interest in the ability of appearance-based inequalities to complicate this tackling.

Our contribution also offers a variety of insights and further opportunities for the study of appearance, beauty and inequality. While some interpretations of the connection between beauty and merit have been made in existing work on beauty and inequality (e.g. Vandebroek, 2016; Widdows, 2018; Wolf, 2013), the examination of the topic has ultimately been limited in this field as well. Empirical research on this topic has been even more scarce, likely hindered by the fact that it is not straightforward to operationalize beauty on the achieved-ascribed continuum, and that operationalizations of beauty are extremely diverse.

Our examination shows that appearance is certainly not a monolith, but truly consists of quite different components. These components, in turn, are perceived very differently in terms of how malleable they are. In other words, the somewhat shared view among researchers that people's ability to influence their own appearance is limited (although researchers disagree on why this is) is not common knowledge among ordinary people. This also demonstrates the power of beliefs in maintaining social inequalities and the

importance of studying them among researchers interested in appearance. At the same time, this fragmentation in the understanding of the concept also means that researchers should be more precise about what they are actually discussing when they talk about ‘appearance’ and ‘beauty’—whether they refer to faces, body size and shape, external style, or something else. This precision, combined with knowledge of how people perceive different aspects of appearance along the achieved-ascribed continuum, can also help scholars to understand certain inconsistencies in studies related to appearance and inequality (see Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume). In other words, the more researchers incorporate visual materials that include not just unembellished faces, but also cues related to personal style or body weight, the more likely they are to gain insights into how appearance-based inequalities tied to gender and class operate. At the same time, our examination suggests that these aspects of appearance, which are most often understood as merits, are likely to be the ones that produce appearance-based inequalities the most. That is to say, scholars should not—as is often done—overlook such cues or try to control for them, but rather focus more on exploring these dimensions of appearance and their outcomes.

Finally, we would like to offer very concrete ideas for future empirical research that stem directly from the empirical case presented in this chapter. In our empirical case, we asked ordinary people about different aspects of appearance and requested them to evaluate to what extent they believe these traits can be influenced by people themselves and, on the other hand, to what extent it is justified for these traits to affect people’s success in life. The first natural step for further empirical research would be to analyse who supports the idea of beauty as a merit; those who benefit the most from it or, paradoxically, those who are most disadvantaged by maintaining such beliefs. The next major step would be to reconsider the formulation of the survey questions themselves. The claim under the focus of our empirical analysis is quite general and is afflicted by typical survey research problems related to question framing.

For instance, what do respondents understand by ‘success in life’? Are they thinking primarily about labour market success? Is success generally understood economically, or in some other way, such as social success or success in love? In addition to refining question formulations for more detailed exploration, future research could also focus on understanding who should be considered meritorious in terms of appearance work and deserving of recognition. For example, vignette research methods could be used to uncover potential gendered double standards in beliefs. Furthermore, surveys on appearance-related beliefs could be conducted among specific population groups, such as employers and other gatekeepers. Above all, integrating questions about appearance into international comparative studies on meritocracy would be beneficial to finally outline the broader picture of the legitimization of appearance and inequality in different cultural contexts.

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Outi Sarpila is a Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Centre at the University of Turku. Between 2023 and 2026, she is serving as a professor of sociology in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku. Sarpila has led two externally funded research projects focused on themes of appearance and inequality. The most recent of these, funded by the Research Council of Finland, has partially facilitated this handbook project. Sarpila's background is in economic sociology, and she has specialized in quantitative research on appearance. Her research on these themes has previously been published in journals such as *Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, and *European Societies*.

Iida Kukkonen is a doctoral researcher at the Unit of Economic Sociology, University of Turku. Her research interests revolve around physical appearance, inequality, gender, and consumption. In her PhD thesis, she studies gendered physical appearance-related inequalities in Finnish working life.

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Part II

Mechanisms

Beauty and Romantic Outcomes

Elizabeth Aura McClintock

1 Introduction

This chapter considers physical attractiveness and inequality in the context of heterosexual romantic relationship formation, with a particular focus on how patterns of partner selection on physical attractiveness may relate to socioeconomic inequality. Prior literature has resoundingly shown that, among modern couples in a variety of national contexts, most couples match on physical attractiveness and on socioeconomic status (operationalized as income, education, occupational status, etc.). Situated against this is a strain of literature proposing a gendered pattern of beauty-status exchange in which women trade beauty for men's socioeconomic status. Both strains of literature assume that, at least within a given context, there is a degree of consensus in rating physical attractiveness. Likewise, both literatures assume that socioeconomic status can be ranked, and often that higher levels of beauty (used synonymously with physical attractiveness) and status are preferred.

In this chapter, I will argue that these two perspectives are not inherently incompatible: If beauty-status exchange occurs, it might exist as a secondary pattern, with matching as a far more powerful rule. In theory, most couples might

match on beauty and on status, while other couples exchange these traits. Alternatively, couples might achieve some minimal level of similarity, after which they might be willing to trade a slight advantage on one dimension for a partner's advantage on another. However, in contrast to the unequivocal and robust support for matching on beauty and on status, evidence supporting beauty-status exchange remains inconsistent and fragile (McClintock, 2017a).

This chapter will then evaluate how patterns of partner selection on physical attractiveness come about and how they contribute to social stratification, that is, the categorization of people into a hierarchy of social classes on the basis of characteristics like wealth, income, education, and occupation. The predominant tendency for partners to have similar levels of beauty, and, indeed, of many characteristics, including those that shape social stratification, might result arise from multiple processes. Individuals might prefer partners who are similarly attractive as themselves, they might compete for the most desirable partners and ultimately settle for someone similar to themselves, or they might match on physical attractiveness as a result of matching on some other, correlated characteristic. Distinguishing which process(es) occur may provide insight into patterns of social stratification and the meaning of status-related characteristics (beauty, income, race, etc.) within romantic relationships.

E. A. McClintock (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame,
Notre Dame, IN, USA
e-mail: emcclint@nd.edu

Notably, the research on physical attractiveness in partner selection has, as yet, largely failed to critically conceptualize how beauty might function as an exchangeable trait within relationships. In addition, despite substantial evidence that physical attractiveness is linked to socioeconomic outcomes and beauty work, perhaps especially for women, research on romantic outcomes has failed to consider whether beauty might serve as a proxy for other valued personal characteristics (e.g., confidence, health). This chapter will argue that a deeper understanding of beauty and its meanings within relationships is necessary to understand its role within patterns of partner selection and within the larger landscape of socioeconomic stratification. It will conclude with recommendations for *Future Directions* of research.

2 Physical Attractiveness and Partner Selection

The main focus of this chapter is to critically review the literature on physical attractiveness as a dimension of romantic partner selection. First, this section will overview the debate over gendered beauty-status exchange, or, more colloquially, the “trophy wife” stereotype that women exchange beauty in order to partner with less attractive men of relatively higher socioeconomic status. Although there may be some mixed support for this, the predominant pattern in partner selection, at least in most contemporary contexts in which individuals select their own mates, is that heterosexual partners are matched on physical attractiveness. Second, it will consider the social processes that might drive couple matching on beauty, such as preferences for similarity, competition in the “partner market,” and interpersonal compatibility. Third, because the stereotypical trophy wife is younger than her partner, and beauty and income are both strongly associated with age, it will consider the intersection of age and physical attractiveness as gendered dimensions of transactional exchange in romantic/sexual relationships.

2.1 Beauty-Status Similarity or Exchange?

The early sociological literature on physical attractiveness in partner selection proposed that, in marriage markets, women sought men with high levels of socioeconomic status (“status”) and men sought women with high levels of physical attractiveness (“beauty”) (Buss, 1990; Elder, 1969). In these studies, the authors demonstrated a positive association between women’s beauty and men’s status, interpreting this as evidence of beauty-status exchange (Elder, 1969; Taylor & Glenn, 1976; Udry, 1977). Such perspectives conceptualize partner selection as a competitive market process and assume a broadly-shared, but gendered, preference for beautiful women and highly-resourced men. As women’s status and men’s beauty were presumed to be irrelevant, and the authors did not consider whether couples might match on beauty and status. Notably, this approach was strongly influenced by the literature on evolutionary psychology (e.g., Buss, 1998) and remains popular across numerous academic fields, including economics and psychology. Popular and academic belief in the trophy wife stereotype may also result from deeply ingrained sexist attitudes valorizing female dependence (Glicke & Fiske, 1996).

However, there is strong evidence of matching (within marriage, *homogamy*) on physical attractiveness (Carmalt et al., 2008; Feingold, 1988; Murstein, 1972; Murstein & Christy, 1976; Stevens et al., 1990) and on socioeconomic status (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Gardyn, 2002; Mare, 1991; Stevens et al., 1990) in the contemporary United States, with a growing literature documenting similar patterns across other contemporary national contexts (Xu & Pan, 2023). But, although it is undeniable that couples tend to be similar on socioeconomic status and on physical attractiveness, just as they tend to be similar on race, religion, and innumerable other traits, the mechanisms that generate this outcome are less certain. In addition, many of the traits that couples match on are interdependent, complicating scholars’ efforts to study any one dimension of partner selection in isolation.

In particular, physical attractiveness is positively associated with socioeconomic status. Those rated more favorably in appearance also enjoy improved school performance, greater occupational success, and higher earnings (Langlois et al., 2000; Monk et al., 2021; Rosenblat, 2008; Rosenblat & Mobius, 2006; Wardle et al., 2002). McClintock (2014) argued that, in the literature proposing beauty-status exchange, the failure to control for matching on beauty and on status might result in researchers overestimating the magnitude of exchange or even creating the entirely-spurious appearance of exchange. Because physical attractiveness and socioeconomic status are positively correlated within individuals, partner matching on these traits would result in a correlation of his socioeconomic status and her physical attractiveness (and vice-versa), even in the absence of any cross-trait exchange (McClintock, 2014). Thus, in order to evaluate evidence that couples exchange beauty and status, scholars must first account for the association between one partner's beauty and the other partner's status that would arise entirely as a result of matching on those traits.

McClintock found that, among a sample of 1,507 young adult couples in the United States, controlling for matching on beauty and status (to account for the between-partner cross-trait association that would occur purely as a side effect of matching on the two traits) eliminated nearly all evidence that these traits might be exchanged. Xu and Pan replicated this finding using data on a large sample of Chinese couples (Xu & Pan, 2023). Notably, both McClintock (2014) and Xu and Pan (2023) were able to replicate the spurious appearance of exchange in that, prior to controlling for matching, women's beauty was associated with their male partner's socioeconomic status (education, income, occupational prestige), but they also found the reverse association—that men's handsomeness was associated with their female partner's socioeconomic status. And, critically, both studies found that controlling for matching on appearance and on status eliminated most or all of the evidence of beauty-status exchange.

Still, this by no means represents a consensus: Most obviously, not finding evidence of something—in this case, of beauty-status exchange—does not prove that it does not occur. Rather, these findings characterize the dominant pattern of partner selection on the basis of beauty and status, which is, resoundingly, one of matching. Other scholars have still argued for evidence of beauty-status exchange (Gullickson, 2017), and, in a related literature, for the exchange of race and socioeconomic status (Xie & Dong, 2021). Yet, fundamentally, the literatures on matching and exchange are talking past one another. McClintock (2014, 2017a) focused on controlling for matching, as the predominant pattern, and then testing whether evidence of beauty-status exchange, as a secondary pattern of partner selection, is robust to alternative measures and specifications. Other scholars counter this literature by producing narrow evidence that exchange might sometimes occur (Gullickson, 2017). Indeed, even proponents of exchange acknowledge that the predominant pattern in partner selection is that of matching (Xie & Dong, 2021).

2.2 How Does Similarity Come About?

From the literature reviewed above, it is clear that most couples match on physical attractiveness. The relevant theoretical explanations for this pattern rely on the implicit assumption that beauty and status are consensually-ranked traits (McClintock, 2014): That is, that it is possible to order individuals into a hierarchy of least-to-most desirable in terms of beauty and status, and also that potential partners attach value to these traits. In the case of beauty, the assumption that beauty ratings are consensual is often revered by evolutionary psychologists and contested by sociologists. For example, in this volume Lidborg and Boothroyd demonstrate important cultural variation in beauty standards. Similarly, in this volume, Kuipers et al. document contextual and cultural variation and subjectivity in beauty ratings.

Nevertheless, in practice, prior literature indicates that, within a given cultural context, beauty

and status can be measured hierarchically, and that higher levels of beauty and status are preferred (see McClintock, 2014, page 579, for a discussion). Indeed, although asking respondents to rank the importance of various traits indicates that neither men nor women attach much importance to partners' beauty or status (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Furnham, 2009; Regan & Joshi, 2003), experimental studies suggest that both genders prefer physically-attractive partners, and that women prefer high-status partners (Li et al, 2002; Neyt et al, 2020; Ranzini et al, 2022; Ward, 2017). Thus, beauty and status are ordered and desired, but, even so, there remain multiple possible processes that might result in partner matching on these traits.

Settling for what is attainable: Perhaps paradoxically, if the partner search process functions as a market exchange, this could nevertheless result in matching across multiple traits. Each individual might pursue those above them in this hierarchy, but discover that they must settle for someone of similar beauty and socioeconomic status as themselves. Indeed, data from online daters suggest that both men and women pursue partners who are, by the authors' algorithm, about 25% more attractive than the searchers, but that the probability of receiving a reply drops as the gap in attractiveness between the dater and the target increases (Bruch & Newman, 2018). Of course, such competition might result in matching on "overall desirability," but it would not, in itself, result in matching on each desirable trait—this may be explained by a reluctance to compromise on at least one of several interrelated traits.

Reluctance to compromise: In modern societies that use love, compatibility, and attraction as the basis for long-term unions, the threshold defining minimal partner requirements may be relatively high (Coontz, 2005), limiting willingness to trade an advantage in one trait for a disadvantage in another. Consistent with this, in experimental studies, individuals show substantial reluctance to accept hypothetical partners whose levels of physical attractiveness, intelligence, and status are not high enough (Li & Kenrick, 2006; Li et al, 2002). If individuals are largely unwilling to

compromise on physical attractiveness or education (by accepting a substantially less-endowed partner on either dimension), this would limit scope for cross-trait beauty-status exchange, and competition for the most beautiful, highest-status partners would result in couple matching on both dimensions.

Preference for similarity: If individuals hold a preference for similarity on any one trait, the co-occurrence of related characteristics encourages matching across multiple dimensions and may limit the possible scope of exchange. For example, if couples seek similarity in educational attainment, this would push them toward similarity in all traits that are correlated with education, such as income, body size, physical attractiveness, and health (McClintock, 2014). Indeed, there is some evidence that, in the case of education, both women and men may prefer partners who are similar to themselves over those with more or less education (Jonason & Antoon, 2019). A preference for similarity on any dimension that is associated with (dis)advantage on numerous other dimensions, such as parental class background or participation in sports, would constrain cross-trait exchange on related traits.

Limitations: Importantly, current research has not been able to fully mediate between possible mechanisms driving partner matching (settling for what is attainable, reluctance to compromise, or preference for similarity) and key gaps in knowledge remain. In many experimental studies, the potential partner is hypothetical, and people's imagined choices might differ from those they would make if they actually met and interacted with a real potential partner. Additionally, there is strong evidence that people lack insight into which partner traits are most important to them. For example, when experimental participants were presented with information on a potential partner's physical attractiveness, earning potential, and expressiveness, both women and men were most influenced by physical attractiveness in determining the hypothetical partner's desirability, but women *perceived* themselves to be most influenced by earnings potential (Sprecher, 1989). Supporting this, data from speed

dating suggest that, although participants express gender-stereotypical differences in the value they *believe* they attach to beauty and status, there is no gender difference in the characteristics associated with actual short-term or long-term romantic interest (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). This finding—that sex differences exist in stated preferences but not in actual preferences—remains strong in a recent meta-review of the literature (Eastwick et al., 2014). That is, when asked to describe their ideal partner, women attach more importance to earnings than men, while men attach more importance to physical attractiveness than women, but, when evaluating actual partners, no gender difference is evident.

In any case, focusing on preference provides limited insight into romantic outcomes because individuals' ability to achieve their preferences is constrained. Everyone might want rich, beautiful partners, but not everyone can attain them. The supply of the richest and most beautiful partners is, by definition, limited, and it is also socially structured and frequently gender-unequal. Societies differ in overall income inequality and in gender gaps in socioeconomic attainment. As these inequalities shift over time, patterns of assortative mating also evolve. For example, as women's educational attainment has surpassed men's educational attainment in many countries, there has been a rise in the prevalence and acceptability of unions in which women have more education than men (Van Bavel et al., 2018). In fact, in nearly all European nations and in the United States, wives are more likely to exceed their husband's education (hypogamy) than the reverse (Van Bavel et al., 2018). This trend toward educational hypogamy is more pronounced in nations where college-educated women are also economically empowered (Han, 2022). Thus, the gendered distribution of a given characteristic, together with societal egalitarianism, shapes resulting heterosexual patterns in partner selection. Researchers have yet to consider how the distribution of beauty might vary across national contexts (e.g., as a result of healthcare access or beauty work), but this could certainly drive mating patterns.

Elucidating the mechanisms driving the predominant tendency for partners to match on beauty and socioeconomic status would provide insight into partner selection processes broadly. For example, although both social structural and sociobiological theories might be used to predict the existence of gendered beauty-status exchange, it is the sociobiological literature that is most definite in this prediction. That this pattern is not predominate does not refute the relevance of evolutionary adaptations in human mating, but it does indicate that popular evolutionary accounts require revision. Likewise, a preference for similarity on certain traits, such as race and education, does not invalidate market-based understandings of partner selection, but it does indicate that competitive market models must allow for non-competitive forces (compatibility, love). Notably, the processes described above—settling for what is attainable, reluctance to compromise, or preference for similarity—are by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but, taken together, may help contextualize future research.

2.3 Physical Attractiveness and Transactional Exchange in Age-Discrepant Unions

Traditionally, beauty has been associated with youth, especially for women (see England & McClintock, 2009, for a discussion). The stereotypical “trophy wife” is both better-looking and younger, compared to her husband. But age signifies more than beauty—a youthful partner may also be less established in their career, have accumulated less wealth, and possess less authority when partnered with a substantially older spouse. Indeed, in launching the sociological inquiry on spousal age gaps, Presser (1975) argues that women's marriage to older men is both a result and a cause of gender inequality, within couples and more broadly. Thus, beauty-status would certainly reinforce women's disadvantaged status through the gendered gap in socioeconomic status and, often, also through the gendered age gap. Consistent with this, women's economic empowerment

is associated with a decreasing spousal age gap at marriage across a variety of social contexts (Cheng & Kolk, 2021).

Notably, because marriage between partners with a large difference in age are less stable (Francis-Tan & Mialon, 2015), trading youthful beauty for men's socioeconomic status may represent an economically-risky trade-off for women. If young women curtail their own socioeconomic accomplishment when partnering with an older, socioeconomically-advantaged man (Presser, 1975), and the union later dissolves, they may be left with little benefit for their sacrifice. In fact, such arrangements may be so unstable that, at least in the contemporary United States, the limited and mixed evidence of beauty-status exchange may exist only for dating and cohabiting couples, not for married couples (McClintock, 2014). Given the pervasiveness of ageism, beauty is transient, especially for women, and relationships based on beauty-status exchange may therefore be time-limited.

Indeed, the rise of "sugar" arrangements, in which a "sugar daddy" offers economic incentives to secure a young, attractive "sugar baby" for dating and sexual companionship, supports the thesis that, at least in contemporary societies, unions based on exchanging women's beauty/youth for men's status are unstable. The nascent sociological literature on these unions suggests that, across a wide variety of social and national contexts, sugar relationships veil transactional sex work within a veneer of mutually enjoyable dating (Gunnarsson & Strid, 2022; Upadhyay, 2021) and with variable degrees of female coercion, exploitation, pragmatism, and empowerment (Gunnarsson & Strid, 2022; Hoss & Blokland, 2018; Metcalfe et al, 2023; Recio, 2021; Recio, 2022; Upadhyay, 2021). Overall, extant research suggests that sugar dating is best understood in the context of sex work and sexual coercion, not that of partner selection. Indeed, as modern relationships value romance and connection (Coontz, 2005), limited satisfaction might be attainable in those based on exchange. Supporting this, men engaged in "sugar" relationships express dissatisfaction with the lack of mutuality in such unions (Gunnarsson & Strid,

2022). In this regard, the literature on transactional dating provides a useful case study of the tension between understanding romantic unions as commodity exchanges and valuing romantic unions as sources of love and companionship.

3 Consequences for Stratification

It is well known that contemporary couples tend to match on socioeconomic characteristics, such as education, income, occupational status, and family background, which, unsurprisingly, exacerbates between-household socioeconomic inequality. The tendency toward socioeconomic similarity between partners has been increasing over time (Ciscato & Weber, 2020), as has the strength of matching on traits associated with education, such as smoking (Maralani & Portier, 2021). Indeed, there is some evidence of increasing consolidation in advantaged statuses, such that couples' statuses on two traits (e.g., smoking and education) are more similar than can be explained by matching on both dimensions independently (Maralani & Portier, 2021). Given data limitations (the author knows of no multigenerational studies that measure attractiveness before or at the time of union formation), it remains unknown whether matching on physical attractiveness has increased over time or whether beauty-based matching demonstrates increased consolidation with other dimensions of advantage.

Because physical attractiveness is highly rewarded in labor markets, couple matching on physical attractiveness is almost certain to further amplify between-household inequality. However, although physical attractiveness has recently garnered more attention as a key determinant of individual income (Monk et al., 2021), researchers have, as yet, not examined quantitatively how matching on physical attractiveness might exacerbate between-household income inequality. Data at the individual level suggests that the household-level impact may be substantial. Net of controls, the magnitude of the earnings gap between individuals rated at the highest and lowest ends of

the physical attractiveness continuum exceeds the Black/white race gap in earnings (Monk et al., 2021). Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) initially estimated the difference in income between the most and least attractive workers in the United States to be roughly 10–15%, net of controls, and estimates using more recent US data suggest even larger benefits to beauty, at roughly 20% (Monk et al., 2021; Nault et al., 2020; Wong & Penner, 2016). The processes driving these beauty premiums are complex, and, as yet, not fully understood, but may include perceptions of beauty as individual merit (Sarpila & Kukkonen, in this volume), payoffs to beauty in social networks (Smith & Hamplova, in this volume), and rewards for beauty resulting from hiring discrimination (Kühn & Wolbring, in this volume).

4 New Directions

In this section, I consider new directions for research into physical attractiveness and romantic outcomes, with a focus on relationship dynamics beyond partner selection. This includes the nascent literature on beauty as a dimension of bargaining in ongoing, long-term relationships, such as in negotiating a favorable division of housework. I also propose several new lines of research that might clarify current debates or fruitfully extend existing knowledge. Finally, I discuss concerns about current approaches that might be ameliorated in through careful attention to measurement, operationalization, and causality.

4.1 Beauty and Bargaining

Recent scholarship has begun to devote more attention to how physical attractiveness shapes ongoing interactions in relationships. Extending competitive, market-based understandings of partner selection to established, ongoing relationships, scholars have theorized that whichever spouse has better options outside the current union will be less dependent on maintaining the union and will therefore have more power in it (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Dependence is

often characterized as economic, but, in principle, any trait that is advantageous in the partner market would reduce dependence on the current union. Following this logic, scholars have conceptualized physical attractiveness as providing leverage within relationships (e.g., Esping-Andersen & Schmitt, 2020). Notably, these bargaining perspectives would benefit from engaging with the literature on beauty as capital—insofar as it is a form of *subordinate* capital, it may provide limited returns (see Craig in this volume), potentially reducing its leverage in spousal negotiations.

One prominent new avenue of research brings beauty into the scholarship on the division of housework. Launching this research, Esping-Andersen and Schmitt (2020) conceptualized physical attractiveness—problematically proxied by Body Mass Index (BMI)—as a source of bargaining power, such that a partnered individual's housework would decrease as their attractiveness increased. The authors found mixed support for this perspective in Germany, in that women's attractiveness (operationalized as having a low BMI) was associated with performing less housework, while the reverse was true for men. These mixed findings are hard to interpret, especially given that BMI is associated with health, race, and social class and serves as a weak and gendered proxy for physical attractiveness. In a similar vein, subsequent research in Canada found that satisfaction with one's own physical appearance was associated with lower housework time for women and with greater satisfaction with the division of housework for both genders (Dilmaghani, 2021). Again, these findings are hard to interpret, as satisfaction with one's appearance might be a better proxy of confidence, self-esteem, or positivity than of actual beauty.

Indeed, a recent study that delved more deeply into the association of physical attractiveness and housework performance found that, in China, the association between women's physical attractiveness and housework is partially mediated by income, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationship (Li, 2022). This suggests a more nuanced interpretation of the association of physical attractiveness and housework performance: Not only

are results for men inconsistent with this perspective, but the association of women's physical attractiveness with housework may be mediated by other variables, only one of which (income) is conventionally considered an asset in the spousal bargaining process. Given that most research in this vein has used problematic proxies for physical attractiveness (Dilmaghani, 2021; Esping-Andersen & Schmitt, 2020) and that there is clear evidence of mediation (Li, 2022), current research cannot be interpreted as supporting a meaningful, direct association of beauty and housework.

More generally, it is advisable to exercise caution before inferring that a given trait has been used to negotiate for a more advantageous division of housework (or any other outcome) without direct evidence on negotiation processes or couple understandings. Future research on physical attractiveness in ongoing relationships should consider other theoretical perspectives, beyond bargaining models, and should investigate how beauty is experienced and understood in long-term relationships. Research that centers a bargaining perspective should seek to measure negotiation processes more directly and should consider the larger implications that their findings might have for couples across the life course. For example, dominant norms of beauty privilege youthfulness, so how might the depreciation of bodily capital with age shift power relations and the division of housework? Similarly, would scholars expect changes in body size/shape to change the allocation of housework within couples? To take a yet more disturbing example, would a spouse who suffers a disfiguring accident or illness be expected to increase their housework contribution? It is difficult to reconcile the implications of a beauty-for-housework bargaining process within the context of a presumably loving, intimate relationship.

4.2 Historical and Contextual Variation

Future research, particularly on beauty-status exchange, should consider how contextual opportunities, constraints, and gendered expectations

might shape partnering patterns. Most notably, women's economic independence might change the tradeoffs they make. For example, in at least some national contexts, women engaging in "sugar" arrangements are very explicit that they have made this choice as a result of economic need and inadequate alternatives (Recio, 2022). At the same time, it would be inappropriate to *assume* that unions in any given context are characterized by a pervasive pattern of gendered beauty-status exchange without directly measuring proposed exchange dynamics. For example, in the US context, this assumption may have generated very misleading characterizations of marriage patterns (McClintock, 2014). Unfortunately, when scholars reify preexisting stereotypes as inviolable truths, they may unintentionally perpetuate harmful sexist or racist tropes (McClintock & Sheehan, 2019).

The influence of sociobiological understandings of partner selection, which frequently assume that women are valued for beauty and men are valued for socioeconomic provision (Buss, 1990, 1998), may have discouraged scholars from investigating alternative processes. However, these theories are difficult to test, poorly supported, and underestimate the importance of culture and social learning in human behavior, as discussed in more detail in this volume (see Lidborg & Boothroyd). Future researchers should consider how human patterns of partner selection are deeply social—in fact, having flexible, socially-adaptable partnering preferences may be *the* evolved human mating strategy.

Finally, it is, as yet, unknown whether beauty functions equivalently in same-sex and queer unions. Mainstream standards of beauty oppress women by subjugating them to the (heterosexual) male gaze and evolutionary accounts of beauty are premised on heterosexuality. It is unknown whether conventional approaches to measuring beauty (see this volume), or of conceptualizing it in romantic unions, would prove valid among non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals. There is a robust humanistic literature on queer beauty practices, but large-scale demographic studies of physical attractiveness in partner selection have been limited to

heterosexual couples. Unfortunately, large-scale nationally-representative surveys with physical attractiveness ratings do not oversample non-cisgender and non-heterosexual respondents, but online dating data might enable more inclusive analyses.

4.3 Measurement and Causality

The research on physical attractiveness and romantic outcomes has been limited by the unavailability of optimal measures. Perhaps as a result, some researchers have used physical attractiveness scores measured years prior to union formation (Dunkel & Shakelford, 2019; Elder, 1969), used Body Mass Index to proxy physical attractiveness (Esping-Andersen & Schmitt, 2020), and measured attractiveness and/or socioeconomic status well after marriage has commenced (Taylor & Glenn, 1976). Clearly, measuring physical attractiveness or socioeconomic status *after* marriage, in order to make inferences about partner selection processes *prior* to marriage, can generate biased results. Most obviously, gendered specialization increases the gender earnings gap within couples over time, especially after childbirth. More subtly, gender differences in the effort dedicated to maintaining appearance and in the importance of youthfulness as a component of beauty might result in complex, gendered patterns of observer-rated decline in physical appearance after marriage (see Ojala & Pietilä, this volume).

Finally, given individuals' unwillingness to "compromise" on their standards for spousal appearance or education, it may be only the very-wealthy who can "afford" to exchange socioeconomic status to attract a better-looking partner—if so, the rarity of the extremely wealthy makes empirical analyses difficult. It may also bias popular perceptions of the prevalence of beauty-status exchange, given the outsize societal attention given to the uber-wealthy. Future research should be more rigorous in measurement, both by not making inadequate compromises when ideal measures are unavailable, and in thinking critically about data availability and operationalization. Several chapters in this volume may provide guidance in considering how to measure beauty

across cultural contexts (Lidborg & Boothroyd), account for associations between beauty and potential confounders and mediators (such as well-being [Smith & Hamplova] and social capital [Raudenska]), and conceptualize beauty as a form of capital (Craig).

Finally, physical attractiveness may be measured with reasonable reliability (at least within a given context), but scholars often fail to conceptualize precisely what is being measured. Indeed, recent research indicates that perceptions of beauty may best be understood as learned cultural concepts, rather than as adaptive evolutionary preferences (see Lidborg & Boothroyd, in this volume for a detailed discussion). They are imbued with class meanings and racial inequalities (see Monk, this volume), linked to social capital and social networks (see Raudenska, this volume), and vary over time and place (see Kuipers et al., this volume). Thus, to some extent, matching on beauty might capture individuals' preferences for potential partners who share their own values regarding extroversion, (un)conventional gender presentation, physical fitness, time spent grooming, and investments in appearance generally. Moreover, such traits may be proxies for other, difficult-to-measure characteristics such as ambition, conventionality, approval-seeking, culture, and social class. In order to understand beauty in romantic relationships, it is first necessary to pursue a nuanced understanding of beauty itself.

4.4 Critically Evaluating Preconceived Assumptions

Finally, in this area of research, as in any other area, researcher's preconceived assumptions can generate misleading results. This has arguably plagued research on physical attractiveness (McClintock, 2014; McClintock & Sheehan 2019). Future researchers should consider various possible perspectives and acknowledge that there is not "one truth" for all couples in all places and all times. In the case of physical attractiveness, the tendency to assume the truth of a given belief (e.g., that trophy wife marriages are common) might

generate observation bias. For example, individuals might notice celebrity examples of apparent trophy wives, but fail to recall the many homogenous couples of their own acquaintance. As the research on physical attractiveness comes into dialogue with the research on housework, it may be especially imperative for scholars to approach their research without committing to a single theoretical perspective. Indeed, the research on the division of housework may be another field prone to searching data for evidence of a theory, as opposed to evaluating the robustness of support for various theoretical explanations (McClintock, 2017b, 2018).

5 Conclusions

Recent research has greatly expanded our understanding of physical attractiveness in romantic outcomes, but important limitations remain. First, as emphasized throughout this volume, beauty is difficult to conceptualize and challenging to evaluate across contexts. It is closely related to socioeconomic status, perceptions of merit, social capital, gender, and race, but these interrelationships are not fully understood. Even less clear is how beauty functions within relationships. Much of the literature on physical attractiveness as a force in couple dynamics assesses those dynamics only indirectly (e.g., by measuring partner similarity in good looks or the distribution of housework) and favors bargaining-based models. Future research on physical attractiveness in ongoing relationships should measure couple interactions and interrogate the meanings that partners attach to beauty in relationships. Researchers should also be open to incorporating other theoretical perspectives, beyond bargaining models, and should be cautious before inferring exchange processes that may rely on presuppositions and reify stereotypes.

In particular, the literature on beauty-status exchange has demonstrated substantial reluctance to abandon belief in gendered beauty-status exchange as a dominant pattern in modern unions (e.g., Sassler & Joyner 2011; Gullickson, 2017; Xie & Dong, 2021), despite evidence to

the contrary. This may reflect a general challenge in academics: Theories tend to perpetuate, even as evidence against them also accumulates. However, belief in the prevalence of beauty-status exchange is not only academic. It also pervades popular culture, biasing perceptions and perpetuating gendered stereotypes. The trophy wife stereotype is arguably both pre-feminist and reactionary, as it contributes to the devaluation of women's achievements and their dehumanization as objects of male consumption. I am not arguing that academics should shy away from uncomfortable truths—in fact, revealing inequalities can allow them to be challenged. However, when evidence for a harmful perspective is weak or indirect, it is responsible to proceed with caution and to consider alternative explanations.

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- Elizabeth Aura McClintock** PhD, is a Professor of Sociology at University of Notre Dame. She earned her doctorate in sociology from Stanford University. Her research examines gender and inequality within partner selection and romantic relationships, contextualizing romantic and family outcomes within structures of inequality and employment.

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Beauty and Hiring Discrimination

Juliane Kühn and Tobias Wolbring

1 Introduction

“Who is your number-one problem” is the first sentence in a book on recruitment and hiring by Smart and Street (2008, p. xiii), which aims to help managers overcome the biggest hiring mistakes. Hiring the wrong employees can have substantial consequences for companies, such as internal conflicts, bad performance, or high turnover. Hiring practices have not only far-reaching consequences for employers, but also for applicants since it is the first step in a career within a company, followed by further decisions, such as pay raises and promotions. As a result, inequalities in this first step can lead to consequences in the following steps and subsequently accumulate over the life course (Jæger, 2011).

While making choices between applicants and creating inequalities by hiring some, but not others is at the heart of the hiring process, a noteworthy feature is that employers’ hiring decisions are based on incomplete information. In the first stage,

the employer has the submitted application documents such as CVs, certificates, and recommendation letters at hand. In further stages, these can be supplemented by personal impressions from a face-to-face interview or more detailed information from an assessment process. However, while this process might involve more or less good signals of future performance and fit to the job environment, the employer does not know the applicant’s actual productivity. Under such circumstances, one might assume that employers try to select applicants based on their qualifications, suitability for the position, and expected future productivity.

Nevertheless, a plethora of research demonstrates that other characteristics also matter in hiring, such as gender (Bertogg et al., 2020), ethnicity (Quillian & Lee, 2023), or age (Batinovic et al., 2023). Initially, these characteristics seem to have no obvious connection to individual productivity. If that is true, these studies find evidence of discriminatory behavior, which is the *unjustified* unequal treatment of individuals based on ascriptive characteristics (Allport, 1954). Through social processes, these characteristics contribute, among other things, to differences in the access to valued resources and, thus, persistent advantages or disadvantages of individuals. Consequently, they have the potential to influence social inequality.

While socio-economic research has traditionally focused on dimensions of social stratification such as gender, ethnicity, and social class,

J. Kühn · T. Wolbring (✉)
Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology,
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg,
Nuremberg, Germany
e-mail: tobias.wolbring@fau.de

J. Kühn
e-mail: juliane.kuehn@fau.de

the impact of physical attractiveness¹ has been largely neglected in the literature. As the review by Baert (2017) shows, out of 90 correspondence studies that investigated discrimination in hiring, only four focused on physical appearance. Although there has been some earlier work, only more recently—around the 1990s—beauty has been discovered as an important dimension of social inequality—in sociology, social psychology, and economics (Maestripieri et al., 2017). Research in this emerging field using both observational and experimental research designs has clearly documented a beauty premium in hiring, meaning a preference for physically attractive applicants compared to physically less attractive applicants (e.g., Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Hosoda et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 1995). Nevertheless, these effects do not apply unconditionally to all individuals, as results reveal differences between men and women regarding the effects of physical attractiveness. While no uniform picture emerges with regard to existing empirical studies on gendered beauty premiums, two recent reviews of the literature suggest that the positive effects of physical attractiveness are more universal for men, while they might be less strong for women and depend on contextual conditions for women (Kukkonen et al., 2024; Nault et al., 2020; see also, Mason & Midtgaard and Lidborg & Boothroyd in this handbook).

Against that background, two questions arise: (a) why are attractive applicants preferred in hiring

processes? And (b) what are the reasons for the differences between men and women? This chapter examines the underlying mechanisms for the effects of physical attractiveness in general (Sect. 2) and concerning gender-specific effects (Sect. 3). We explain the potential mechanisms proposed in the literature and synthesize empirical studies related to the different theoretical arguments. Thereby, it is worth emphasizing that disentangling different mechanisms, which might be interrelated and simultaneously at work, is not straightforward. The chapter closes with a discussion of potential avenues for future research, including variations across occupational contexts, intersections of physical attractiveness with other ascribed characteristics, and new technical ways to vary physical attractiveness and analyze their effects (Sect. 4).

2 Mechanisms of Beauty-Based Hiring Discrimination

Most early scholarship on the effects of physical attractiveness on hiring and other labor market outcomes originated in the United States, where scholars initially focused on experimental studies to analyze the effects of physical attractiveness. Over time, more cross-sectional analyses using survey data were carried out. Today, the research field of beauty-based discrimination is developing fast, and various terms and theoretical concepts are used, such as beauty, physical attractiveness, and lookism. In the last ten years, more studies have also been conducted in Europe, Asia, and other continents (Kukkonen et al., 2024). The methodological spectrum has also expanded to include more vignette studies and field experiments in the form of audit and correspondence studies.

Within *audit and correspondence studies* (for an introduction, see Gaddis, 2018), researchers try to causally identify the effects of physical attractiveness by relying on an experimental design in a real-world setting. Hypothetical application documents are sent out in response to actual job advertisements, and the physical attractiveness of applicants is varied by

¹ In this chapter, we focus on physical attractiveness and its subjective perceptions and use the terms beauty and physical attractiveness synonymously. Most studies thereby examine the role of facial attractiveness, which is known to be the most important determinant of physical attractiveness. In this overview, we do not cover studies with a focus on other dimensions of physical appearance such as height and weight. These characteristics are correlated with perceptions of physical attractiveness but analytically distinct dimensions. Although similar social processes such as stereotyping and discrimination (e.g., see Bozoyan & Wolbring, 2018) are at work, as for the beauty premium, a review of these distinct literatures on other physical characteristics is beyond the scope of this chapter (for further reading see Cawley, 2011). In addition, we focus in particular on facial attractiveness, which is a major determinant of a person's overall attractiveness and on which—according to the attractiveness consensus—people largely agree (Berry, 2000).

pictures of different individuals. Central to the analyses of these field experiments are different callback rates. Within *factorial survey experiments* or *vignette studies* (for an introduction, see Auspurg & Hinz, 2015), hypothetical applicants are presented to survey respondents based on written documents. In addition, fictitious job descriptions are generated. Both the fictitious job advertisement and application documents are presented to the respondents. While vignette studies only allow to study hypothetical judgments and intended behavior, they offer various advantages such as studying as-if scenarios, achieving high statistical power with reasonable costs, and securing orthogonality of experimental treatments.

The different experimental and non-experimental approaches complement each other strengthening trust in the existence of the beauty premium. Vignette studies find a preference for attractive applicants, for example, in terms of overall employment potential (Cash et al., 1977), the invitation probability for a job interview (Baert & Decuypere, 2014), the hiring recommendation (Dipboye et al., 1975), or the salary offered (Gilmore et al., 1986). In line with this, audit studies and correspondence tests show that attractive applicants are more likely to receive a positive callback for actual job advertisements than unattractive applicants despite identical or very similar application documents (Deng et al., 2020; Rooth, 2009). Finally, observational studies using cross-sectional or longitudinal designs reveal wage differentials between attractive and unattractive employees, for example, at the beginning (Frieze et al., 1991) or over time (Sala et al., 2013). The field, therefore, has made substantial progress over time, not only clarifying that good-looking applicants actually profit from their looks in the hiring process but also advancing our understanding of the underlying processes why this is happening.

At the same time, socio-economic theorizing and empirical research on beauty-based discrimination can be characterized by fragmentation along disciplinary boundaries. As a result, theoretical arguments can be found in economics, psychology, sociology, and other social sciences,

which are similar or closely related but are rarely connected. The mechanisms proposed in the literature can be organized along theoretical arguments that explain the beauty premium in hiring based on (a) actual or perceived differences in productivity (Subsect. 2.1) and (b) preferences for or against certain social groups existing irrespective of such productivity differences (Subsect. 2.2).

2.1 Beauty, Productivity, and Statistical Discrimination

To better understand beauty-based discrimination, it is helpful to outline what *cannot* be considered discrimination: unequal treatment of individuals due to underlying differences between individuals, which are relevant for the decision at hand. For example, hiring applicant A instead of applicant B due to productivity differences between A and B or a lack of required credentials by applicant B is usually not considered discrimination (for further reading, see Pager & Shepherd, 2008 and Quillian & Midtbøe, 2021).

Regarding the beauty premium, explanations of treatment differences due to job-related advantages, such as differences in productivity, cannot be completely ruled out. Although rather controversial, Kanazawa (2011) argues that attractive individuals are more intelligent than unattractive individuals. This effect is supposed to be more pronounced in men than in women. If intelligence plays a role in pursuing a profession, attractive employees would be more productive. In addition to intelligence, good looks could also increase productivity in certain professions, especially those that involve representing a company, selling a product to customers, or negotiating prices. In line with this, Sachsida et al. (2003) contend that higher wages of attractive salespeople in shopping centers in Brasilia are due to productivity and not discrimination. In this case, unequal treatment cannot be considered discriminatory behavior, and this preference is consistent with the idea of meritocracy (Nault et al., 2020). However, several studies show that the correlation between intelligence and productivity is small

and rather inconsistent: some studies indeed find a positive relationship (Jackson et al., 1995), while others even report negative correlations (Jäger, 2011). Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between *actual* and *perceived* productivity. Based on application documents or first impressions during job interviews, employers lack exact information about the actual productivity of potential employees. According to Arrow's (1973) and Phelps's (1972) theory of statistical discrimination, employers, therefore, try to *infer* productivity based on the information available. Given the lack of information, employers may base their inferences on the membership to a particular group and its average productivity. An individual is assigned to a particular social category based on easily available and, in the employer's view, informative characteristics, such as physical attractiveness. The average productivity of this group is then attributed to the individual applicant. The less information is available, the more this assessment of average productivity is taken into account (Guryan & Charles, 2013). In line with this reasoning, Altonji and Pierret (2001) find that employers discriminate especially against young employees based on limited information, but the extent of discrimination decreases with increasing seniority. To summarize, incomplete information is the cause of statistical discrimination, and individuals attempt to remedy these information asymmetries by using readily available and obvious information.

The importance of physical attractiveness in relation to employees' perceived productivity becomes particularly clear when analyzing different types of tasks, as physical attractiveness does not always play a role in productivity. The laboratory experiment by Deryugina and Shurchkov (2015) reveals that attractive individuals receive higher wage bids in bargaining tasks. However, they do not benefit from their physical attractiveness in analytical and data entry tasks. The authors attribute this difference to statistical discrimination, as they assume that physical attractiveness is primarily associated with a better starting position in bargaining but not in the other tasks. Stinebrickner et al. (2019)

also conclude that physical attractiveness positively affects wages if it is related to productivity. Using data from a panel study, they demonstrate that attractive employees benefit from a beauty premium in occupations where employees work with customers. In professions that work with information and data, they do not find a comparable advantage.

In this context, it is possible that individuals who assume that their appearance is associated with productivity and affects their career chances already choose corresponding occupations (Hamermesh, 2011). According to this argument of occupational sorting, attractive individuals would choose occupations in which their physical attractiveness promises added value, while unattractive individuals would avoid occupations in which they might face a penalty. Sierminska and Singhal (2023) conclude in their review that attractive women mainly choose occupations in management and administration and, less often, blue-collar occupations. However, this example also illustrates that the attribution of whether this sorting into occupations is due to gender socialization or due to expected returns to physical attractiveness is challenging.

Expectations about future employees' productivity are based on interrelated mechanisms that do not necessarily function in isolation from each other. On the one hand, the perception of *status* guides attributions of productivity. Status construction theory (Ridgeway, 1991) states that individuals categorize themselves and others in social interactions to understand the situation and derive their own actions accordingly. For this categorization, individuals use easily accessible and visible information, so-called diffuse status characteristics. Webster and Driskell (1983) argue in their seminal paper on beauty as status that physical attractiveness might serve as such a diffuse status characteristic. As Wolbring and Riordan (2016, p. 256) explain: "Physical attractiveness is systematically correlated with classical measures of actual and inferred status, such as education, wealth, and income [...], is salient in social interactions, and also indicates access to

other desirable resources like friendship, attention, and opinion leadership”. In turn, individuals may infer other unrelated positive characteristics, such as qualifications and productivity, from physical attractiveness and the attributed status.

When estimating productivity, employers may also rely on *stereotypes* about the characteristics and behaviors likely to be exhibited by an individual (Maestriperi et al., 2017). Concerning physical attractiveness, the what-is-beautiful-is-good effect (Dion et al., 1972) states that a high level of physical attractiveness leads to the attribution of positive expectations. Consequently, more attractive individuals are considered to have “better” personality traits and characteristics than less attractive individuals, such as being more trustworthy (Wilson & Eckel, 2006), showing more cooperative behavior (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008) and a greater overall likability (Langlois et al., 2000). In line with theories of statistical discrimination, people use physical attractiveness as an easily visible characteristic to assume further—mostly positively associated—traits and subsequently assume higher productivity. For example, the decomposition of the beauty premium by Mobius and Rosenblat (2006) uses a maze-solving task to point out that stereotypes about abilities, especially oral skills, are a key component of the higher wages of physically attractive individuals.

2.2 Preference-Based Discrimination

Beauty-based discrimination might not or not only reflect information asymmetries and actual or assumed productivity differences between social groups. In contrast to the theory of statistical discrimination and related approaches, unequal treatment might result from *preferences* for or against a particular group. According to Becker’s (1957) theory of preference-based discrimination, employers might be willing to offer one group of workers higher wages and hire them simply to avoid interactions with another group of workers. Regarding physical attractiveness, employers might prefer attractive employees, even if such behavior seems economically irrational,

because employers are willing to pay higher wages despite equal or lower productivity for workers of the preferred group. Therefore, the difference in offered wages is a measure of employers’ tastes, which can be included in the utility function of a formal model. One implication of such a model is that unattractive employees have to accept lower wages despite equal productivity or have to outperform their attractive colleagues in terms of productivity to receive the same wage (Sierminska & Singhal, 2023). Next to the discrimination by employers or coworkers, customers might also show preferences for attractive employees. Accordingly, the results of Li et al. (2019) reveal that the physical attractiveness of salespeople influences customer satisfaction, quality perception, and the likeability of the servants.

Different potential mechanisms have been proposed in the literature causing preferences for attractive and against unattractive individuals. On the one hand, some *evolutionary theorists* argue that physical attractiveness conveys information that may be crucial for offspring reproduction. Even though increasingly contested in evolutionary psychology (see Lidborg & Boothroyd in this handbook), Maestriperi et al. (2017, p. 4) summarize the following: “Facial attractiveness is likely to be an indicator of overall quality, including greater genetic quality, lower exposure to stress during early development, greater resistance to diseases and parasites, and greater fertility.” Selecting partners based on their physical appearance might have, therefore, offered evolutionary advantages in reproduction and survival. It might also have been an evolutionary rational strategy to select group members based on their physical attractiveness. Although it remains unclear whether and to what degree such beauty-based selection offers advantages in modern societies, these evolutionary-acquired strategies still matter in mate selection and might also play a role in other contexts, such as hiring.

On the other hand, *socialization processes* and resulting self-fulfilling prophecies are, at least, equally important for understanding tastes. If teachers assume that physically attractive pupils

will perform better, they might pay more attention and offer more support to them as they are promising more potential. This might positively affect their self-confidence and social and communication skills (Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Encouragement and support can positively affect attractive pupils' educational intentions and, thus, their human capital—which “refers to the knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health of individuals” (Becker, 2002, p. 3). Their increased self-confidence can also make them more popular with employers, colleagues, or customers, positively affecting their social capital (Nault et al., 2020). As a result, they might be able to demand higher wages (Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). However, Nault et al. (2020, p. 4) clarify “that there is currently insufficient research on these social dynamics, limiting the understanding of how exactly social, and to some extent, human capital differences as a function of attractiveness emerge.”

The widely cited study by Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) is one of the first inquiries into preference-based discrimination of less attractive individuals. Their findings show that attractive employees receive higher salaries than their less attractive colleagues. Although, as described above, various mechanisms might play a role, the authors conclude that their analyses show the strongest support for preference-based discrimination. Likewise, several other studies have demonstrated that attractive individuals receive higher wages than their unattractive counterparts and interpret their findings as evidence for the existence of preference-based discrimination (Frieze et al., 1991; Sala et al., 2013). Using survey data containing information on wages and other characteristics of employees, researchers attempt to indirectly control for productivity (e.g., education or years of employment) and interpret the remaining wage differences as preference-based discrimination. Consistent with this, the longitudinal data analysis by Scholz and Sicinski (2015) identifies salary differences between attractive and unattractive employees, which the authors believe are not solely due to productivity but instead indicate preference-based discrimination.

3 Gendered Effects in Beauty-Based Discrimination

So far, we have focused on mechanisms that explain the general effect of the beauty premium. Physical attractiveness and gender, though, are two characteristics that act both individually and are intertwined (Kuipers, 2015). In the following, we want to take a more nuanced look at the effects of physical attractiveness for men and women.

The evolutionary view suggests quite fundamental differences in the effects of physical attractiveness for male and female applicants (Nault et al., 2020). Since women play a crucial role in rearing offspring by giving birth, they should benefit particularly from their physical attractiveness. Accordingly, some evolutionary psychologists state a strong correlation between fertility and physical attractiveness for women (Buss, 1989). In their review, however, and in line with these claims being increasingly contested, Nault et al. (2020) find stronger physical attractiveness effects among men than women. Kukkonen et al. (2024) come to the same conclusion, finding that the effects of physical attractiveness are more universal for men, while they depend on contextual conditions for women.

According to status construction theory, gender is a fundamental aspect of identity and functions as a “background identity” (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 152) in social interactions. This leads to individuals being ascribed gender-specific characteristics. More precisely, agentic characteristics are attributed to men, and communal characteristics are attributed to women (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). Physical attractiveness reinforces this gendered perception of individuals (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). However, there are gender differences regarding this process. While attractive women are usually also perceived as more feminine, the physical attractiveness of men has a less clear influence on their perceived masculinity (Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Little et al., 2011; Rennels et al., 2008). Applied to the hiring context, attractive women are thus perceived as more feminine than unattractive women, which

can prove advantageous, especially in female-typed occupations. Accordingly, some studies illustrate that attractive women are considered more suitable (than men) for female-typed occupations and are, therefore, more likely to be hired (Busetta et al., 2021; López Bóo et al., 2013).

In contrast, physical attractiveness can prove to be a disadvantage for women when applying for male-typed occupations (Johnson & Chan, 2019; Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016) or leading positions (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Shahani-Denning et al., 2011). These results are in line with Heilman's (1983) lack-of-fit model. Following this model, women primarily associated with communal characteristics are denied those agentic characteristics that seem to be required in connection with male-typed jobs and leadership tasks. Since physical attractiveness for women reinforces the perception of female characteristics (Little et al., 2011), this effect can become even more harmful.

These results highlight the relevance of the occupational context and the need for a comparison between the individual's ascribed characteristics and the job's required characteristics. Women who are successful in male-typed occupations—despite the challenges described—are considered susceptible to the so-called queen bee syndrome. This means that these successful women try to set themselves apart from other women by devaluing potential competitors based on traditional gender stereotypes (Staines et al., 1974). Other women are then perceived as less competent and less engaged by women who, for example, already hold leadership positions (Ellemers et al., 2004; Henshaw et al., 2018). In contrast, some studies describe this syndrome as a myth that could not be replicated (Arvate et al., 2018; Tchindebet et al., 2024).

Conversely, the occupational context is less and other explanations are more relevant for men. Accordingly, some studies show that the correlation between physical attractiveness and perceived competence applies primarily to men but not women (Lee et al., 2015). While men already have a higher status, they are also attributed a higher level of competence due to their physical

attractiveness. Consequently, both positive attributions, namely status and physical attractiveness, reinforce their effects so that men benefit significantly from physical attractiveness compared to women (Chiang & Saw, 2018; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Ruffle & Shtudiner, 2015)—regardless of the occupational context.

In addition, not only the gender of the applicant but also the gender of the individual evaluating a potential employee is decisive. Some authors argue that the effects of physical attractiveness are particularly evident in mixed-sex interactions² (Agthe et al., 2016; Luxen & Van De Vijver, 2006). Accordingly, the preference for physically attractive individuals applies especially to opposite-sex interaction partners, who could become potential mates and parents of one's own children (intersexual selection). Thereby, evolutionary theory is used to explain the negative physical attractiveness biases toward members of one's own sex. In the competition for potential partners, it seems essential to devalue competitors, i.e., people of one's own sex (intrasexual competition).

Based on the idea of friend and foe, the effect of physical attractiveness is also determined by whether individuals work together or against each other. Lee et al. (2015), who consider the dependence between the decision maker and the applicant, find that attractive men are preferred in cooperative situations while they are disadvantaged in competitive situations. In a rivalrous environment, Buunk et al. (2016) demonstrate that an attractive competitor leads to increased envy and lower career advancement expectations compared to an unattractive competitor. For women, perceived unfriendliness can amplify this adverse effect.

² Same-sex couples are of course not to be neglected at this point. However, from the perspective of evolutionary theories, the thought of one's own offspring is in the foreground, which is naturally restricted to heterosexual couples. This heterosexual idea is the basis for the investigations of the gender constellation of the evaluator and the evaluated individuals.

4 Summary and Directions for Further Research

This chapter has shown that physical attractiveness plays a role in recruitment decisions, which are a crucial first step in joining a company. Alongside other criteria such as gender, age, or ethnicity, physical attractiveness is an ascriptive characteristic that can lead to inequalities in this context. Various studies document that attractive people are preferred in recruitment processes. On the one hand, the beauty-based attribution of status or stereotypes—also known as the what-is-beautiful-is-good effect—could lead to such an advantage. On the other hand, it could result from preferences related to evolutionary or socialization processes. In this context, we have clarified that one single mechanism is unlikely to fully explain the corresponding results, as different factors are often simultaneously at work or are even intertwined.

Future research could provide further clarity and try to disentangle the different cogs and wheels at work. Researchers may be able to integrate several relevant mechanisms simultaneously into a comprehensive design to explain physical attractiveness and determine the individual contribution of different factors. Comparative studies can thereby leverage cross-national variations in beauty standards and stereotypes to advance knowledge, while experimental studies may be particularly suited to test causal claims and dissect the underlying mechanisms.

A more differentiated view of physical attractiveness would be advantageous in future research. Some studies primarily differentiate between attractive and unattractive individuals in a dichotomous way. Thereby, some studies compare highly attractive individuals with moderately attractive individuals; others compare slightly below-average attractive individuals with slightly above-average attractive individuals. It would be worthwhile to use continuous measures of physical attractiveness and explore non-linear effects across this attractiveness continuum. Furthermore, it might prove fruitful to go beyond facial attractiveness, which was the focus of most previous studies, and also examine perceptions of attractiveness in more detail and how they are

related to other factors such as state of health, attitude, behavior, or voice.

To do the latter, one needs to go beyond static pictures, for example, in written application documents. Direct interaction or video format is more suitable for exploring these research questions. So far, however, video CVs and application videos have been used rarely in studies investigating the effects of physical attractiveness, although they are increasingly used in recruitment processes (De Keere, 2022). In such videos, applicants answer prepared questions or introduce themselves and their motivation without predetermined guidelines. These visual and auditory impressions go beyond the written application documents. With the help of such application videos, it is conceivable that perceptions of physical attractiveness go beyond mere facial attractiveness by conveying a more holistic impression of the applicants.

In this context, it is possible to manipulate physical attractiveness, for example, with the help of artificial intelligence. The term deepfakes has become established in this regard. Photos or videos can be edited so that the faces of individuals in videos are exchanged, and thus, a face swap takes place. As Eberl et al. (2022) demonstrate in their pilot study, researchers are not dependent on a computational background but can achieve this variation with the help of freely available software. In application situations, these videos cannot replace the face-to-face interview. However, they can be used as an intermediate step between reviewing written documents and the following job interview, saving time and resources for companies and applicants.

Furthermore, theories and empirical evidence presented in this chapter suggest that the effect of physical attractiveness on recruitment decisions is modified by gender. However, studies have rarely considered other characteristics and their interaction with beauty apart from these two. One exception is the paper by Monk et al. (2021), which looks at the returns to physical attractiveness by race and gender. Using nationally representative data for the United States, they find substantial disparities in the earning returns to physical attractiveness along these dimensions and their combination. Further studies are needed to analyze

these interrelated effects in different companies, countries, and continents, also varying applicant's ethnicity. Furthermore, it is also conceivable that these results can be extended to other characteristics, such as age. To what extent do physical attractiveness effects play a role when workers have an extensive employment history, and which factor is the more decisive one? Further studies are needed to investigate the intersectionality of physical attractiveness with other characteristics such as ethnicity and age, and how those effects play out in different cultural contexts.

Finally, we have shown that the occupational context influences the effects of physical attractiveness, especially when comparing men and women. Accordingly, some researchers distinguish between male- and female-typed occupations. In experimental studies, however, successfully manipulating the occupational context depends on how the respondents *perceive* these occupations. Consequently, measures expressing the gender ratio estimated by respondents are needed in future studies, as our review illustrates that the corresponding perception may influence the results or explain their differences. In addition, some researchers focused on gender-neutral occupations in their experiments (Shahani-Denning et al., 2011). Combining these approaches and integrating all three aspects (gender-neutral, male-typed, female-typed) might be helpful, even if this further increases the complexity in the selection of occupations.

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Juliane Kühn is a research associate and doctoral candidate at the Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, where she also completed her Master’s degree in socioeconomics (M.Sc.). Prior to this, she completed a Bachelor’s degree in business psychology (B.Sc.) and worked as a project manager at a market research institute. Her research focuses primarily on investigating hiring discrimination. In so doing, she explores novel research methods such as deepfakes to manipulate various characteristics of applicants (e.g., physical attractiveness, ethnicity) and investigates the subsequent effect on recruiters’ decision-making.

Tobias Wolbring Prof. Dr., holds the Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, where he conducts research at the crossroads of sociology, economics, and psychology. Prior to this role, he was an assistant professor of sociology, with a specialization in longitudinal data analysis at the University of Mannheim, a postdoc at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich, and a research assistant at the University of Munich, where he earned his doctorate in 2013. Using both experimental and longitudinal methods, his recent work delves into social inequalities, labor markets, and subjective well-being, earning him recognition in top-tier journals such as *Social Forces*, the *European Sociological Review*, and *Sociological Methods & Research*. He received the Best Dissertation Award from the German Sociological Association and the Robert K. Merton Prize from the International Network of Analytical Sociology, served as a visiting professor at Utrecht University, and the University of Hong Kong, and is editor-in-chief of the German SSCI-listed journal “*Soziale Welt*”.

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Beauty and Social Capital

Petra Raudenská

1 Introduction

Contemporary society is obsessed with beauty. It admires, displays and televises beauty, determines what or who is beautiful, and ultimately capitalizes on beauty. Hakim (2010) has already noted the increasing importance of erotic capital in the twenty-first century, especially for women, due to visual culture, social media, and other developments in the labor market such as rising incomes and expanding service sector. But the true value of this human (or cultural) commodity, in all its complexity, can only be derived from psychological, sociological, or economic studies that show how strongly attractiveness is linked to marital and professional success, social status, and inequality. The studies then look at what might be behind this relationship and what other personal characteristics (whether actual or expected) attractive people have that contribute to their socioeconomic, social, and personal success. Jæger (2011, pp. 985–987) describes three theoretical approaches that attempt to explain why physically attractive individuals might be advantaged relative

to less attractive individuals and remain advantaged throughout life: evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and the social constructionist approach. The latter two are also discussed in detail in the meta-analysis by Langlois et al. (2000).

Simply put, studies conclude that other people (particularly in the job market, among co-workers or managers) believe and expect, based on an individual's physical attractiveness, that attractive people have innumerable positive traits and less attractive people have more negative traits. As a result, they are treated differently based on these expectations. This stereotype then helps attractive people achieve positive outcomes. Studies have shown that people assume that attractive people have relatively higher intelligence, skills, competence, social skills, friendliness, likability, extroversion, and leadership abilities (Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992; Jackson et al., 1995; Jæger, 2011; Langlois et al., 2000; Peng et al., 2020). Furthermore, psychological research has shown that individuals can internalize these external evaluations and change their behavior in response (Eagly et al., 1991).

Studies have also found that more attractive people have different (actual) personal characteristics. Recent longitudinal studies have shown that more physically attractive people have higher completed fertility (Jokela, 2009) and better physical and mental health (Feingold, 1992; Reither

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P. Raudenská (✉)
Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences,
Prague, Czech Republic
e-mail: petra.raudenska@soc.cas.cz

et al., 2009).¹ Attractive people are more self-confident, socially skilled, popular and extroverted, emotionally stable, self-disciplined, and happier than less attractive people (Langlois et al., 2000; Luxen & Van de Vijver, 2006; Mobius & Rosenblatt, 2006; Hosoda et al., 2003; Judge et al., 2009; Datta Gupta et al., 2016; Matějů et al., 2017; Ko & Suh, 2019)—all personality traits with positive effects on social success and career growth.

In this chapter, attractiveness or beauty is approached from the basis of quantitative research tradition. The beauty of the individual is thus understood as a universal phenomenon on which most people are able to agree. Thus, beauty standards could be shared and beauty as a concept can be operationalized and measured, even in relatively large population surveys. In particular, we focus on one of these mediators between attractiveness and professional success, namely social capital. Previous research has shown that individuals have a preference for socializing and establishing connections with more attractive people, thereby enhancing their likelihood of building strong social capital (Gladstone & O'Connor, 2013; Lemay et al., 2010). Attractive people are more likely to be invited to join both organizations and informal gatherings (Palmer & Peterson, 2021). Gladstone and O'Connor's (2013) study also showed that people believe that attractive individuals (automatically) have higher levels of social capital, which gives them a better chance of professional success. Finally, studies have shown that attractive individuals have a special kind of less dense social networks with weaker ties that are primarily aimed at the mutually beneficial exchange of useful information. Attractive individuals tend to strategically choose more advantageous positions in social networks, particularly in broker roles, compared to less attractive individuals (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2018). This strategic positioning in social networks could also provide advantages to more attractive individuals in the labor market and lead to inequalities.

Based on these previous psychological and sociological studies dedicated to the relationship between attractiveness and social capital, this

chapter also presents an empirical case from the Czech Republic that shows the structure of the social network of highly attractive and less attractive people. It answers the question of whether attractive people have more friends and social contacts that give them preferential access to important information or other benefits. Finally, this chapter will also show whether there is a relationship between attractiveness and labor market success, even when we take into account the role of individuals' social capital. The final section discusses the empirical results in the context of previous studies and outlines possibilities for new research.

2 The Relationship Between Attractiveness and Social Capital

2.1 Social Capital

The phenomenon of social capital has been studied and explored in the social sciences since the late 1980s. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital, primarily at the individual level, as a set of potential resources (benefits) derived from social relationships, contacts, and acquaintances that an individual can use as his or her own capital in the social world. In the 1990s, political scientist Robert Putnam (1995) began to emphasize a more collective form of social capital. In a unique approach, Putnam links social capital, which includes trust, norms, and relationships, to a socially cohesive, civic democratic society. Networks of relationships exist, but in this case they facilitate mutual cooperation and civic engagement, making people's work more productive and civil society more cohesive (Putnam, 2000). This theory of collective capital posits that social capital not only benefits individuals, but also contributes to and sustains the entire civic community when people are actively engaged in civic life.

The individual dimension of social capital is more relevant when examining the relationship between attractiveness and social capital, with a useful distinction being made between

¹ More in Jæger (2011).

bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital takes the form of so-called strong ties, i.e., affective, close interpersonal relationships that are typically maintained with family and close friends. It is characterized by high levels of interpersonal trust and frequent social contact (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999).

Bridging social capital consists of ‘weaker’ ties between individuals that may be used to exchange information but typically do not provide emotional support in one’s life (Granovetter, 1973). It can be mobilized at any time to the individual’s benefit, typically on the condition of reciprocity (Matějů & Vitásková, 2006). Therefore, in the following sections, where we present the main results of our analyses, we refer to this capital as *reciprocal social capital*. Those who have contacts—“know the right people”—to help them navigate the labor market are likely to find more promising jobs, negotiate better salaries, or experience career growth (Burt, 2001, 2004; Seibert et al., 2001; Seidel et al., 2000). It is not only the size of the network that matters, but also the economic and cultural capital of the individuals involved in these social ties (Hakim, 2011). Social networks based on mutually beneficial exchanges of various kinds operate in all societies. O’Connor and Gladstone (2018) show that it is this kind of social capital that more attractive individuals tend to possess compared to less attractive ones.

2.2 Why Beauty Matters in Social Relations?

In terms of personal, social, and professional success, individuals with higher levels of attractiveness enjoy an advantage over their less attractive counterparts, at least at different life-stages (Jæger, 2011). Beauty plays an important role, for instance in the labor market, making it easier to get a job with a higher socioeconomic status and to earn a higher income (Anýžová & Matějů, 2018; Cipriani & Zago, 2011; Fletcher, 2009; Hamermesh, 2011; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Harper, 2000). Compared to their less attractive

counterparts, individuals with greater attractiveness are more prone to receiving interview callbacks (Bóo et al., 2013), are also more likely to be hired for what are perceived as desirable jobs (Lee et al., 2018), attain promotions at a comparatively faster rate (Morrow et al., 1990), receive different evaluations of their job performance (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005), and experience higher career satisfaction (Hosoda et al., 2003).

Jæger (2011, p. 999) argued that “evolutionary, social psychological and social constructionist theories provide theoretical insights into the mechanisms through which physical attractiveness might affect social stratification over the life course”. However, we will attempt to summarize the findings so far in a simpler way by dividing psychological research into two strands that help to explain why beauty pays (see O’Connor & Gladstone, 2018, p. 42).

The first focuses on how other people perceive attractive people and what positive qualities, which then help attractive people to favorable outcomes, they attribute to them. Studies have shown that perceivers believe the attractive person to be relatively more intelligent,² qualified, competent, deserving, more sociable, friendly, extroverted, and has higher social capital (Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992; Gladstone & O’Connor, 2013; Jackson et al., 1995; Jæger, 2011; Langlois et al., 2000). On the contrary, some recent studies indicated that unattractive people are perceived as more intelligent, more trustworthy due to their perceived competence, and earn significantly more than their attractive counterparts (e.g., Kanazawa & Still, 2018), suggesting that the effect of attractiveness may be nonlinear (Peng et al., 2020, p. 67). Psychological research also shows that individuals may internalize these external evaluations and change their

² Some studies suggested that more attractive people could have relatively higher intelligence (Jackson et al., 1995; Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004). Some of these findings are quite controversial and contested in the social sciences. For instance, Jæger (2011, p. 999) concludes in his paper on physical attractiveness and socio-economic and marital success that ‘(e)xisting evidence from meta-analyses on whether physical attractiveness is associated with higher intelligence or other productive skills is mixed’.

behavior in response (Eagly et al., 1991). Given a lifetime of positive social interactions, individuals with greater attractiveness can expect to enjoy relatively more social success (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2018).

The second stream of research points out that more attractive people may have (actually) different characteristics. Psychological studies have found that more attractive people have higher levels of self-esteem, social/communication skills, achievement, emotional stability, self-discipline, well-being, and are simply more popular (Matějů et al., 2017). And all of these psychological factors could consequently have a positive effect on labor market outcomes.

2.3 The Link Between Attractiveness and Social Capital

Among the personal characteristics that might moderate the relationship between attractiveness and career success, social capital also plays a role. A study by Gladstone and O'Connor (2013) shows that, in addition to a number of positive characteristics that attractive individuals (supposedly) possess, people also maintain believe and expect that attractive individuals (automatically) possess higher levels of social capital. Naturally, the labor market is the best place to capitalize on such stereotypes, as potential employers are more likely not only to hire more attractive individuals, but also to favor them for key positions that both require such levels of social capital and allow for its continued accumulation. In this way, perceived social capital quickly becomes real capital—a mechanism that the authors see as a classic case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Their experiment implies that, in the scenario where employers are aware that an individual possesses attractiveness but lacks social capital, they are less likely to assign that person to a crucial position within their company. This finding further strengthens the mediating role of social capital in the relationship between attractiveness and professional status.

Previous studies have also shown that people prefer to socialize and form bonds with more attractive people (Gladstone & O'Connor, 2013), which in turn increases their chances of accumulating stronger social capital. People enjoy and prefer to be in the presence of attractive people that give them greater opportunity for social interaction (Chatterjee et al., 2009; Feingold, 1992; Lemay et al., 2010). This finding is broadly consistent with other evidence that, for example, more attractive children are more sought after by their peers, receive more attention, popularity, and are more likely to be offered help or invited to join teams (Langlois et al., 2000). This finding, which has also been demonstrated for the adult population, could be explained by the positive or strong emotions experienced when encountering an attractive person (Said et al., 2008; Winston et al., 2007) and the automatic association between beauty and friendliness, honesty, pleasant nature, and other socially desirable traits (Eagly et al., 1991; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). Apparently, the “halo” effect could shape communication with more attractive individuals, with first impressions playing a key role. A study by Gladstone and O'Connor (2013) also shows that attractive people do not make extra efforts to establish social contacts; they simply receive more offers. A study by Palmer and Peterson (2021) confirms this showing that more attractive people are more likely to be invited to join both organizations and informal gatherings.

Finally, a recent study by O'Connor and Gladstone (2018) also demonstrated structural differences in the individual social capital of more attractive individuals. Such individuals have less dense social networks with weaker ties (between individuals) that can be effectively used for mutually beneficial exchange of useful information in the labor market and professional contexts but typically do not provide emotional support in one's life (Granovetter, 1973). The results of their other experiment showed that more attractive people are more likely to choose for themselves more profitable broker positions in social networks relative to other positions compared to less attractive people. Thus, the authors suggest

that higher levels and a specific structure of social capital are the mechanism that helps translate individual attractiveness into actual labor market returns.

As such, physical attractiveness can be seen as a form of capital that can be used in everyday social interactions and brings obvious benefits to its possessor, including direct or indirect effects on financial gain. According to Catherine Hakim (2010, 2011), beauty is part of “erotic capital” which includes not only physical attractiveness but also a particular kind of social energy, the ability to communicate easily and pleasantly, charm, playfulness, and erotic imagination. Hakim notes that erotic capital is not just another form of capital that facilitates individual success in interpersonal relationships or the labor market, but also one that is increasingly relevant and useful in today’s beauty-obsessed society. In this spirit, although we do not measure and utilize the full potential of the concept of erotic capital, we assume that attractiveness and social capital are two distinct theoretical concepts and will treat them as such. The most interesting question, then, is how these concepts relate to each other.

3 An Empirical Case from the Czech Republic

Based on the previous literature, we attempted to explore the relationship between attractiveness and social capital using our own quantitative survey, as many previous results were based on qualitative or experimental survey designs. We would like to present some findings from this research to illustrate the relationship between beauty and social capital.

3.1 Data and Operationalization of the Concepts

The data presented in this chapter were drawn from a nationally representative Czech questionnaire survey called *Neglected Human Capital Dimensions* (2015)—carried out on 2,220 respondents aged 16–66 interviewed face to face in

2015.³ This survey was focused mainly on attractiveness, personality traits, values, social capital, well-being, and certain aspects of lifestyle.

Attractiveness of an individual represents a key variable in the analysis. In the Czech survey, there were three kinds of evaluation of *respondent attractiveness*. As part of the survey, the respondents evaluated themselves on an eleven-point scale (0–10) of physical attractiveness. They were also evaluated by the interviewers using the same eleven-point scale of attractiveness. The interviewers assessed the respondent’s attractiveness just after his/her face-to-face interview. Generally, people get higher scores at the end of interviews because they have come alive while answering the questions. In effect, this score probably stands rather for erotic capital (e.g., grooming, styling, liveliness, social skills, likability), rather than just good looks narrowly defined. We are also aware that interviewers’ ratings may have been biased by other socio-demographic characteristics such as similar age, education, and the social class from which they came (see chapters written by Kuipers et al.).

In the third case, in those cases, where respondents agreed to have their portrait photograph taken, they were evaluated by a panel of 32 independent evaluators using Stephenson’s (Stephenson, 1953) Q-methodology.⁴ Our analysis of the link between attractiveness and social capital could not work with an index which includes the evaluation of photographs by the group of evaluators because of a limited number of cases for which it was possible to calculate (982 cases). Thus, we used the composite measure of attractiveness based on both self-evaluation and

³This survey was a direct follow-up to the previous cross-national representative comparative PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills (OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) and ensured its continuation in the Czech Republic. It carried out on respondents interviewed for the first time between the years 2012 and 2013 in the PIAAC Survey. This is one of the reasons why we have also data on respondents’ cognitive skills.

⁴More information can be found in our book “Power of Beauty: Do beauty and attractiveness contribute to life success?” (Matějů et al., 2017).

interviewers' evaluation. We classified individuals as above average (highly attractive), average (moderately attractive), and below average (less attractive). The first category was defined as the 25% of individuals at the top of the attractiveness scale, the second as the 25% at the bottom, and the remaining 50% as average.⁵

To measure the *intensity of social contacts*, we used (a) activity items measuring the importance of friends and acquaintances in one's life (i.e., not just the most immediate circle of the primary group), (b) how often one meets with them outside work, whether at home or (c) elsewhere, and (d) how one compares this frequency with that of other people in one's age group. This concept was measured as a composite index that ranges from 1 (high intensity of social contacts) to -1 (low intensity of social contacts).

To measure *reciprocal social capital*, our survey used three traditional items on reciprocal relationships of information exchange or assistance. The first question asked how often other people had asked the respondent to help them solve a problem or difficult life situation or to use their influence because of their job, position, or contacts. This captures an active role in reciprocal exchange. The second item, on the other hand, measured how often the respondent turned to other people for help when he/she was in a difficult situation (needed a doctor, lawyer, wanted to get an official to speak on his/her behalf, wanted to get a better job, wanted to get his/her child into kindergarten). These are some of the situations in which assistance is given; this captures the passive role in reciprocal exchange. The third question then asked more generally about the importance of such useful contacts in the respondent's life. The concept of reciprocal social capital was also measured as a composite index that ranges from 1 (high level of reciprocal social capital) to -1 (low level of reciprocal social capital).

⁵ Where it was needed, we categorized respondent's cognitive skills in the same way for better comparability. The variable indicating cognitive skills (SKILLS) is based on two dimensions measured in the PIAAC survey, namely numeracy (NUM) and literacy (LIT). In regression analyses, we use the mean value of the variables NUM and LIT $[(NUM + LIT) \div 2]$.

Individual *self-esteem* was measured on Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale, with items adopted for the Czech context by Blatný and Osecká (1994).

3.2 Empirical Findings

3.2.1 The Intensity of Social Contacts and Attractiveness

First, we look at the intensity of social contacts of highly attractive and less attractive individuals according to gender. A higher frequency of social contacts is found among younger people than among older people, among men than among women, and among the better educated than among the less educated. However, regardless of these socio-demographic characteristics, Fig. 1 shows that more attractive people meet their friends and acquaintances more often and consider them more important in their lives. Highly and moderately attractive men have slightly more social contacts than equally attractive women.

Interestingly, women are slightly more likely to meet their friends/acquaintances at home and men are slightly more likely to meet their friends outside their home—in restaurants, bars, or cafes for a meal, drink, or just to chat (see Figs. 2 and 3). This effect is eliminated by individual attractiveness, with both highly attractive men and women tending to meet their friends both at home and outside.⁶ Since the home environment tends to reflect a higher level of bonding capital (as the emotionally close milieu of one's family life), we attach greater relevance to the level of willingness to meet outside the home, a milieu more conducive to reciprocal relationships of mutual exchange. And it is precisely highly attractive men and women who are more likely to meet their friends in such contexts.

⁶ As the correlation between high socioeconomic status and attractiveness may play a significant role here, the results of this frequency analysis are also controlled for individual's ISEI. "Individuals with higher socioeconomic status not only have higher frequency of social contacts and meet their friends outside often, they may have healthier lifestyles and may invest more in beauty-enhancing products than low-SES individuals" (Jæger, 2011, p. 985).

Fig. 1 Intensity of social contacts by attractiveness level and gender

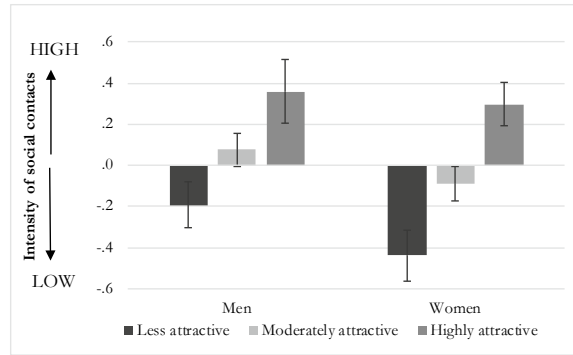


Fig. 2 Frequency of meeting one's friends or acquaintances at home

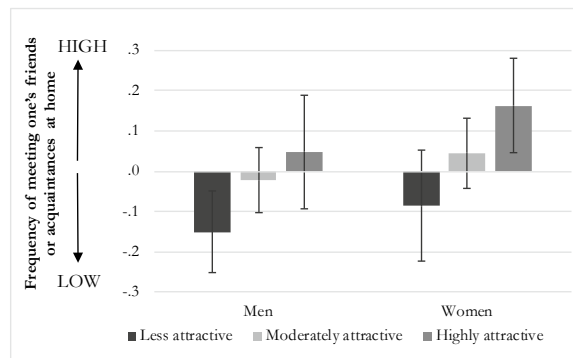
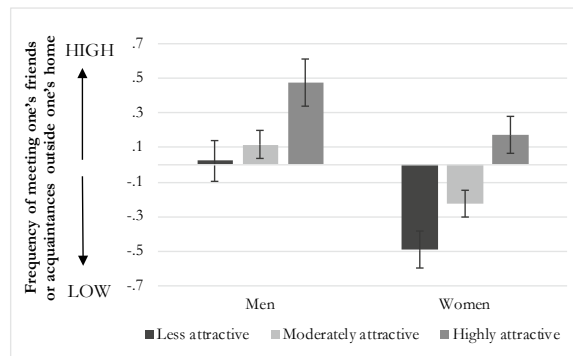


Fig. 3 Frequency of meeting one's friends or acquaintances outside one's home (in restaurants, bars, cafes)



3.2.2 Reciprocal Social Capital

In general, reciprocal social capital is more likely to be found among people who are better educated or belong to younger cohorts. Our research supports Gladstone and O'Connor's (2013) findings that highly attractive people accumulate higher levels of reciprocal social capital of mutual exchange than less attractive people, especially highly attractive women (see Fig. 4).

To explore the issue further, our survey also asked about the types of life situations in which

people turn to others for help. Five percentages of highly attractive people (compared to nine percentages of those with below-average attractiveness) often turn to others when they need to find a good doctor or lawyer, get a government agency to act on their behalf, or get their child into a kindergarten; about 80% attractive people do so rarely or sometimes, see Fig. 5.

Eight percentage of very attractive people (three percentage of those with below-average

Fig. 4 Level of reciprocal social capital by attractiveness and gender

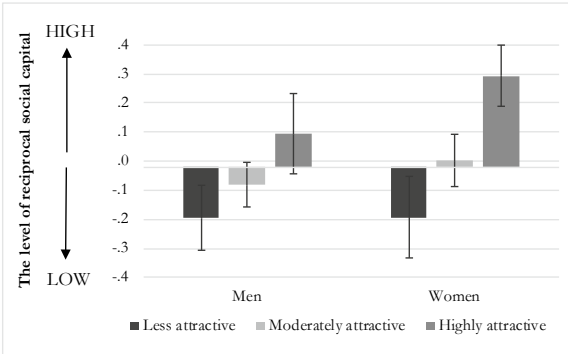
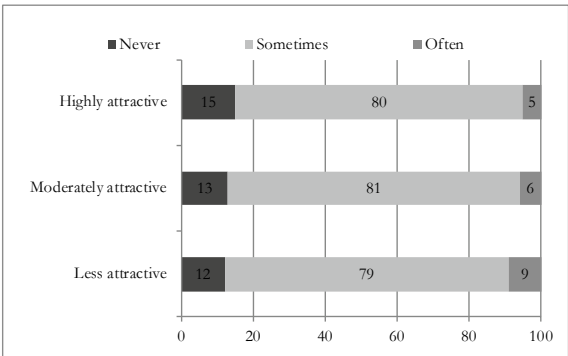


Fig. 5 How often do you turn to other people for help when you find yourself in a difficult situation—you need a good doctor, lawyer, want to get a word in your favor at a public authority, get your child enrolled in school? (percentages)



attractiveness) often ask their friends or acquaintances for help when they need a better job, more than 60% attractive people do so rarely or sometimes—see Figs. 6. The implication of this analysis is that more attractive people are less likely to be reluctant to ask for help in finding a better job, suggesting that they use their social capital to achieve better labor market outcomes and increase their chances of achieving both higher occupational socioeconomic status and higher pay. Attractive women are even more likely than men to turn to others for help with various difficult life situations.

Individual’s social networks are characterized not only by their size but also by the economic and cultural capital of those involved in such social ties. We therefore asked our respondents whether their friends or acquaintances could afford more or less than they could. One might expected that more attractive individuals would be more likely to surround themselves with people who have equal or greater levels of cultural and economic capital, and the results suggest

that this is the case (see Fig. 7). The circle of friends of highly attractive individuals consists of people who are able to pay about the same as the attractive individual (62%), or even somewhat or much more (24%) than the attractive individual.

3.2.3 Labor Market Outcomes and Career Success

We somewhat disagree with the conclusions of Gladstone and O’Connor (2013) that attractiveness serves only as a proxy for (perceived or real) social capital, and that it is social capital that predominantly (irrespective of individual attractiveness) shapes one’s labor market outcomes. Information about an individual’s attractiveness may be sufficient to predict the structure of his or her social network (see above), but we believe that one cannot completely rule out the effect either of attractiveness per se or of other psychological traits (such as self-esteem) that are not included in Gladstone and O’Connor’s (2013) experimental study.

Fig. 6 How often do you turn to other people for help when you need to get a better job? (percentages)

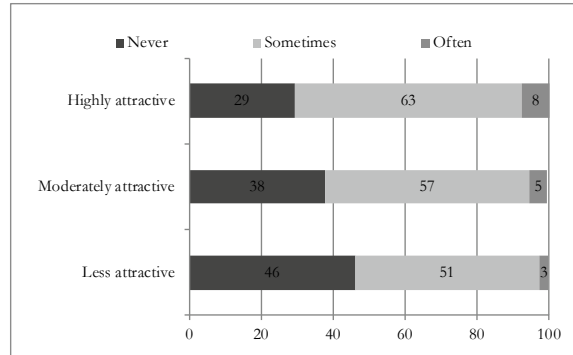
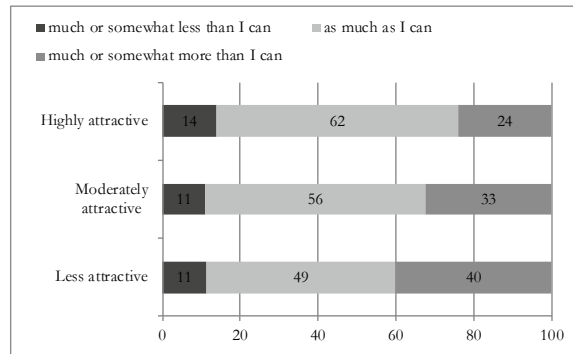


Fig. 7 Friends and acquaintances you meet with can generally afford... (percentages)



The regression results⁷ show that attractiveness remains an important indicator of labor market success, even after controlling for reciprocal social capital and individual self-esteem. In terms of the chances of getting a good job, educational attainment and cognitive skills are of course the most significant factors for middle-aged men and women. However, as expected, the effect of attractiveness is not eliminated.

In short, men's status bonus for being attractive is much larger than their status penalty for being unattractive, with a difference of about seven points between highly attractive and unattractive men.⁸ Interestingly, the role of attractiveness in

women's chances of getting a higher socioeconomic status job is weaker than for men. On the other hand, levels of reciprocal social capital and self-esteem play a significant role only for women. Higher levels of reciprocal social capital and self-esteem increase women's occupational socioeconomic status by 2.5 points (the trend is less pronounced for men). In short, men capitalize more than women on their high attractiveness in their efforts to get better jobs. Women, on the other hand, capitalize more on their attractiveness, self-esteem, and reciprocal social capital.

The second important aspect of labor market outcomes is income. The results show that education is again the strongest factor influencing earnings. Men have no bonus for above-average attractiveness but they have an 11% income penalty for below-average attractiveness.⁹ These differences are much more pronounced for women. Their bonus for above-average attractiveness is

⁷ Only economically active respondents with non-zero income were included in the analyses. Given that both beauty and cognitive skills become consistently effective in the labor market only in middle age (30–50 years), when individuals are approaching the peak of their careers (see Anýžová & Matějů, 2018), we have conducted the regression analysis only on this age group.

⁸ This might be certainly a substantial difference given this variable's (ISEI) range between approximately 16 (cleaners, manufacturing laborers) and 85 (surgeons, senior government officials).

⁹ We conducted the analysis with income in terms of average hourly earnings including all bonuses in logarithmic form, which allowed us to interpret the results as percentages of average income.

16% of average income and their malus is seven percentage. There is a 23% income gap between highly and less attractive women, even after controlling for reciprocal social capital and individual's self-esteem.

4 Conclusion

We live in a society where physical appearance matters. Attractiveness clearly plays an important role both in our social lives and in our workplace outcomes. The central goal of this chapter was to describe the relationship between attractiveness and social capital. Based on our empirical case from the Czech Republic, our results show that attractiveness has a strong link with the intensity of one's social activities. More attractive people meet their friends and acquaintances more often, consider them more important in their lives, and tend to meet their friends both at home and outside.

Attractive people are also more likely to be willing to ask for help when they need a better job, a doctor, a lawyer, a word in their favor with an authority, or a place in kindergarten for their child. The circle of friends of people with above-average attractiveness is made up of people who can afford mostly the same as the attractive person, or even somewhat more. This is an important piece of information about the structure of their (reciprocal) social capital complementing previous literature.

Last but not least, we have partially refuted the research conclusions of Gladstone and O'Connor (2013) that attractiveness serves (only) as a proxy variable for (alleged or actual) social capital in the labor market outcomes. In particular, it appears that more attractive individuals have better chances of obtaining higher socioeconomic status jobs and earning higher incomes than less attractive individuals, and that this effect of attractiveness remains even when we take into account individual's social capital and self-esteem. Kanazawa and Still (2018) propose three explanations for the effect of physical attractiveness on earnings—discrimination, self-selection, and individual differences. Our results suggest that discrimination (on the part of the employers,

co-workers, or clients) is a plausible explanation in the Czech Republic as the association between attractiveness and earnings does not disappear when respondents' occupations, cognitive skills, social capital, and even psychological characteristics are statistically controlled.

From the empirical case presented, it seems that in the Czech Republic capital associated with attractiveness pays off more for women than for men in some aspects. Thus, these results do not confirm the findings of other research according to which men benefit more than women from exceptional physical attractiveness in terms of socioeconomic outcomes (see a systematic review of Kukkonen et al., 2024, for more). In the Czech Republic, the opposite is true, and the differences in favor of women are considerable. However, similarly higher beauty premiums for attractive women appear also in Germany, Luxembourg, China, and other countries (Doorley & Sierminska, 2012; Hamermesh et al., 2002; Kukkonen et al., 2024).

In their systematic review, Kukkonen et al. (2024, p. 134) illustrate these conflicting research findings in many research studies over the past decades. Furthermore, they found that the results of attractiveness are gendered in that it is more consistently beneficial for men than for women. For women, attractiveness is not a universal benefit and appears to be detrimental in some cases. They conclude that attractiveness is more universally beneficial for men, whereas it may be more context dependent for women.

5 New Avenues for Research

Although the empirical results we have present are based on Czech data, we believe that their applicability extends far beyond Czech borders. Thus, future research should examine cultural variations in the relationship between attractiveness, social capital, and career success, taking into account the impact of evolving social norms, digital advances, and economic developments. It also seems important to extend comparative analyses to emerging economies and to examine how attractiveness and social capital are linked and how they are translate

into labor market outcomes in rapidly evolving economic contexts. It would also be useful to conduct longitudinal studies to observe changes in the effect of attractiveness on individuals' social capital and labor market outcomes over time.

We also believe it is critical to explore intersectionality by considering how factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background intersect with attractiveness to affect social capital and career outcomes. We should explore the mechanisms by which attractiveness affects earnings and look closely at the role of discrimination in the labor market and different fields of work, examining employer and coworker biases based on physical attractiveness. From this perspective, it is important to explore potential policy implications related to workplace diversity, inclusion, and policies to counter appearance bias. It would also be useful to explore interventions and strategies that organizations can implement to ensure fair and merit-based assessments in hiring and promotion processes.

There are also unanswered research questions related to a deeper understanding of how individual psychological traits, including self-esteem and attractiveness, interact as predictors of labor market outcomes. We should explore additional psychological factors that may influence career success and earnings, contributing to a more complete understanding of the dynamics at play.

Finally, future research should also pay attention to the role of technology, social media, and digital platforms in shaping perceptions of attractiveness and their influence on labor market outcomes, and how the increasing importance of erotic capital, as noted by Hakim (2010), interacts with technological advances in the twenty-first century. In terms of incorporating modern methodologies, advanced statistical models, experimental approaches, and/or machine learning should be used to uncover nuanced relationships and interactions between attractiveness, social capital, and labor market success.

By addressing these research directions, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between physical attractiveness, social capital, and career outcomes in contemporary societies.

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Petra Raudenská works as a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy Sciences. Petra is a recognized expert in comparative social survey methodology and social inequality research, with a focus on well-being. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Charles University in Prague and excels in advanced quantitative methods. Her research interests include survey methodology, social inequality, human capital, well-being, health, and human values. She has authored or co-authored a number of books and her work has been published in *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, *Social Science Research*.

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How Beauty Impacts Life Satisfaction: Objective, Subjective, and Mediating Effects

Michael L. Smith and Dana Hamplová

1 Introduction

To what degree does our sense of beauty, or how attractive others see us as, impact our well-being? The quest for well-being drives many social behaviors, such as relationship decisions, lifestyle choices, work practices, and leisure activities. Many service industries—from cosmetics to fitness centers to hair salons to textiles—revolve around the promise of greater attractiveness, and the premise that this attractiveness will also yield greater subjective well-being. In fact, a growing body of literature has found strong associations between attractiveness and subjective well-being (Datta Gupta et al., 2016; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Ko & Suh, 2019; Plaut et al., 2009), and has identified a wide range of mechanisms linking the two, such as parents' increased attention and resources dedicated to more attractive children. In other words, much of the existing research has confirmed with data what many people would presume based on Western

cultural practices and the growth of the “beauty industry.”

But can “beauty” even be measured? Of course, everyone has their own opinions on what is attractive to them, and these opinions can change not only across an individual's life, but also across communities and cultures. Beauty is truly in the eyes of the individual and inherently heterogeneous. But that does not mean that we cannot ask people about whether and how they find others attractive, and then analyze that data to identify social and cultural patterns—described statistically as means and variances—and investigate how those patterns relate to other social conditions. In that sense, attractiveness or beauty—in this chapter we use these terms interchangeably—is measurable, even if they are nothing more than social constructs that vary across human society. In a similar way, we all have different views of what foods are delicious—and such tastes certainly vary across societies—but that doesn't mean it is impossible to identify and measure the dishes people find most delicious, and analyze how they relate to other social phenomena. And so it is with beauty.

In fact, social scientists have measured beauty in two different ways, which we describe as “subjective” and “objective” approaches. By subjective measures, we mean respondents' self-assessments, such as when an interviewer asks a respondent how attractive they feel they are on a scale of 1–10, or asks how they think others

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M. L. Smith · D. Hamplová (✉)
Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology,
Prague, Czech Republic
e-mail: dana.hamplova@soc.cas.cz

M. L. Smith
e-mail: michael.smith@soc.cas.cz

perceive them as attractive on the same scale. Basically, people have a sense of their own attractiveness, just as they have a sense of their own self-worth, self-confidence, and well-being; the goal of the social scientist is to then identify ways to measure and systematically study these “subjective” characteristics. By contrast, “objective” approaches to measuring beauty include when an expert panel (or another specified group) rate others by how attractive they think they are, such through as standardized pictures of people’s facial profiles. Some “objective” approaches can also include collecting data on individuals not dependent on their subjective states, such as people’s height, weight, chest or waist size, body shape, and so on, but it would have to be established empirically whether such physical traits correspond to what others identify as “beautiful.”

While there is a long track record of measuring both attractiveness and social well-being in the social sciences, what is less understood are the social-psychological mechanisms at play linking the two. Social scientists have often confounded such “subjective” and “objective” approaches, rather than seeing them as distinctive factors each of which can plausibly relate to well-being in different ways. Between these two kinds of factors—“subjective” and “objective” approaches to beauty—which one has a greater impact on individuals’ well-being, and how? This is the primary question we will answer in this chapter.

To summarize, we focus on two dimensions of bodily appearance that are often ignored in research on life satisfaction: (1) “subjective” measures, i.e., individuals’ self-assessment of their own attractiveness, and (2) “objective” measures, i.e., assessments by interviewers and expert panels. We also take into account a variety of intervening factors that the current literature believes may moderate the relationship between attractiveness and well-being, particularly personality traits (Friedman & Kern, 2014), health status (Marks, 1996; Palmore & Luikart, 1972), marital status (Hamplová, 2006), and socioeconomic conditions (Evans & Kelley, 2004). Statistical methods enable us to distill out how each of these characteristics relates to each other

and contributes to subjective well-being, if they contribute at all.

How important is objective versus subjective attractiveness on well-being, how are their effects moderated by other conditions? One limiting condition on current research answering this question is the overall paucity of large-scale cross-national social surveys that would field relevant questions, especially relating to attractiveness. By designing and fielding our own survey in 2015, and by using the panel of respondents participating in the Czech PIAAC survey (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies), we were able to overcome this limitation of data, at least for a single country, and show how other researchers can replicate our approach. Information about our data is discussed after we briefly overview the current state of research.

2 Current State of Research

In sociological research, the terms “life satisfaction,” “happiness,” “well-being,” and “quality of life” are often used interchangeably, as they are in this chapter. In the dominant research tradition, subjective well-being is defined as self-reported, subjective judgments about one’s life (Hamplová, 2015). Scholars typically distinguish several components of subjective well-being: a cognitive dimension, a hedonic dimension, and an eudemonic dimension (Diener et al., 2018; Hamplová & Trusínová, 2018). Life satisfaction or cognitive dimension refers to one’s overall evaluation of life and can be understood as ‘contentment’ (Veenhoven, 2012). It is also the dimension that this chapter focuses on. By contrast, the hedonic dimension describes the emotional aspect of well-being and consists of two sub-dimensions: the preponderance of positive affect, often viewed as the feeling of joy or happiness (Huppert & So, 2013; Minkov & Bond, 2017), and the preponderance of negative affect, usually measured by anxiety or depression scales (Goyal et al., 2014; Nes et al., 2006). The eudemonic dimension reflects life purpose, vitality, flourishing, or engagement. Other aspects of SWB have also been elaborated in the literature (Diener et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, despite these conceptual distinctions, the terms life satisfaction, happiness, flourishing, and subjective well-being (SWB) are often used interchangeably across the social sciences.

Physical appearance is one of the most noticeable characteristics of a person and can lead to cues about his or her other qualities (Langlois et al., 2000). Positive evaluations of other people's looks create a "halo effect," or a cognitive bias in which we assume that good-looking people also have other characteristics we evaluate positively, such a successful career, as a fun social life, a desirable personality, and perhaps also greater subjective well-being (Dion et al., 1972). But these are not mere biases. The view that attractive people may also have other positive socioeconomic attributes has led economists to measure the size of these effects, often described as a "beauty premium," or conversely, a "plainness penalty." Attractive individuals are more likely to be hired, promoted, and to earn higher salaries than unattractive individuals (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1993; Hosoda et al., 2003). The impact of "beauty," and conversely, "ugliness," is not necessarily linear (i.e., have a consistent impact on well-being across levels of attractiveness). Many researchers have found that the wage penalties for "ugliness," i.e., being seen as strongly unattractive, are greater than the economic benefits of being strongly attractive (Requena, 2017). Given that attractiveness and unattractiveness are associated with such economic and social advantages (and disadvantages), it is easy to assume that attractive people have also greater subjective well-being than those less attractive.

It may seem that our research for this chapter is based on the work of Catherin Hakim, especially her concept of erotic capital (Hakim, 2010). In that influential essay, Hakim theorized beauty as "erotic capital," specifically seeing attractiveness as a personal asset that impacts life outcomes in a similar way as economic, cultural, and social capital (at the time of writing, it was popular for social scientists to view many different human characteristics as forms of "capital" that can be developed and "invested" in). In that basic sense, this chapter also sees attractiveness as something measurable and that can have measurable impacts

on life outcomes, such as well-being. However, Hakim (2010) conceives of erotic capital as a form of social power: a characteristic that men and women can use to gain advantage in the labor market, marriage market, and other forms of negotiation, something that plays no role in the current chapter. She additionally conceives it as a grand theory of human relations that is somehow in tension with other theoretical perspectives (especially feminist ones), while the current chapter is purely empirical and doesn't rely on any major theory beyond the measurability of concepts like beauty and well-being. Lastly, Hakim contends that erotic capital "is held mostly by women" (Hakim, 2010, p. 510), while in our analysis attractiveness is something that men and women can equally possess, and in fact there is no reason why men's attractiveness (subjective or objective) cannot be more impactful on their subjective well-being than it is for women.

Returning to our research question, there are several plausible mechanisms why attractiveness may impact subjective well-being. First, perceived attractiveness may boost self-esteem and confidence, which is strongly associated with subjective well-being. This may be due to the extra care and attention good-looking people receive, even in school (Langlois et al., 2000). Children viewed as attractive receive more attention by their parents, by their teachers, and as adults are even more likely to be in a romantic relationship, where they also have better and more frequent sex (Etcoff, 1999).

Second, there seems to be a link between physical attractiveness and personality types and other individual-level characteristics that lead individuals to invest in their appearance, to exercise, to care about their health, and so on. Researchers have found a strong association between extraverted personalities, emotional stability, and other 'positive' personality characteristics and attractiveness (Headey et al., 1993; Hosoda et al., 2003; Judge et al., 1999; Markowitz, 1998). At the same time, researchers of subjective well-being have found that respondents with a strong internal locus of control have higher subjective well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener et al., 2003). Emotional stability is also

a strong predictor of well-being (Almlund et al., 2011; Borghans et al., 2008; Jackson, 2006). In the Czech Republic, Hřebíčková et al. (2010) found that emotional stability and extraversion are positively associated with life satisfaction among Czech adults, but their study did not take into account other mediating factors, such as income or marital status. Bringing together these diverse studies, there is good reason to believe that both attractiveness and personality traits are both associated with subjective well-being, but it is not clear how these variables are associated with each other.

A third, more common argument is via economic mechanisms: people viewed as attractive succeed more in many aspects of life, such as in job interviews, occupational promotions, and gaining leadership positions at work, all of which likely boost life satisfaction above and beyond the levels of satisfaction that income alone may produce. Most studies have focused on the role of these economic mechanisms, analyzing how attractiveness impacts job hiring practices and subsequent income (Biddle & Hamermesh, 1998; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1993; Hitsch et al., 2010; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006; Mocan & Tekin, 2010; Scholz & Sicinski, 2015), which in turn many positively impacts subjective well-being at the individual level. Through these and other mechanisms, we also hypothesize that attractiveness is a strong predictor of subjective well-being in the Czech Republic.

The many studies that have found a strong association between attractiveness and subjective well-being have differed in their methodology (Argyle, 1987; Datta Gupta et al., 2016; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Plaut et al., 2009). Among the first to establish external (“objective”) measures of physical attractiveness was Diener et al. (1995), who compared results between several observational studies to assess the relationship between attractiveness and subjective well-being. They found a relatively strong association between these variables among college students. However, when “appearance enhancers” were covered or removed from the participants and were ranked again on an attractiveness scale, there was no longer any significant correlation between attractiveness and subjective well-being.

The concluded that the link between perceived attractiveness and subjective well-being “may be due to happier people doing more to enhance their beauty.” Other intervening factors may also play a role: better-off students may be both more likely to adorn themselves and more likely to be happier, for example.

However, research on the attractiveness and well-being link is inconclusive. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) contend that life circumstances, including attractiveness, do not explain subjective well-being, and that attempts to change one’s appearance would only have a minimal and short-term effect. Attractiveness can be confounded by other, sometimes unobserved factors, such as self-esteem, clothing, or other cognitive or non-cognitive traits, which can obscure results. And a study of female twins also found no association between physical attractiveness and depression, a negative indicator of subjective well-being (McGovern et al., 1996).

Research on the attractiveness-subjective well-being link can be differentiated by whether attractiveness is measured via respondents’ self-evaluations or by external evaluators. Critics of self-reports contend that they are susceptible to reporting bias, i.e., if respondents who evaluate their looks positively would also evaluate their well-being positively. On the other hand, a number of studies have found that there is a strong association between self- and external evaluations, which begs the question of how much of a bias there can be.

The alternative to self-evaluations are “objective” measures, either in terms of measuring female respondents’ waist-to-hip ratio (Plaut et al., 2009) or BMI (body-mass index) among both men and women, which is a common measure of obesity. Deaton and Arora (2009) used only height and found that taller people are happier, but that this effect is null after taking into account income and education. Another approach is via a panel of independent evaluators who assess respondents’ standardized pictures and rate them on an attractiveness scale. Mean or median values across evaluators can be established for each respondent. In this study, we use a combination of these methods: respondent self-assessment

(as the “subjective” measure) and independent evaluations as “objective” measures.

3 Empirical Case

Research on the link between attractiveness and subjective well-being has been conducted primarily in Western countries, such as the United States. Precisely because perceived attractiveness may vary greatly across cultures, research on less studied countries is particularly valuable for the sake of cross-national comparison. Because of the previous lack of data, there have not been studies of the attractiveness well-being link in the Czech Republic, which is a relatively new democracy in Central Europe that has a vibrant free market and is deeply intertwined with the rest of Europe, economically, socially, and culturally—especially with Germany and Austria. This chapter therefore provides another country study on this association relevant for research in other European countries and includes a wide range of intervening variables based on the literature above.

The data used in this chapter are from a nationally representative 2015 Czech follow-up survey to the PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills (OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) originally carried out in the Czech Republic in 2012 and 2013. In 2015, we randomly sampled 2,220 respondents aged 16–66 from the 6,081 respondents that originally participated in the earlier Czech PIAAC study. This follow-up approach ensured that we would have high-quality background information about respondents, while also being able to field additional questions relating to attractiveness, personality traits, self-confidence, and other characteristics that may impact subjective well-being.

We use a conventional, well-established statistical methodology—a form of linear regression. Linear regression is suitable because our dependent variable (life satisfaction) is measured on a 10-point scale ranging from very unsatisfied to very satisfied, and our main explanatory variables, such as self-esteem, are estimated from a number of questionnaire items. The regression involves a particular model, called a latent structural model,

which means that the impact of concepts like “self-esteem” or on well-being can be estimated at the same time (i.e., within the same model) as the concept of “self-esteem” is itself being defined by responses to specific social survey questions. The statistical method also has the virtue of being able to estimate the direct effect of objective vs. subjective measures of beauty on life satisfaction, as well as the degree to which they are indirectly mediated (interacted) by intervening variables, such as self-esteem and personality.

In our analysis, the subjective measure of beauty is not defined *a priori* or contingent on any grand theory of beauty. It is simply a factor score—a value for each respondent based on their responses to three questions that collectively measure different aspects of subjective attractiveness. This common statistical approach has greater validity compared to a situation in which only one question is used. The three questions, or items, we used are:

- “How do you overall assess your own physical attractiveness?” [Responses ranging on a 10-point scale from very unattractive to very attractive]
- “With my bodily appearance I am...” [Responses ranging on a 10-point scale from very unsatisfied to very satisfied]
- “According to today’s social standards, do others consider you as attractive?,” with responses ranging from “definitely no” to “definitely yes.”

These three items have factor loadings of .866, .798, and .759—which is a statistical way of saying how much each of the questions contributes to the overall concept of subjective attractiveness—and together indicate an internally balanced index, or concept.

For our objective measure of beauty, we initially considered including to a body-mass index, but our initial analyses found that it wasn’t correlated well with other objective measures, nor is it as theoretically sound, because it is more a measure of health status than attractiveness. We therefore developed a scale composed of assessments by the interviewer and a team

of evaluators who assessed the attractiveness of respondents based on standardized facial pictures taken at the time of the interview. Similar to our measure of subjective attractiveness, this “objective” measure also had strong statistical properties. Our other variables include self-esteem (a factor score based on the well-established 10-item Rosenberg scale), age, sex, a variable indicated whether the respondent is married or not, and an internationally recognized measure of occupational status (the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status).

As our previous research found that the personality trait most strongly associated with attractiveness is emotional stability (or conversely, neuroticism), we included 7 items that are part of the well-established battery of the “Big-5” personality traits (Smith et al. 2021). In general, those who score high in neuroticism are emotionally reactive, vulnerable to stress, and view ordinary situations as threatening, while those with low scores, i.e., emotionally stable people, are less easily upset and tend to be calm and free from persistent negative feelings. While we could have included many other variables, such as educational attainment or cognitive skills, our initial analyses indicated that these other variables had no measurable impact on our models and for the sake of cogency were not included in the study.

Our empirical findings are reported in Tables 1, 2, and 3, first for both men and women together, and then separately by sex. Each table includes six models that progressively include more explanatory variables, which enables readers to better see how the inclusion of different factors impacts overall model fit. Model 1 is our simplest model, including only subjective and objective beauty and age, which also models for the effect of age and objective beauty on respondents’ self-rating. What we can immediately observe from the model is that the objective measure of beauty has a significantly stronger direct effect on life satisfaction compared to the self-assessed measure, the latter of which isn’t even statistically significant among men (Table 2). In fact, as we incorporate more variables in subsequent models, the direct effect of self-assessed attractiveness becomes statistically insignificant, for both men and women.

On the other hand, these models reveal that the way others assess individuals’ attractiveness directly impacts self-assessed attractiveness, even if the latter doesn’t impact life satisfaction at all. In other words, the Czech data reveal that self-assessments are, at least in part, based on how others perceive them (along with the role of age). But when estimated together, our initial assumptions about the positive impact of self-rated beauty are in fact explained by the ratings of others.

How do objective ratings of attractiveness impact life satisfaction? Our results indicate that much of the effect of the objective ratings is in fact *indirect*. Model 2 introduces the role of self-esteem, while Model 3 introduces neuroticism, Model 4 introduces ISEI—International Socioeconomic Index—and Model 5 introduces family status (and their interactions). Model 6 includes all analyzed variables. Model 2 already reveals that self-esteem greatly impacts life satisfaction, and that there is a very large impact of objective beauty on self-esteem, for both men and women. In fact, the majority of the total effect of objective beauty on life satisfaction is accounted for by the indirect effect of objective beauty on self-esteem. In other words, how others perceive us greatly impacts our self-esteem, which in turn reflects our level of subjective well-being. In Model 2 and subsequent models, self-assessed attractiveness has no measurable impact on life satisfaction; its initially positive association among Czech women is in fact explained by their self-esteem.

The strong intervening role of self-esteem on life satisfaction is also echoed by the role of neuroticism, but to a lesser degree. Neuroticism (or emotional stability) has a strongly negative direct effect on life satisfaction, consistent across our models. There is also an exceptionally strong association between neuroticism and self-esteem: emotionally stable individuals are much more likely to assess their self-worth highly, which translates into greater life satisfaction. These associations are equally as strong for Czech men as they are for Czech women.

Our results also reveal that objectively attractive individuals are more likely to be married and have higher occupational status, for both men and women. The direct effect of marriage

Table 1 Standardized estimates of life satisfaction, both men and women

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Main predictors						
Subjective beauty	0.119**	0.016	0.020	0.023	0.030	0.031
Objective beauty	0.199**	0.134**	0.126**	0.118**	0.113**	0.112**
Sex (=male)	0.009	−0.012	−0.036	−0.034	−0.031	−0.031
Age	−0.076**	−0.088**	−0.102**	−0.103**	−0.155**	−0.156**
ISEI				0.049*	0.029	0.031
Married					0.156**	0.158**
Self-esteem		0.392**	0.284**	0.277**	0.266**	0.267**
Neuroticism			−0.147**	−0.142**	−0.138**	−0.138**
Path to subjective beauty						
Age - > Subjective	−0.189**	−0.185**	−0.192**	−0.193**	−0.193**	−0.193**
Objective - > Subjective	0.358**	0.479*	0.358**	0.366**	0.366**	0.364**
Neuroticism - > Subjective			−0.168**	−0.153**	−0.148**	−0.153**
Path to self-esteem						
Objective - > Self-esteem		0.413**	0.145**	0.159**	0.165**	0.16**
Neuroticism - > Self-esteem			−0.774**	−0.765**	−0.761**	−0.764**
Path to marital status						
Objective - > married					0.103**	0.057*
Age - > married					0.347**	0.344**
ISEI - > married						0.119**
Path to ISEI						
Objective - > ISEI				0.239**	0.255**	0.237**
Model fit						
BIC	30,267.9	66,148.5	95,243.6	111,306.1	114,167.2	114,147.1
RMSEA	0.032	0.045	0.043	0.043	0.043	0.042

on life satisfaction is high—as has been shown in many cross-national studies (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Mastekaasa, 1992, 1994)—but the impact of occupation on life satisfaction is in fact nugatory for both sexes. In other words, the quality of one’s job has little impact on life satisfaction, particularly when taking into account the powerful role of externally-assessed beauty, self-esteem, and emotional stability.

While our empirical findings about marriage and occupation aren’t new, what is new is our findings on the direct and indirect effects of objective attractiveness. In our final model (Model 6 depicted in Fig. 12.1), the gender differences in the role of attractiveness are particularly evident. For women, the direct effect of objective (as well as subjective) beauty on life satisfaction is statistically insignificant, which is remarkable.

Table 2 Standardized estimates of life satisfaction, men only

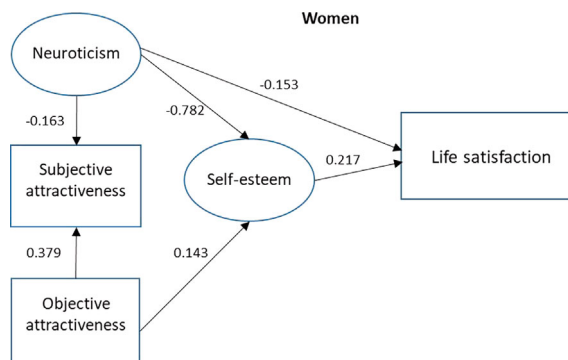
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Main predictors						
Subjective beauty	0.073	−0.011	−0.012	−0.009	0.001	0.004
Objective beauty	0.275**	0.185**	0.174**	0.171**	0.154**	0.146**
Age	−0.070*	−0.075*	−0.089**	−0.09**	−0.164**	−0.167**
ISEI				0.035	0.007	0.015
Married					0.149**	0.155**
Self-esteem		0.426**	0.327**	0.324**	0.304**	0.308**
Neuroticism			−0.142*	−0.137	−0.142*	−0.141*
Path to subjective beauty						
Age - > Subjective	−0.236**	−0.232**	−0.238**	−0.239**	−0.239**	−0.239**
Objective - > Subjective	0.339**	0.422**	0.311**	0.312**	0.311**	0.308**
Neuroticism - > Subjective			−0.171**	−0.166**	−0.157**	−0.164**
Path to self-esteem						
Objective - > Self-esteem		0.400**	0.154**	0.159**	0.174**	0.165**
Neuroticism - > Self-esteem			−0.755**	−0.751**	−0.742**	−0.748**
Path to marital status						
Objective - > married					0.212**	0.16**
Age - > married					0.511**	0.508**
ISEI - > married						0.13**
Path to ISEI						
Objective - > ISEI				0.205**	0.243**	0.207**
Model fit						
BIC	13,298.4	29,035.6	41,506.5	48,652.3	49,713.7	49,701.6
RMSEA	0.030	0.043	0.039	0.04	0.041	0.04

Beauty still plays a role in the formation of well-being, albeit an indirect one: objective beauty strongly impacts both emotional stability and self-esteem, which in turn shapes subjective well-being. It seems that these three factors (objective beauty, emotional stability, and self-esteem) create a positive feedback loop, possibly reinforcing each other and enhancing life satisfaction. Other demographic factors, besides marriage, play a relatively minor or nugatory role.

The story is different for men: objective beauty has a large, direct effect on life satisfaction, in addition to its effect on emotional stability and self-esteem. This is depicted by the darker arrow in Fig. 12.2, which summarizes graphically the findings in Tables 2 and 3, Model 6. Of the total effect of objective beauty on life satisfaction, about 63% takes place directly. In other words, when others assess men as attractive for their age, it has relatively less to do with their emotional state and

Table 3 Standardized coefficient estimates of life satisfaction, women only

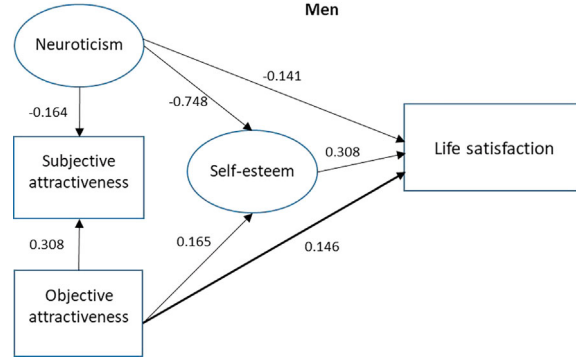
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Main predictors						
Subjective beauty	0.156**	0.039	0.053	0.056	0.055	0.056
Objective beauty	0.142**	0.094	0.085*	0.070	0.082	0.082
Age	-0.085**	-0.100*	-0.113**	-0.114**	-0.145**	-0.146**
ISEI				0.061	0.045	0.045
Married					0.152**	0.153**
Self-esteem		0.362**	0.231**	0.221**	0.216**	0.217**
Neuroticism			-0.171*	-0.166*	-0.154*	-0.153*
Path to subjective beauty						
Age - > Subjective	-0.156	-0.153**	-0.164**	-0.165**	-0.165**	-0.165**
Objective - > Subjective	0.360	0.530**	0.360**	0.381**	0.383**	0.379**
Neuroticism - > Subjective			-0.189**	-0.161**	-0.158**	-0.163**
Path to self-esteem						
Objective - > Self-esteem		0.452**	0.117**	0.145**	0.148**	0.143**
Neuroticism - > Self-esteem			-0.797**	-0.781**	-0.779**	-0.782**
Path to marital status						
Objective - > married					0.033	-0.014
Age - > married					0.212**	0.21**
ISEI - > married						0.106**
Path to ISEI						
Objective - > ISEI				0.270**	0.276**	0.265**
Model fit						
BIC	17,036.2	37,289.2	53,939.2	62,875.1	64,621.4	64,617.7
RMSEA	0.000	0.047	0.042	0.043	0.043	0.042

Fig. 1 Path diagram of final model with standardized coefficients for men

more to do with their strictly objective characteristics, such as (possibly) their facial proportions, or whether they are well shaven or dressed. While

emotional stability and self-esteem are important—in fact, self-confidence is often regarded in Western popular culture as an attractive male

Fig. 2 Path diagram of final model with standardized coefficients for women



trait—the size of the direct effect of beauty, especially compared to women, cannot be understated.

This finding on the gender differences in the role of objective beauty is consistent with other studies that also found that attractiveness among men has a larger impact on incomes and other life outcomes than is the case for women. It may be the case that the way people perceive male beauty is closely tied to how they perceive signs of life success, including their well-being. These results from the Czech Republic, therefore, seem to conform to Western gender patterns of the role of beauty on well-being, rather than being an exception.

4 New Avenues for Research

We have provided substantial evidence on the role of beauty and other factors to explain life satisfaction in the Czech Republic. We initially framed our research around the question of whether personally-assessed (“subjective”) or externally-assessed (“objective”) attractiveness matters more for life satisfaction, and concluded that only objective beauty matters—at least for the Czech Republic. And in terms of the significance of objective beauty, we found that its impact on life satisfaction among women is greatly mediated by self-esteem, emotional stability, and marriage, while the mediating role of these factors is outweighed by beauty’s direct effect among men.

Overall, the results tell us that to improve our subjective well-being, we must invest not so much in our careers, but rather in ourselves, in our own

personal development: focusing on improving our appearance (how others see us), making meaningful changes to our lifestyles toward greater emotional stability and self-esteem. All of those are factors within the capacity of each individual, and taken together, are likely to positively influence other factors, such as marriage prospects on top of their impact on life satisfaction. Such investments into ourselves can be empowering, as many individuals have the capacity to make small changes that can incrementally improve their well-being, regardless of the socioeconomic situation they are in.

Our study also points to new areas for research. First, our study shows the importance of including multiple measures of beauty—some self-assessed, others objective—in empirical analyses and comparing the significance of each. The inclusion of these different measures can help us identify the specific mechanisms through which beauty matters in other life outcomes beyond subjective well-being. This requires that researchers incorporate appropriate measures of beauty in the process of survey design. In our case, this meant training in-person interviewers to take standardized photos of interviewees (of course with their explicit consent), ensure sufficiently large survey samples, and organize post-survey panel assessments of the collected photos. At the same time, researchers who focus on objective measures can also include a short battery of self-assessed beauty items in their questionnaires in order to confirm the relative role of each.

Another important avenue of research is the need for cross-national analysis. The current

study, as with many analyses of the effects of beauty, is commonly based on niche and single-country surveys. If beauty researchers standardize survey items and agree on standardized objective measures, then it would be possible to engage in ex post data harmonization of multiple surveys and carry out cross-national studies, leading to more robust and internationally relevant results.

Above all, research on the role of beauty needs to be specific on what it is actually measuring: how individuals assess themselves, how others assess them, or another metric based on waist size, height, and/or weight. Our results reveal that a “subjective” measure cannot be an indicator of an “objective” one, and vice versa. Similarly, researchers using other measures, such as BMI, need to demonstrate that these measures are indeed measures of beauty, as opposed to indicators of health status, and that they have cross-national validity. Indeed, research on the effects of beauty is only beginning to flourish, and we hope that our contribution to this volume will help facilitate that.

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Michael L. Smith is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Sociology, the Czech Academy of Science. He received B.A. degrees from the University of Washington in Seattle (1998), M.A. from Boston College (2000), and his PhD in Political Science (2008) from the New School for Social Research in New York, where he also received the Hannah Arendt Prize for Best Dissertation. He has led a variety of research projects and data collection efforts, including a Center of Excellence project that established the Czech Household Panel Study. His work has been published in journals such as *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *Research in the Sociology of Education*, *Research in the Sociology of Education*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, and others. Currently,

he serves on the International Editorial Board of *Social Forces*.

Dana Hamplová is a Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. She earned a Ph.D. in Sociology from the Charles University. From 2002 to 2004, she worked as a research associate at the Globalife project at the University of Bamberg. From 2006 to 2010, she was a post-doc at McGill University at the Canadian Research Chair on Social statistics and Family Change. She acted as a secretary of the European Consortium for Sociological Research (ECSR)

and as a member of Scientific Advisory Board of European Social Survey (ESS). Currently, she is a member of The Research, Development, and Innovation Council of the Czech government. From 2014 to 2017, she was a member of the Board of Directors of Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA). Her main research interests are in social inequalities, demographic behavior, quality of life, and comparative sociology. Her work has appeared in leading international journals such as *Demography*, *European Sociological Review*, or *European Journal of Population*.

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Beauty, Media Representations, and Body Image

Ella Guest and Elizabeth A. Daniels

1 Introduction: The Links Between Beauty, Media Representations, and Body Image

Body image refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours about their appearance (Cash, 2004). The US National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA, 2023) explains body image as “how you see yourself when you look in the mirror or when you picture yourself in your mind. It encompasses: what you believe about your own appearance (including memories, assumptions, and generalisations); how you feel about your body, including your height, shape, and size, and; how you sense and control your body as you move—how you physically experience or feel in your body”. Beginning in childhood, we internalise messages about appearance from parents, peers, and media that affect our body image (Thompson et al., 1999).

Dominant beauty standards for women in the US and other Western countries are Eurocentric and are generally found to include having a thin body, light skin, light coloured eyes, and long,

straight, light coloured hair (Avery et al., 2021). Far less scholarly attention has investigated beauty standards for men; however, muscularity plays a central role and is intertwined with perceptions of masculinity (Luciano, 2007). These beauty ideals are common in traditional media, like TV shows and movies that are commercially produced (Brubaker et al., 2023), as well as social media, which allow users to create, share, and interact with content (Carrotte et al., 2017). Indeed, media are a potent source of information about beauty and appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999) and exposure to idealised bodies in both traditional and social media is related to viewers' body image (e.g., Blond, 2008; Huang et al., 2021).

In this chapter, with a focus on psychological research conducted in the US, the UK, and Australia, we discuss: (1) who is and who is not represented in media, (2) how media representations affect viewers' body image, and (3) research-related and practical recommendations. To address the first aim, we summarise research on dominant media portrayals and consider how individuals with appearance-altering conditions are portrayed in media. In this discussion, we aim to draw attention to inequalities in media representations and highlight the invisibility of people with stigmatised appearances in commercially produced media. To address the second aim, we review research on the effects of viewing idealised media images that depict a narrow standard of

E. Guest (✉) · E. A. Daniels
School of Social Sciences, Centre for Appearance Research (CAR), College of Health, Science & Society, University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK
e-mail: Ella.Guest@uwe.ac.uk

E. A. Daniels
e-mail: Beth.Daniels@uwe.ac.uk

beauty on viewers' body image and describe theoretical mechanisms explaining how media exposure affects body image. We also discuss how social media, specifically, have the potential to be used as a tool to promote acceptance of appearance diversity and foster positive body image. We close by offering suggestions for future research and practical recommendations. In this chapter, we take a sociocultural perspective, which focusses on the roles of society, culture, and social interaction in shaping human experiences (American Psychological Association, 2024).

2 Dominant Media Portrayals of Appearance

To understand how media affect body image, it is necessary to understand who is and who is not represented in media. Content analyses, which quantify the number of times an event or behaviour occurs, have repeatedly found that certain groups are depicted more commonly in media than other groups. In particular, White men are over-represented in media across a wide range of genres compared to women and people of colour (see Scharrer et al., 2022 for a review of US media). Theorists have long noted that these patterns have implications (Tuchman, 1978). For example, Berry (2003) stated that those who are featured in media "become worthy of attention and concern" in society, whereas those who are left out "remain invisible" (p. 363).

Furthermore, groups under-represented in media may be portrayed in problematic ways. For example, when women are portrayed in media, they are often depicted in narrow and stereotyped ways (Collins, 2011) including as sexual objects (for reviews, see Ward, 2016; Ward et al., 2023). Indeed, the sexual objectification of women in media is common and entails valuing a woman mainly for her sexual appeal over other aspects of her humanity including her interests and competencies (Ward et al., 2023). For example, a content analysis of adolescent female characters in popular films released in the US found that girls were frequently thin and depicted in sexy attire with some nudity (Smith et al., 2017, see

also Smith et al., 2012 for similar findings of adult women in popular US TV programmes and films). Patterns showing that women are more likely to be sexually objectified in media compared to men have been documented in US media as well as globally (Ward et al., 2023). In sum, media across a wide range of formats are replete with sexually objectified portrayals of girls and women, creating a narrow and stereotyped representation of girls and women that values their sexual attractiveness over other characteristics (e.g., thoughts, interests, personality). These portrayals have implications for girls' and women's body image, as we discuss in detail below.

3 Representations of Individuals with Visible Differences in Media

One group that is disproportionately affected by beauty standards, and is often under-represented, or mis-represented, in media is individuals with health conditions that affect their appearance, known collectively as 'visible differences' or 'appearance-altering conditions'. The over-representation of narrow beauty ideals, and lack of representation of individuals who deviate from them, can lead people with visible differences to feel they cannot relate to anyone in media and contribute to body image concerns.

There are many examples of visible differences, including congenital conditions (e.g., cleft lip and/or palate, naevus birthmarks), those that are acquired as a result of diseases (e.g., psoriasis, lipoedema), injuries (e.g., burn scarring, limb loss), or as a consequence of undergoing treatment (e.g., mastectomy scarring, alopecia; see Rumsey & Harcourt, 2012 for an overview). While many individuals adjust well to the challenges associated with their condition, a significant number experience social anxiety, depression, appearance-related distress, and low self-esteem, which can lead to social isolation and negatively impact academic engagement, career aspirations, forming romantic relationships, and life engagement (e.g., Rumsey & Harcourt, 2012). Unfortunately, individuals with appearance-altering

conditions frequently experience negative social interactions, including being pointed and stared at in public, receiving unwanted and often insensitive comments and/or questions about their appearance, and up to a third have been the recipient of hate crimes (Stock et al., 2013; Swift & Bogart, 2021). These negative experiences stem from sociocultural attitudes towards appearance difference, which is particularly pertinent because societal attitudes and behaviours are highly influenced by the way that individuals from stigmatised groups, such as those with visible differences, are represented in media (Ramasubramanian & Yadlin, 2017). Given that individuals with appearance-altering conditions deviate from Western beauty ideals and appearance ‘norms’, they are rarely featured in advertisements, magazines, television, and films and there is a general lack of awareness of these conditions and their causes within the general population (Mathews et al., 2023).

Moreover, when individuals with appearance-altering conditions *are* featured in media, their visible difference is often made the main focus of their character and they are portrayed in a negative light, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes and increases stigma towards appearance difference (Mathews et al., 2023). One common portrayal, particularly in films, is as villainous, bitter, or evil characters (Mathews et al., 2023; Wardle & Boyce, 2023). In fact, producers and film writers often use the juxtaposition of beauty versus visible difference to signal to the audience whether a character is portrayed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Momin et al., 2023). This typically includes depicting villains with facial scarring, limb differences, or dermatological conditions including alopecia, facial warts, and dark patches under their eyes (Croley et al., 2017). This practice is ingrained in popular culture, dating back to fairy tales (e.g., Snow White versus the Evil Queen; Cinderella and the Ugly Sisters; Beauty and the Beast) and continues to be a common character trope used today (Leduc, 2020).

Another way that individuals with visible differences are portrayed in film, TV, and the news is as characters who should be pitied or looked down upon (Wardle & Boyce, 2023). For example,

news articles discussing conditions such as burn injuries, or any form of scarring, are often highly medicalised and describe individuals using negative words such as ‘victim’ or ‘sufferer’. Moreover, characters with skin conditions such as acne are often portrayed as inferior, shy, and undesirable characters (Marion et al., 2018). These negative stereotypes portrayed in media exacerbate inequality and alienate individuals with appearance-altering conditions by creating the narrative that they are outsiders or part of an ‘outgroup’. Intergroup Anxiety Theory proposes that these stereotypes lead people to experience state anxiety, unease, and apprehension when interacting with members of an outgroup because of expectations that the experience will be negative and concerns they will face negative consequences for interacting with someone who is seen as an outsider (Stephan, 2014). This illustrates how the negative stereotypes in media can play a part in shaping how society views appearance difference, including potentially harmful attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, increasing the representation of appearance difference in media is needed to address beauty inequalities and increase acceptance of appearance diversity within society.

4 How Media Representations Affect Viewers’ Body Image

Media representations have implications for viewers’ body image. Indeed, a substantial body of research has investigated the negative effects of viewing idealised media images that depict a narrow standard of beauty on viewers’ body image. A meta-analysis of 543 effect sizes from 127 studies ($n = 35,195$; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.13$, $SD = 5.87$) found that higher appearance-related media exposure was associated with negative body image outcomes with small to moderate effect sizes (Huang et al., 2021). Effects were significant in studies: (1) assessing body satisfaction, body self-consciousness, internalisation of the thin-ideal (i.e., the extent to which one desires to be thin), and disordered eating behaviour, but not mental health risk, emotional

responses, or attitudinal responses, (2) for magazine content, TV programmes, music videos, and non-celebrity social media accounts, but not studies using magazine advertisements, TV commercials, movie clips, print commercial or non-commercial photos, or celebrity social media accounts, (3) with adolescents and emerging adults (ages 18–32), but not adults. Of note, gender did not moderate these effects, meaning that both girls'/women's and boys'/men's body image were affected by media exposure (effects on other gender groups were not reported). These findings indicate that young people are at risk for body image concerns through consuming a variety of media.

As described above, White men are over-represented in media and compared to women and people of colour (Scharer et al., 2022). In addition, Eurocentric beauty standards are pervasive in the US and other Western contexts (Avery et al., 2021). These patterns beg the question—does media exposure depicting Eurocentric appearance norms affect viewers of colour who may not share the same beauty standards? Only a small body of research has investigated this question to date (e.g., Madden & Breny, 2016; Perkins et al., 2021) and none, to our knowledge, with boys or men or people of other genders. There is evidence that adolescent girls of colour are affected similarly to White girls by exposure to Eurocentric appearance norms depicted in media. Specifically, this study found that higher exposure to Eurocentric appearance norms through TV consumption was related to greater body shame in Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, and White girls (Daniels et al., 2024). These findings indicate that girls of colour may be negatively affected by media that feature narrow Eurocentric beauty standards. However, there is also evidence that ethnic identity may buffer adolescent girls against the negative effects of exposure to images of thin-ideal White women (Schooler & Daniels, 2014). More research needs to be done to examine these patterns in greater depth with people of all genders from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, culturally-sensitive measures (Lowy et al., 2021) and frameworks (Landor et al., 2024) are needed.

Multiple theories have been proposed to explain the process by which media use affects viewers' body image including social comparison theory, tripartite influence model, objectification theory, and cultivation theory (see Tylka et al., 2023 for a review). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) states that people compare themselves to others on a range of characteristics that they value, like appearance. These comparisons can be upward (in which one believes the other to be better off than oneself), downward (in which one believes the other to be worse off than oneself), or lateral (in which one believes the other to be similar to oneself). In terms of media use, when average people compare themselves to media figures, who typically have appearances not attainable for most people, they engage in upward comparisons and feel dissatisfied with their own bodies. The tripartite influence model (Thompson et al., 1999) identified family, peers, and media as influential sources of information. Through media exposure, people can internalise narrow standards of beauty and feel dissatisfied with their own appearance. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) identified media exposure as one way through which girls and women learn to value their physical appearance over other aspects of their humanity and to view their body as an object for others' pleasure (termed self-objectification). Similarly, cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) proposed that viewers internalise messages they see in media through repeated exposure and these messages serve as a basis for social comparison. These theories help us understand the processes by which media affect viewers and, therefore, provide insights for interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of media use on body image.

5 Social Media and Body Image

Social media came into widespread use in the 2000s (Murphy et al., 2013). Unlike traditional media, social media allow for two-way communication between users in the form of comments and various types of feedback such as 'likes' and 'hearts'. Social media have unique features

that can contribute to body image concerns, for example, the opportunity to present an idealised self through photo-editing tools and use of filters to align more closely with appearance ideals (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Furthermore, sharing and viewing ‘selfies’, defined as “self-photos taken with a hand-held device that are usually shared on social media”, are highly popular social media activities among young people (McLean et al., 2019, p. 513).

A review by Vandenbosch et al. (2022) suggests that taking, and particularly editing, selfies can lead both women and men to self-objectify and internalise appearance ideals, resulting in body dissatisfaction and further photo-manipulation. Moreover, many comments on selfies are appearance related and both negative and positive appearance-related comments are found to reinforce appearance ideals and can lead to body dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Křížová & Kvardová, 2023; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Whereas a lot of research has documented the negative effects of consuming idealised images in traditional and social media, more recent research has shifted towards understanding whether social media can be harnessed in a positive way to improve body image and increase acceptance of appearance diversity. One place that the representation of appearance diversity has gained popularity is on the image-based platform *Instagram* (Rodgers et al., 2022). Much of this can be attributed to the Body Positive or ‘BoPo’ movement, which seeks to challenge pressures to adhere to sociocultural appearance ideals, and to counter harmful appearance-based online trends such as thinspiration (i.e., thin-ideal images used to motivate unhealthy weight loss) and fitpiration (i.e., toned and muscular ideal content aimed at encouraging individuals to gain muscle).

Although accounting for only a small percentage of overall content on social media, body positive posts are becoming increasingly popular—as of June 2024, the hashtag #Body-Positive has been used twenty-million times on *Instagram*. Body positive posts challenge beauty standards and the inequality (e.g., weight discrimination) individuals who do not meet these ideals face by featuring women with varying body

shapes, sizes, and skin tones, and women from marginalised groups (Rodgers et al., 2022). Often, this includes unedited photographs or videos of women in larger bodies with visible signs of stretch marks, cellulite, and body hair (Cowles et al., 2023). Furthermore, images are often accompanied by captions or quotes about appreciation and respect for the body and its functions, an appreciation of a wide range of appearances as beautiful, and calls to action relating to beauty standards and weight discrimination (Cohen et al., 2019; Cowles et al., 2023). Researchers have theorised that BoPo content can foster positive body image by encouraging viewers to appreciate their bodies and broaden their conceptualisation of beauty, while discouraging the internalisation of appearance ideals (Rodgers et al., 2022).

Promisingly, numerous studies have found that viewing BoPo content on social media sites including *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *TikTok* can have a positive impact on viewers, including increasing positive body image and body satisfaction in young women and men (Cohen et al., 2019; Pritchard & Button, 2023). Findings suggest that viewing body positive posts for even a brief period can be beneficial and counteract the negative impact of posts portraying unattainable beauty ideals on social media. Similarly, carrying out ‘digital pruning’, whereby users consciously unfollow, mute, or block unhelpful or harmful appearance-related content could be beneficial (Tylka et al., 2023).

These studies provide useful real-world applications because it is relatively easy for individuals to engage with body positive content through their typical social media use by following accounts that use body positive hashtags (e.g., #BoPo #BodyPositive #BodyPositivity #LoveYourself). However, there are several issues with the naturally occurring body positive content on social media which may hinder its practical applications. First, much of the content labelled as #BoPo does not align with the aims of the movement or the concept of positive body image. For example, a content analysis by Lazuka and colleagues (2020) identified that 67% of BoPo posts featured White women and almost 80% aligned with some form of beauty ideal. This suggests that

most individuals, and particularly those from marginalised groups, are not represented in body positive content (Lazuka et al., 2020). Additionally, the body positive movement developed from the feminist fat acceptance/liberation movement, which sought to challenge weight discrimination; however, it now often centres on White, able-bodied privileged women who are conventionally attractive (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Lazuka et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in a content analysis of body positive Instagram posts, Lazuka and colleagues (2020) identified that the majority did relate to appreciating appearance diversity, including a range of physical appearances.

Furthermore, social media is increasingly being used to increase representation and raise awareness of appearance diversity including individuals with disabilities and appearance-altering conditions. For example, a number of visible difference charities including Face Equality International and Changing Faces in the UK use social media to raise awareness and increase representation of visible differences and to challenge appearance-related stigma and misconceptions (Stone & Fisher, 2020). In addition, there are numerous visible difference influencers with large followings on social media. For example, Nikki Lilly, a young British woman with the condition Arteriovenous malformation (AVM), has over 2.5 million subscribers on YouTube, 457,000 followers on Instagram, and uses her account to raise awareness and normalise AVM.

These examples demonstrate how social media can provide a powerful platform for social change because users can develop their own content and successfully challenge narrow appearance ideals found in traditional forms of media (Lazuka et al., 2020). Although promising, most of these campaigns aimed at increasing representation and reducing stigma have not been evaluated (Mathews et al., 2023). Therefore, it is unclear whether they are effective at reducing stigma towards appearance-altering conditions. Nonetheless, there is some evidence to suggest that viewing media content that includes educational information, positive messaging, and personal stories of over-coming adversity can reduce

stigma towards appearance-altering conditions (Mathews et al., 2023; Stone & Fisher, 2020). Further work is needed to understand which aspects of social media campaigns are needed to effectively promote appearance diversity acceptance and reduce stigma towards people with visible differences.

6 Future Directions

There are several research-related and practical recommendations in relation to this area. First, although social media provide various platforms with different characteristics that enable users to generate their own content and represent those who are usually missing from traditional media, mainstream media still play a large role in the day-to-day lives of most individuals (Rideout, 2015). Therefore, it is important that those involved in decision-making in media, such as commissioners, producers, and writers, understand the impact their portrayal of appearance can have on viewers and the importance of valuing appearance diversity. One recent example of how this can be adopted comes from the UK television network Channel 4, which committed to representation of individuals from minority groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+) in their television shows through their Commissioning Diversity Guidelines (Channel 4 2022 Commissioning Diversity Guidelines, 2022). Moreover, there have also been some positive portrayals of visible difference in media, including the 2017 film *Wonder*, which tells the story of August Pullman, a ten-year-old boy with a facial difference who joins a mainstream school in New York (Chbosky, 2017).

A key issue within media and body image research is the lack of diversity of participants, which typically consist of young, White, able-bodied, highly educated women from select countries (e.g., Australia, UK, and the US; Gahler et al., 2023; Halliwell, 2015). To understand how to foster positive outcomes in all individuals, it is necessary for researchers to actively involve individuals of different genders, ages, and from racial and ethnic minority groups in various countries

around the world in research to understand their specific experiences and reduce inequality in the field.

Although there are now promising research findings into the potential positive effects of social media in relation to improving body image and increasing acceptance of appearance diversity, further experimental research, using a randomised controlled design, is necessary to determine what specific elements are needed to make a social media campaign effective at reducing stigma and increasing acceptance of appearance diversity (Mathews et al., 2023). Moreover, a central practical issue is how to disseminate these campaigns widely, rather than just within groups of individuals who are already interested in understanding more about appearance-altering conditions and therefore actively seek this content. One important consideration is that social media platforms utilise algorithms to display personalised content to users which is deemed to be relevant to them (Swart, 2021). This means that once an individual engages with content relating to body positivity or appearance diversity, they are more likely to receive similar content in their feed again; however, it also means that those who engage with harmful appearance-related content, such as thinspiration or fitspiration, are increasingly exposed to it. In the light of this, it is necessary for social media companies to work alongside academics and policymakers to remedy this issue and make social media a safe place for those who use it.

Finally, it is important to consider how to equip social media users, particularly children and young people, with social media literacy skills and the ability to think critically about the content they are viewing, including whether it might be harmful for them. Promisingly, there is evidence that social media literacy can protect against the negative effects of social media on body image (Paxton et al., 2022) and existing evidence-based body image interventions for children (e.g., Everybody's Different: The Appearance Game, Guest et al., 2021) and adolescents (SoMe, Gordon et al., 2021; Dove Confident Me, Diedrichs et al., 2021) include social media literacy. Moreover, in the UK, the government's Women and Equalities Committee (2021)

published an inquiry into body image, which highlighted the need for social media companies to be accountable for protecting individuals from online harms associated with negative body image. They suggested steps including using more stringent age-verification processes, enforcing community guidelines, and advertising standards, and representing more appearance diversity in advertising.

7 Conclusions

In summary, traditional and social media often represent narrow appearance ideals and under- or mis-represent individuals from marginalised groups, which can have a significant impact on body image and add to beauty inequalities. Extant research suggests that viewing diverse content on social media can improve body image, mood, and increase acceptance of appearance diversity. Future research is needed to better understand which elements of social media posts and campaigns are needed to effectively increase acceptance of appearance diversity in relation to weight, shape, skin colour, and visible differences.

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Elizabeth A. Daniels PhD, is a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England. She earned her doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of California Santa Cruz and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in sport psychology at the University of California Los Angeles. Her research examines how media affect girls' and young women's body image as well as protective factors such as physical activity and sport participation.

Ella Guest is a Senior Research Fellow and Registered Health Psychologist based at the Centre for Appearance Research (CAR), a centre of excellence for psychological and interdisciplinary, person-centred research in appearance, visible difference, body image and related studies at the University of the West of England. Ella's research seeks to understand experiences of living with conditions that affect appearance and explore whether social media can be used to promote positive body image, reduce appearance-related stigma, and increase acceptance of appearance diversity.

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Looking Right for the Job: Appearances, Unequal Chances, and Gatekeeping in the Labor Market

Kobe De Keere, Outi Sarpila, and Laura Vonk

1 Introduction

Aesthetic requirements have become a norm in contemporary labor markets. As discussed in previous chapters of this handbook, beauty (or attractiveness), in particular, is often perceived as a resource that enhances employability (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Nickson & Warhurst, this volume). However, this is, as research shows, not always the case. At least part of the research tradition that views beauty as a quantitatively measurable attribute demonstrates that beauty does not always confer financial or labor market advantages, especially for women (Kukkonen et al., 2024; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; see also Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). In other words, these studies suggest that employers do not necessarily value or prioritize beauty uniformly but may even ‘penalize’ employees for being good looking. Instead, qualitative sociological research on beauty emphasizes that beauty is not only valued but also evaluated differently

in various labor market contexts because evaluation criteria and practices are inevitably situationally embedded (Elias et al., 2017; Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014). This leads us to consider that perhaps employers are not always most drawn to candidates that merely ‘look good.’ Perhaps it is more, or at least equally, about finding an employee who looks ‘right’ for the job.

More recent sociological study on appearance, work, and occupations has indeed drawn some attention to the distinction between ‘looking good’ and ‘looking right’ and shown that being ‘presentable’ and ‘doing it right’ for a job does not necessarily equate physical attractiveness or beauty (Vonk, 2021; Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Sarpila et al., 2024; cf. Marquis et al., 2024). In fact, the original literature on aesthetic labor also stems from the idea of ‘looking right.’ However, subsequent literature has primarily focused on exploring the significance of beauty in the workplace. As Nickson et al. (2003, p. 190) suggest, even in the retail and hospitality sectors, ‘it is important to note that all organizations have an aesthetic appeal, but the form of aesthetic being offered may vary from one type of service organization to another.’ This does not mean that appearance is less relevant as a source of inequalities at work. However, it prompts us to consider whether conceptualizing appearance only through looking ‘good’—instead of looking right for a situation, purpose, or job—makes us partly blind to how looks inform career success. When referring to

K. De Keere (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: k.dekeere@uva.nl

O. Sarpila
University of Turku, Turku, Finland
e-mail: outi.sarpila@utu.fi

L. Vonk
Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy,
The Hague, The Netherlands
e-mail: l.vonk@wrr.nl

‘looking good,’ we understand it is mainly defined by beauty and attractiveness, although we know that it is not a universal definition of looking ‘good’ (for discussion, see Nickson & Warhurst, this volume). In this chapter, we contrast this notion of ‘looking good’ to the concept of ‘looking right.’

The significance of appearance and looking right in the workplace pivots our attention to the importance of the process of evaluating and selecting job candidates. Access to occupational positions is often guarded by specialized professionals, also called gatekeepers. These gatekeepers, such as recruiters, hiring managers, and personnel advisors, are tied to sector and organization-specific demands and conditions when making hiring decisions. Consequently, larger structures of inequality are rarely shaped top-down but more often rest on evaluative processes such as norm-setting, signaling, categorization, comparing, and legitimatizing (Lamont et al., 2014). Looking closely at the way appearances are being evaluated and sometimes used as a signaling tool for being the right (looking) person for the job allows us to unpack how labor market inequalities in terms of class, gender, race, and age are not always the result of personal biases or universal preferences, but emerge out of context-specific practices, criteria, and logics.

The importance of looking professionally ‘right’ instead of just ‘good’ guides us to essential questions. How is looking ‘right’ for a job assessed in labor markets? How do gatekeepers make decisions on appearances, and how do they justify these? How is this related to looking ‘good’ and, more generally, to aesthetic concerns about appearance and grooming? Moreover, to what extent do gatekeepers contribute to regulating looking ‘right’ in the labor market? As we have learned in other sections of this handbook, several reasons have been provided by economists and (social) psychologists for why employers might value looking ‘good’ in hiring: because it indicates unobserved qualities that the employers value, because beauty itself is appreciated for enhancing productivity, or simply because employers prefer to reward good looks (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Wolbring, this volume). However,

to offer a framework to tackle the questions concerning looking right, we review previous work on ‘aesthetics at work’ and integrate this into the sociology of valuation and evaluation (SVE), (critical) management and organizational studies, and cultural sociology. In terms of looking ‘right,’ rather than looking ‘good,’ these processes and practices involve three crucial aspects we further delve into in the first part of our chapter: (1) the notion of ‘fit’ within the labor market, (2) the logic of gatekeeping practices, and (3) complexity of unspoken aesthetic norms. The second part of the chapter shifts the focus to the pre-entry phase, which is examined through the analysis of an empirical case: aesthetic advice given by staffing agencies on their websites. We conclude the chapter by discussing how the concept of looking ‘right’ could be more effectively incorporated into future research.

2 The Importance of Looking ‘Right’ in Hiring

2.1 Looking ‘Right’ and Fitting In

The adage that employers are looking for ‘the best person for the job’ contains both a lie and a truth. Concerning the former, it perpetuates the—often disproven—belief that the labor market operates based on meritocratic (and rational) logic. However, it speaks the truth about the peg-in-hole reality of labor market selection. It is more often about fitting in than simply being the best. However, this fitting in can be interpreted in multiple ways. For the sake of an overview, we distinguish three main approaches. First, the personnel psychology and management studies that focus on people-organization fit; second the critical organization studies on homophily, the glass slipper, or the ideal worker; and third cultural sociological research on cultural matching. What we perceive as fitting in and the significance of appearances can be interpreted differently depending on the perspective.

The first approach can be found in personnel psychology and management studies focusing on

people-organization fit. This perspective assumes that a better alignment between the individual worker and the job or working environment boosts productivity, motivation, and job satisfaction (for review, see Kristof, 1996). Therefore, an individual's personality, values, and goals become integral to managers' assessment processes, determining whether an employee or candidate can truly enhance organizational output and success.

This view on labor market fit aims not only at understanding the relationship between workers and organizations but also at improving it (O'Reilly et al., 1991), particularly by developing better predictive measures and aligning with a human capital approach to soft currencies (see Becker, 1964). Here, the fit is conceptualized as primarily a technical problem on an individual and organizational level that can be solved by improving HR policies. Consequently, this literature largely ignores that personalities or value preferences are not innate but rooted in the social background characteristics of people and that employees not only have minds but also bodies and appearances that are perceived, judged, and even policed by employers. So, while it contributes to measuring the importance of fit, it does not allow us to unpack how appearance and inequalities are intertwined in the labor market.

Critical organization studies is a second strand of research that examines fit by mobilizing concepts such as homophily, the glass slipper, or the ideal worker. Here, the search for fit is not conceptualized as something managers need to achieve but rather as an (often unconscious and even unwanted) outcome of individuals' tendency toward homophily. Due to in-group biases (Brewer, 1979) and social identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), people tend to prefer those similar to themselves in terms of, for instance, race or gender, resulting in homogeneity (Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Rivera & Owens, 2021). While this research tradition has been instrumental in uncovering inequalities in terms of educational background, gender, and race, it has generally ignored the bodily dimension of employment and selection.

In contrast, Karen Ashcraft's (2013) theoretical notion of the 'glass slipper,'¹ which shares with the homophily approach a critical focus on similarities and does not ignore the importance of looks, appearances, and bodies. According to her, occupational groups and employment sectors are associated with specific traits and features, both physically and symbolically, that are being projected on occupational members. This leads to—often class-based—social closure and inequalities because occupational groups seek exclusivity to protect ownership over their expertise, resources, and status (Abbott, 1981). One of the consequences of this is the creation of a 'prototypical practitioner,' somebody who not only has the necessary skills and credentials but also has the right embodied social identity and even looks the part. Hence, it is not about just looking good but having the right bodily fit.

Feminist organizational scholar Joan Acker (2001, 2006) offers a similar critical perspective on labor market fit with her concept of the 'ideal worker.' However, she adds a deeper structural analysis by examining how gender, race, and class intersect in shaping organizational dynamics. Acker challenges the preconception that organizations are neutral entities and workers can be disembodied. Instead, we need to acknowledge that there are many implicit assumptions underlying how employers select and reward employees. First and foremost, the abstract worker has 'no body and thus no gender' (2001, p. 395). Under the guise of neutrality, however, the ideal worker is a collection of traits, capabilities, and bodily dispositions that employers favor. In fact, by presenting the ideal worker as 'unencumbered' and un-bodied, gendered, classed, and racial inequalities are not ignored but instead perpetuated. Concerning appearance, while employers may not verbalize a preference for a particular look or style, this does not negate the existence of implicit yet performative ideas about what the ideal worker is supposed to look like. This perspective has proven instrumental in uncovering

¹ Cinderella is a metaphor referring to a fairytale where the glass slipper fits only a certain person but not others. In the story, it fits Cinderella but not her 'ugly' stepsisters.

gender-based inequalities within organizations and the broader labor market.

A third way to conceptualize fit in the labor market, and closely related to the previous one, is informed by Bourdieu's (1984) proposition that culture is a symbolic resource people rely on to defend and improve their social positions. This approach interprets a potential fit between employer and employee as a 'cultural match' achieved through mobilizing 'cultural capital.' It is well established that leisure time activities, taste preferences, and other biographical signals function as status markers that reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984). It is, therefore, unsurprising that these also play a crucial role in job selection procedures (De Keere, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Rivera, 2016). According to this perspective, these cultural signals act as class markers, allowing hiring managers or employers to recognize themselves (or their organization) in the candidates, thus arriving at a habitus-induced match (Rivera, 2016). At the same time, it is surprising how relatively little attention research has paid to appearance as a cultural class signal.

The ethnographic research of Lauren Rivera (2016), however, on 'cultural matching' in top-tier corporate firms in the United States, did consider appearances. Besides showing how matching occurs through constructing class-based narratives on the candidates, she also found that matching goes beyond merely signaling the right taste but also includes performing a certain aestheticized self. The most popular candidates eventually displayed a *polished* look (2016, p. 94), which entails dressing formally and maintaining a well-groomed appearance. Following this and drawing on interviews with employees at a major accounting firm in the UK, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019) confirmed this corporate demand for a polished style. However, in talking to managers in the television industry, they observed a distinct preference for a different form of personal appearance, termed *studied informality* (2019, p. 137), characterized by a casual wardrobe and relaxed bodily demeanor.

This difference between 'studied informality' and 'polish' shows that the value of the soft currency of appearances is highly situational. Clothing, as Friedman and Laurison point out (2019, pp. 134–144), might serve as seemingly harmless symbols. Yet, they play a powerful role in recognizing the other as similar and arriving at trust, appreciation, and connection among colleagues. In professions where evaluating merit proves challenging, such as the creative sectors, cultural capital, expressed by choice of clothing, comes with even more substantial benefits, playing a crucial role in assimilating, maintaining one's position, and advancing professionally (Friedman & Laurison, 2019, p. 202). So, while appearances play an overall role in class reproduction, what is eventually valued is job, sector, and industry specific. Hence, knowing how to look 'right,' more than how to look 'good,' plays a vital role in achieving a cultural match and, subsequently, getting ahead in the labor market.

2.2 The Logic of Gatekeeping Practices: Evaluating the Right Look

When faced with the challenging task of assessing people, gatekeepers rely on different strategies such as evaluative storytelling, comparison, or typecasting (e.g., Stevens, 2009; Hamann & Beljean, 2021) while drawing on local knowledge and applying field-specific and tacit norms (Posselt, 2016; Darr & Mears, 2017). First and foremost, the gatekeepers engage in *recognition work* (Darr & Mears, 2017; De Keere, 2022). To do so, gatekeepers not only assess what candidates write in their CVs or motivation letters or share during job interviews but also how they look. When looking for new employees, employers often begin with a preconceived type or ideal worker, as Acker called it, and then assess to what extent candidates match this predefined type. It is, for example, no coincidence that there are very few CEOs with (light) blond hair, as they align less with the cultural stereotype (of blond as less intelligent) and thus are not cast as a strong corporate leader (Takeda et al., 2005). This can come down

to reading into the smallest details. As Pajunen (2021) demonstrates, even changing glasses for a job interview influences the chances of being liked and getting hired. Consequently, people's physical attributes, often associated with social origins, such as ethnic background, skin color, body type, or class, are read as markers of suitability (Ndobu et al., 2018).

For employee gatekeepers, candidates' appearances are, semiotically speaking, moving targets that need to be evaluated on multiple levels simultaneously while holding multiple meanings (Vonk & De Keere, 2025). First, research shows that a physical feature deemed highly attractive for one job can be completely disregarded for another. The look of fashion models serves as a classic example here. The beauty standards for high-fashion models certainly do not apply across the entire sector. While edginess and looking 'unusual' are highly appreciated among avant-garde designers, models for the mainstream retail market must look recognizable and 'natural' (Mears, 2011). Similar variations in aesthetic criteria can be found on the broader job market. Within the same organization, recruiters view tattoos or foreign accents as undesirable for front-stage jobs but do not consider them relevant for back-stage jobs (Timming, 2015). Ultimately, it comes down to the gatekeeper recognizing the right look depending on the task or job.

In this respect, gatekeepers always account for multiple parameters simultaneously. They must evaluate suitability within the organization (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), find a fit with the brand (Pettinger, 2014), and please customers (Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Walters, 2018; Boyle & De Keere, 2019). Gatekeepers in the service sector especially carefully look for workers who embody several of these demands at once, which leads to intricate yet strong forms of exclusion. In a Western context, they often aim to cater to their more wealthy, white, middle-class customers by choosing white, thin, young employees who already emulate a middle-class habitus (Boyle & De Keere, 2019). At the same time, they might exoticize their staff by selecting lighter-skinned racial others in an attempt to signal progressiveness. As Kyla Walters

(2018) demonstrated, clothing stores sometimes seem to prefer candidates who look racially ambiguous as a cautious way to diversify their brand. So, there is undoubtedly a peg-in-hole logic, yet there are always several possible fits as there are always multiple requirements that need to be met.

On top of this, bodily features also enter the evaluation process because they are perceived as signals for other qualities (Vonk & De Keere, 2025). Population survey research shows that certain body types are associated with specific occupational stereotypes and class positions, which is in line with the idea of class slipper. For example, while a businessman is more often viewed as corpulent, an artist is seen as skinnier, and a manual worker as muscular (Vandebroek, 2016). Similar examples can also be found in other quantitative studies, where it has been shown that attractiveness does not correlate with stereotypical perceptions of men in working-class occupations (Sarpila et al., 2024), does not necessarily help women get hired in specific fields (Kukkonen et al., 2024), or decreases the likelihood of lower-status individuals being invited to job interviews in general (Marquis et al., 2024). Therefore, gatekeepers can read bodies as fitting more or less into occupational prototypes.

However, appearances are also interpreted as specific indicators of competencies or capacities. Tso's study (2024) of businessmen culture, for instance, showed how good grooming is viewed in the Japanese corporate world as a sign of masculinity and professionalism. Grooming is crucial for demonstrating power and hierarchy, especially when confronted with signs of aging, such as balding or changes in body type. In China, on the other hand, as Ren (2024) shows based on interviews with 73 recruiters, professionalism is strongly associated with an athletic demeanor. A candidate with a fit body type is more easily read as someone with self-discipline and ambition. Similarly, Huzell and Larsson (2012) argue that when recruiters in Sweden seek good-looking candidates, they assess aesthetic criteria and athletic attributes. Based on a survey of HR managers, they found that employers prefer athletic-looking candidates because this signals

health and stamina, reducing the likelihood of absence or rehabilitation due to sickness. Furthermore, soft skills, which are cognitive and thus non-physical capacities, can also be encoded in bodily features. For example, the study on racial discrimination by Moss and Tilly (2001) powerfully demonstrated how employers attribute certain skills, abilities, and attitudes to skin tone. White-skinned candidates in the United States were seen as more communicative and better at solving problems than their Black counterparts.

In sum, what constitutes this right aesthetic fit depends on organizational demands, job type, sector standards, occupational stereotypes, and country norms, which inform gatekeepers' evaluation. Instead of assuming universal standards of beauty, we need to be attentive to how definitions and criteria of what is deemed a suitable look are heavily situated and depend on context. This makes job selection for both parties involved an intricate and ambiguous process, the outcome of which is often unclear. Because of this, gatekeeping recognition work often challenges meritocratic norms and leads to issues of discrimination and exclusion. It is, therefore, unsurprising that aesthetic norms and criteria on appearance are rarely explicit but hidden and unspoken.

2.3 Unspoken Norms of Appearance

While it falls within the duty of gatekeepers to select the right person for the right job, the norms in which this ideal type is couched are almost always implicit. Even in the case of explicit beauty work such as fashion modeling, finding the right 'look' remains elusive, intuitive, and implicit (Mears, 2011). It is not about simply going over a list of criteria for acceptable visual features. The lack of explicit norms can only be partially attributed to the inherent nature of assessing visual cues requiring practical, instead of declarative, knowledge (De Keere, 2022; Kuipers et al., 2022). The legitimacy problem is another critical reason why career gatekeepers rarely explicitly express or list their specific appearance standards.

In most employment sectors, the worth of workers is not expected to be formally determined by their appearances. The prevailing belief in the—questionable (Young, 1958)—ideology of meritocracy as the guiding principle of the labor market (Dobbin, 2009) stands in stark contrast to looks entering as selection criteria for career success. Consequently, aesthetic norms are morally complex for labor market intermediaries and gatekeepers, as they entail uncertainty regarding the justifiability of accepting or rejecting candidates based on their looks (Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Vonk, 2024). While some aspects of people's appearances can be understood as malleable and can thus be worked upon and achieved, such as clothing, hygiene, or haircut, other features, such as skin tone, voice timbre, or body type, are seen as ascribed and thus out of the 'jurisdiction' of gatekeepers. This distinction—although ambiguous—between achieved and ascribed means that employment chances depend on aspects of the self that can only be partly manipulated and on aesthetic hierarchies based on unequal power relations (Bordo, 2003; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). Not everyone is able to meet the standard, and not everyone is equally able to use their self-presentation to their advantage (Sarpila et al., 2020). Norms on appearance can thus be seen as illegitimate and pushed under the surface, nonetheless powerful. This leads to moral unease as gatekeepers must make decisions based on acceptable criteria, which requires legitimizing the ambiguous and flawed criteria they employ (De Keere, 2022, 2025).

On top of that, due to societal shifts, these criteria can change over time. Walters' (2018) research on aesthetic labor in the retail industry demonstrates how the definition of employees' 'right look' is an ongoing process, making standards very elusive. She shows how Black female workers in clothing stores suddenly gained permission to wear their hair in, for instance, small braids, a style that had previously been deemed as 'wrong' or unacceptable. Because the top management wanted to start communicating the right kind of 'employee diversity,'

typically, black-associated hairstyles became part of the acceptable appearance. However, situations can also end differently. Dahlin's (2013) study on Danish parking attendants, on the other hand, indicates that employers sometimes wanted to avoid hiring workers who looked 'too much like a parking attendant.' This involved the avoidance of stereotypical class indicators, such as tattoos. On the other hand, the ambiguous-looking 'right' policy means that, for example, hiring a person from an ethnic minority who embodies the right ethnic diversity but could still be denied wearing religious symbols as part of their working uniform. Hence, the right look is always convoluted as it inevitably entails both aesthetical and ethical concerns.

The fact that norms on appearances are elusive and hidden is a challenge not only for gatekeepers but for job seekers and workers as well. How to conform to an ideal or try on the glass slipper if that ideal or slipper is (at least) partly hidden and sometimes even changing? As pointed out earlier, achieving the right look is not as easy as simply putting on a well-ironed suit. It requires localized and adaptive knowledge of sector-specific norms and a feel for nuances in cultural codes and standards (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). As shown, for example, by Van den Berg and Arts (2019), tech workers can freely wear hoodies or flip-flops to work. In contrast, others unemployed might face repercussions, even from social services, for wearing the exact same attire to a job interview.

Literature has shown how employees comply with aesthetic norms *on the job* (e.g., Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Mears, 2014; Misra & Walters, 2022) and how co-workers can be involved in upholding these through judgment, peer pressure, and gossip (Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Vonk, 2021). However, for (new) job seekers, it is more of a challenge to grasp what these aesthetic norms entail and are dependent on external advice on how to 'brand themselves' and increase their 'employability' (Wee & Brooks, 2010) through looking right. While earlier studies have shown that professional advice can have regulative

power over individuals in shaping their positions toward work (De Keere, 2014; van den Berg, 2019), so far, little work has been done on how aesthetic advice is diffused and shared with workers *pre-entry* employment (important exceptions are van den Berg and Vonk 2020; Vonk, 2024).

3 Pre-Entry Regulation of Looking 'Right': A Case Study

To illustrate how labor market intermediaries, such as gatekeepers, are involved in determining 'looking right,' we investigate how they diffuse appearance standards. We depend on data from a larger research project that delineated the various kinds of aesthetic guidance provided to job seekers by staffing agencies in the Netherlands (see Vonk, 2024). This includes a content analysis of the online communication of 20 of the largest staffing agencies in the Netherlands. After an initial open coding of 49 relevant individual web pages, where essential themes and contradictions in the advice were identified, 13 advice articles were selected for a more in-depth study. This is the data we rely on to illustrate the cultural contradiction in 'looking right' for a job.

3.1 Fitting In

Reading the online advice, you learn as a job seeker that a job interview is primarily intended to assess whether you could fit in. This means resembling the people who are already employed, making the candidate immediately look like a colleague:

"What clothes should I wear to a job interview?"

This is a question asked on a daily basis by job candidates. Every organization has its own dress code; as a candidate, it's your goal to fit the image. You want the employer to (literally) see you as part of the team. Employers have certain expectations of job candidates. This concerns both the inside and the outside. It is up to you to meet these expectations, so you can leave a strong first impression during your job interview. (We Talent)

While the advice is mainly directed at clothing, ‘the image of the organization’ certainly also pertains to workers’ bodies, which are racialized, aged, gendered, classed, and so on. Similar to what Acker (2001) argued, based on the notion of the ideal worker, organizations often enforce implicit norms by silencing the embodied reality of being an employee (or job candidate).

Continuing on this emphasis on ‘fitting in,’ the advice on the We Talent webpages goes further in explaining how to discover what these contextual norms are: ‘Dare to listen to your own intuition. Based on an (email) conversation you can form a first impression of the person and the organization’ (We Talent).

However, for ‘intuition’ and ‘tone of emails’ to be informative for how to look, situationally specific cultural knowledge is expected. Hence, looking right comes down to cultural matching, requiring the right cultural capital (Rivera, 2016; Friedman & Laurison, 2019). A conversation with a hiring manager (orally or by email) might be helpful for ‘insiders,’ but for those lacking context-specific cultural knowledge, it loses its informative value. By presenting this advice as simple and neutral, these webpages are legitimizing the privileges of cultural capital. It simultaneously normalizes the importance of looking right while presenting aesthetic fit as achievable. Consequently, by saying that one has to fit the contextual norms while not verbalizing what these norms are, exclusionary practices are allowed to seep in without the possibility of being challenged. Eventually, when a job seeker does not manage to fit in aesthetically, these same webpages suggest self-exclusion: ‘When you feel that you have to divert too much from your personal style in order to meet expectations, you should ask yourself if this is really the right place for you’ (We Talent).

The data contained many similar passages on other web pages that express the idea that adapting your appearance too much is generally a bad idea because having to change your personal style on a daily basis would eventually make you chronically unhappy. It legitimizes the exclusion of those

who do not fit in aesthetically and promotes self-elimination of those who do not immediately feel that they have ‘the right look.’

Attracting the ‘right’ candidates and rejecting the ‘wrong’ ones is one of the core tasks of staffing agencies. In line with Ashcraft’s (2013) glass slipper idea, the agencies’ standards on looks justify exclusions, thus restricting access to certain occupations. Essentially, only those who can play the part, by how they dress and look, will enter the pool of candidates, contributing to social closure around an occupational group, which eventually translates into unequal labor market opportunities.

3.2 Be Your Informal Self

A second common piece of advice that staffing agencies champion is that each candidate should definitely express their authenticity and individuality through their appearance, clothing, and presentation style. Most agencies advise that, although overdressing is a safe option, you do run the risk of not looking authentic and misaligning with the ‘vibe’ of the workplace:

At the majority of informal companies, you will come across a bit stiff if you show up in your suit. Usually, you won’t be turned down if you’re too formal, but you will leave behind the impression that you don’t really fit the company culture. (Young Capital)

By emphasizing the importance of informality at work, instead of offering clear advice, these online communications actually complicate the matter for job seekers trying to find out what to wear. We read simultaneously that overdressing is safe while at the same time being told that one should feel comfortable and at ease. As staffing agency Driessen explains on their webpage, formal attire will always be too generic to express yourself truly. Consequently, job candidates should not only put in the effort to fit in but should also find the right type of self-presentation (through, for example, clothing) to express their authentic personality.

According to this advice, showing your true self is not merely about looks but a way of displaying one’s talents and complete personality.

Appearances matter when bringing these to the fore. Job seekers are thus discouraged from deviating too much from their ‘natural’ and personal style because it would entail covering up an essential part of their personality. Hence, showing one’s true colors is good for both parties involved: job seeker and gatekeepers (see also De Keere, 2014).

3.3 Conformist Authenticity

As a result of having to fit in while being their true self, job seekers are forced to curate their style of self-presentation carefully. Tempo-Team, for example, tells their applicants to leave out certain accessories, as these would distract the interviewer:

During the job interview all focus lies on you and on your fantastic talents. All eyes on you! Leave your jewelry and piercings at home; that works out best. Hey presto, you’re in the spotlight. (Tempo-Team)

Appearances should not distract by standing out, as it would mean that the glass slipper would not fit, yet at the same time, one needs to be recognizable and not too generic. Again, rather than formulating clear norms, which could be explicitly exclusionary, the agencies offer the ostensibly neutral message that looks should not distract and should, therefore, not stand out. However, these ‘neutral’ messages offer instead a legitimization for exclusions: a candidate is not rejected due to having piercings but because her true self did not come across as her appearance distracted from them. In order to express their authentic yet fitting self, job seekers should not work too hard on modifying their looks yet be willing to leave out what might be misinterpreted.

In sum, while these staffing agencies present their aesthetic advice in a frivolous and casual way, it can leave the job seeker more confused than informed. Navigating the paradox between fitting in and being oneself demands field-specific knowledge and cultural capital. Consequently, not making any norms explicit leads to silent exclusion and self-exclusion. Moreover, being rejected based on one’s appearance can be morally repackaged as an argument about personality mismatch and not finding one’s true self (De Keere, 2023,

2024). So, by rewarding candidates with the ‘right’ aesthetics and restricting access for those who do not meet these norms, the discourse reflected in the aesthetic advice facilitates occupational closure, cultural matching, and discrimination based on an (unspoken) template of the ideal worker. Thus, the logic of inequality can potentially be quite different from traditional appearance-based discrimination that has been mostly related to group memberships. In other words, looking ‘right’ is not just about who appears to belong to a specific gender, ethnic group, or age group but rather about demonstrating or failing to demonstrate cultural knowledge in the eyes of gatekeepers, leading to unequal treatment.

4 Conclusion and New Avenues for Research

In this chapter, we have focused on examining how looking ‘right,’ as distinct from looking ‘good,’ is linked to appearances and inequalities, especially in the workplace. We recognize that looking right can relate to appearance-based inequalities in two critical ways. Looking right (or wrong) can be associated with expressing social categories valued by the employer through external cues. In this case, looking right as a source of social inequalities involves more ‘traditional’ discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or age, which is also discussed in other chapters of this book (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Mason & Mitgaard, this volume). However, looking right also produces and reproduces inequalities more subtly through various cultural cues evaluated by gatekeepers and intermediaries. Therefore, labor market inequalities are not only a result of unconscious biases but also of active and situationally embedded decision processes. However, gatekeepers can still be unaware of how they read bodies and recognize others as fitting (or not fitting) the ‘ideal worker.’ In this context, looking ‘right’ appears to be a difficult-to-define soft currency in the labor market that is hard to pinpoint. This also enables non-merit-based hiring

decisions, often fostering intuitive and gut-feeling hiring decisions (Rivera, 2016; De Keere, 2022).

From the job seeker's perspective, this makes this problematic because they are led to believe that the code of cultural and aesthetic expression can be cracked. The empirical case, in turn, illustrates how the staffing agencies produce standards of looking right during the pre-entry phase. The analysis highlights a paradox in staffing agencies' aesthetic advice. Job seekers are urged to conform to organizational norms while expressing their authenticity. This dual requirement perpetuates exclusion by rewarding those with the 'right' aesthetics and cultural knowledge. In essence, the advice leads to social closure based especially on cultural capital.

The tension between looking 'right' and looking 'good' offers important avenues for future research. In this chapter, we demonstrated that standards for aesthetic evaluations and their legitimization occur already in the pre-entry stage. Further studies are needed to analyze this stage of the labor market moment more profoundly. For example, the visual materials of organizations in connection with recruitment announcements could provide rich material, allowing us to map out the standards of looking 'right.' Additionally, the meanings job candidates attribute to this content and how different types of texts and images influence job application decisions remain up for investigation.

While previous research has focused on hiring situations, there is still much to unpack by examining the importance of appearance-based fit. In general, directing attention more toward how gatekeepers' perceptions of looking 'right' are formulated could provide interesting insights into why, for example, job candidates evaluated as attractive in population surveys may not always succeed (either in the lab or real job markets). Innovative methods such as Q-sorting could shed light on studying HR managers' and other employee gatekeepers' aesthetic perceptions.

In addition, the suggestion that future research should pay more attention to gatekeepers and their role in the (re)production of appearance-related

inequalities expands to include their social background. This suggestion stems from the fact that we know very little about how the characteristics of gatekeepers influence the appreciation of particular appearances. Previous examinations have mainly relied on quantitative methods and focused on the role of gender in the (e)valuation of attractiveness (see Wolbring, this volume). However, how recruiters' social class background, and more specifically, their taste toward styles of self-presentation (e.g., grooming and clothing), influence evaluations of job candidates remains shrouded in mystery. Taking such perspectives into account in the future would provide significant additional insight into the logics of appearance in the hiring process and labor markets more generally.

Labor market intermediaries such as gatekeepers are, in fact, agents of inequality, and their decisions in the workplace are not limited to individual hiring decisions but have an impact on entire career trajectories and, therefore, larger economic inequalities (Rivera, 2020). Against this backdrop, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to research on appearance and labor market inequalities to understand how gatekeepers make their decisions. There remains plenty to examine in how employers evaluate, compare, and select between workers and the role looking 'right' plays in this process. When investigating the role of appearances, we should move beyond quantitative paradigms that merely assess the impact of being 'more or less' attractive. Rather than focusing on heavily mediatized questions like, 'Are better-looking people more successful?', we should direct our attention to the context-specific appropriateness of appearances and the cultural knowledge required to align with the employer's aesthetic templates.

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Kobe De Keere is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and the director of the Cultural Sociology Program Group at the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research. He is affiliated with the Weatherhead Research Cluster on Comparative Inequality & Inclusion at Harvard University and is a

Fellow of the Norbert Elias Foundation. His research lies at the intersection of cultural and economic sociology, focusing on how moral concerns shape economic valuation and evaluation. He has recently published in journals such as *Socio-Economic Review*, *Organization*, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, and *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

Outi Sarpila is a Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Centre at the University of Turku. Between 2023 and 2026, she is serving as a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku. Sarpila has led two externally funded research projects focused on themes of appearance and inequality. The most recent of these, funded by the Research Council of Finland, has partially facilitated this handbook project. Sarpila's background is in economic sociology, and she has specialized in quantitative research on appearance. Her research on these themes has previously been published in journals such as *Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, and *European Societies*.

Laura Vonk is currently working as a Researcher at the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, WRR), where she develops long-term policy advice based on scientific insights in an interdisciplinary team. She recently completed a PhD project on the aesthetic regulation of workers in the Dutch post-industrial labor market. As part of this project, she previously published work on peer feedback regarding work aesthetics, on aesthetic advice from labor market intermediaries, and, together with Marguerite van den Berg, on the temporality in dress work of precarious workers.

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Part III

Intersections

Beauty, Gender and Ageing

Hanna Ojala and Ilkka Pietilä

1 Introduction

In middle age, people usually become aware of their appearance in new ways. As an age category, middle age represents a gradual transition to a precarious position within age relations, which represents a system of inequality that privileges younger adults at the expense of old people (Calasanti, 2003). As Sara De Vuyst (2022, p.102) describes this transition, it is “a slippery slope in which ageing is – especially for women – seen as a linear and irreversible trajectory to decay, loss of sexual desire, and unhappiness”. Old age is stigmatised as a personal failure, and as a result of ageing people lose both their societal position and social value.

Bodies are markers of age and particularly mid- and later-life bodies are characterised by decline in terms of youthful beauty and physical attractiveness (Gullette, 2004). Physical manifestations of old age, such as wrinkles, grey hair, sagging skin and changing body composition, are symbols of a lack of control (Jones & Pugh, 2005) and ‘triggers’ for discriminatory actions (Ward & Holland, 2011). Due to the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972), a narrative of decline is strongly

gendered, and women’s ageing is seen more negatively than men’s ageing (Åberg, Kukkonen, & Sarpila, 2020). As Julia Twigg (2004, p. 62) puts it “the older female body is both invisible—in that it is no longer seen—and hypervisible—in that it is all that is seen”. Therefore, women should avoid showing visible signs of ageing, if they want to become seen under ‘the cultural gaze of the youth’ (Gullette, 2004).

The ways in which bodies are marked as ‘old’ may vary by the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation or geographical location, but ageism—embodied form of inequality—results nonetheless. Therefore, the body is central arena for age-resisting practices. To avoid identifying themselves as old, both women and men adopt various anti-ageing beauty practices for managing their bodies. Engaging in beauty work is not optional in anti-ageing culture (Hurd Clarke, 2011, p.132), but compulsory, especially for women (about beauty as moral duty, see Widdows, this volume). As Kwan and Trautner (2009, p. 55) state, “women’s bodies must be altered in some way ... their natural state is unacceptable”. Therefore, refusing to engage in beauty work may lead to a further stigmatisation or even permanent invisibility (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

In this chapter, we look at intersections of age and gender in beauty in the context of ageing. We review existing literature from critical gerontology, feminist gerontology and sociology of ageing on gendered beauty ideals of middle-aged

H. Ojala (✉)
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
e-mail: hanna.ojala@tuni.fi

I. Pietilä
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: ilkka.pietila@helsinki.fi

and older people, and particularly women's and men's beauty practices in anti-ageing culture. We also discuss similarities and differences of ideas of body management among women and men. At the end of the chapter, we sketch some new directions for research on beauty, gender and ageing.

Because women's appearances are more regulated than men's (Kwan & Trautner, 2009) and beauty work is thought to be a life-long requirement of doing femininity (Thorpe, 2018), a larger body of existing literature on beauty, gender and ageing has focused on women and their perceptions on beauty ideals and performed beauty practices. Consequently, men's beauty work has been a marginal(ised) topic. It is also important to note that empirical research carried out on the field is not extensive, most studies are based on qualitative approach, and located in Australian, European and North American contexts (aka Western cultures). Studies have also predominantly approached white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-or upper-class socio-economic status and middle-aged and older people. Especially, research on non-surgical cosmetic procedures has tended to ignore older people, even though it is widely known that consumption of Botox injections, injectable fillers, chemical peels and other non-surgical rejuvenating procedures have grown exponentially during 2000 (Katz & Gish, 2015). (Non)-surgical cosmetic interventions are currently viewed as normative and required aspects of female beauty work (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007) but also increasingly among men (Atkinson, 2008, Gough et al., 2014, Katz & Gish, 2015).

In this chapter, we approach middle-aged and older men's and women's beauty work in the context of anti-ageing culture and conceptualise it as an 'anti-ageing beauty work'. The term highlights that beauty work is not done only for youthful appearances but also *against ageing*. By doing so, we differentiate our approach from more neoliberal approaches that might, as for instance in Garnham's (2013, 2014) study, conceptualise such interventions as cosmetic surgery as practices of self-care, creative self-stylisation and empowering resistance of a normative script of ageing

rather than fighting against ageing. In other words, our approach is structuralist and therefore we define anti-ageing as a practice of ageism—one form of discrimination.

2 Age-Based and Gendered Beauty Ideals in a Blossoming Anti-Ageing Culture

In contemporary Western societies, ageism is one of the primary angles from which appearance is looked at. As Canadian researchers Hurd Clarke, Repta and Griffin (2007, p. 71) put it, in appearance-obsessed Western societies, "individuals are constantly bombarded with the ageist message that youth is attractive, healthy, and desirable, whereas old age is unattractive and synonymous with poor health". For example, via textual and visual representations of (social) media, people are reminded about the necessity of and ability to control over the ageing process. They are also advised how to avoid to become 'unwatchable' (De Vuyst, 2023, p.197), and thus invisible, by using commercial products (e.g. wrinkle creams and vitamins) and body care techniques (e.g. physical training programmes and diet plans). Through ageist messages people are socialised to be concerned with their ageing appearances, to view their bodies as objects and fight against ageing with the assistance of anti-ageing industry.

An idealised body image is youthful, toned and thin regardless of age, gender or geographical location. For example, in Kasnakoglu's (2021, p. 6) study, Turkish women described a beautiful woman as a thin and tall bodied, blonde haired, light eyed Northern European female (about Turkish women and clothing, see Karademir, this volume). Macia, Dial, Montepare, Hane and Duboz (2019) found that in Senegal aesthetic standards value youth, and technologies used to conceal visible signs of ageing are based on global anti-ageing industries. Also, Sheng (2022) reported that current Chinese bodily standards for women are strongly influenced by global beauty industries. Older women's growing willingness to dye their grey hair, in particular, was seen in

Sheng's (2022) study as a signifier of a break with the Chinese cultural tradition of venerating old age. These studies show that Western beauty standards have a global significance and that international beauty corporations effectively spread and reproduce youthful standards worldwide.

Beauty ideals that are built on idealised body images are strongly binary gendered (see also Craig, this volume) and heteronormative: these ideals provide a set of instructions for what *women* and *men* must do to both fight against bodily ageing and succeed to attract each other sexually. Also, global anti-ageing industry and advertising of anti-ageing products and services reinforce heterosexuality and sex differences by holding ageing women and men bound to standards of embodiment that are both youth based and binary gendered (Calasanti & King, 2007, Marshall & Katz, 2006).

Women's beauty ideals are historically created under patriarchy and a male gaze (Gullette, 2004). Patriarchy is based on an ideological and gendered power structure, in which women have a lower social status than men. Women are seen as objects and women's existence is reasoned through men's desires (e.g. housewife and/or trophy wife). Therefore, women's culturally idealised body image rests on aesthetics, looking good and being a 'pleasure to the eye'. This cultural demand does not rest only on a heterosexual (internalised) male gaze by which both men and women look women's bodies through the eyes of men, but also on a girlfriend gaze (a concept coined by Winch 2013). In women's homosocial relations, girlfriend gaze objectifies women body and circulates the same idea of reinforcing and regulating certain normative body image even if at the same time girlfriend gaze can also strategically cultivate women's control over their body (Winch, 2013). Nevertheless, women control each other's appearances.

Male gaze and girlfriend gaze intersect with ageist gaze (about the concept, see Gullette, 2004), which devalues older bodies. Therefore, physical signs of ageing usually mark women as old well before than men (Calasanti & King, 2018) and appearance-related changes are experienced as the most distressing aspects of ageing (vs. e.g.

health issues) among women (Heinrichsmeier, 2019). Women are assumed to look youthful as long as possible but should not do that in a way that results 'too young look' for their age (Thorpe, 2018). This relates to the cultural demand of age-appropriate looks and women should balance their beauty work in such a way that they do not too little or too much.

Edward Thompson Jr. (2019, p. 55) states that there are two idealised male body standards in North American culture above all: muscularity and fitness—and as we see this standard covers Northern European cultures too. Men's beauty ideals are based on looking masculine, particularly looking strong and healthy-enough for work (Calasanti, King, Pietilä, & Ojala, 2018). Men's appearance is thought to represent masculine drive and economic success rather than beauty and pleasure for (male) gaze as women's appearance is. Therefore, same signs of ageing, such as wrinkles, saggy neck, grey or thinning hair, which are seen devaluing for ageing women, are not necessarily seen demasculating for men, whereas loss of strength, bodily capacity and stamina indeed are (Thompson 2019). Thompson (2019, p. 58) summarises that as long as ageing men "maintain sufficient physical capability and do not become too thin or way too heavy, their enduring body functioning is valued masculine capital and compensates for corporeal aging's effects on appearance". Men's idealised body image rests on performance (Calasanti et al., 2018).

However, based on a study of a history of men's surgical beauty interventions, Haiken (2000, p. 389) already 23 years ago stated that manhood and masculinity seemed to provide less protection against appearance-obsessed American culture than was previously assumed. Ojala, Calasanti, King and Pietilä (2016) similarly noted that men are not immune to either visible signs of ageing or ageism. As Gough, et al. (2014, p.118) put it, "[t]he ubiquitous lean, muscular, hairless, topless male torsos in the media, combined with the stigmatization of obesity, undoubtedly create pressures for men".

Today aged men are expected to be groomed, vibrant and look youthful—also around the

face. Therefore, (non)-surgical cosmetic interventions are widely marketed to men, and they are increasingly attending to ‘procedures of re’ (Granham, 2013, p. 41; renovation, rejuvenation, reversal, refresh, reposition and restoration) and see them acceptable corporeal performance for men (Atkinson 2008, Davis 2002, Gough, et al., 2014).

We now move to review existing literature on how middle-aged and older women and men respond to idealised beauty standards introduced above. In the existing literature, three work-related terms are used in references to middle-aged and older people’s body management: body work, beauty work and appearance work. *Body work* is a general term, and it covers practices undertaken to maintain a body in some way (Atkinson, 2008, Thompson, 2019). *Beauty work* is usually used when talking about women and their gendered body modification practices for aesthetics purposes (Hurd Clarke, 2011). As Kwan and Trautner (2009, p. 54) describe it, beauty work “ranges from mundane acts like putting on makeup to extraordinary decisions like undertaking cosmetic surgery”. *Appearance work* refers to controlled body work for one’s appearance. Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2011, p. 500) define appearance work as “the use of clothing, cosmetics, dieting, exercise, hair care and other similar practices to maintain or alter one’s appearance”. All three concepts underscore hard work for one’s own personal appearance, as the work requires planning, investment and commitment from persons engaged in such activity.

3 Women’s Anti-Ageing Beauty Practices

Previous research (e.g. Calasanti & King, 2018, Hurd Clarke & Bundon, 2009, Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007, Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2012, Kasnakoglu, 2021, Thorpe 2018) has shown that ageing women’s goal of their beauty work is to enhance their appearance so that they would remain as attractive as possible. Especially middle-aged women tend to engage in beauty work for fighting against social and physical

invisibility, responding to work-related ageism, addressing a fear of being left by a current romantic partner or trying to make themselves more tempting to a potential mate (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

In their review article, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2012, p.103) summarise that ageing women’s beauty work can be divided on practices of dieting and exercise, hair care, make-up, clothing and fashion, sun tanning, and surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures. Among all these different practices, control of hair colour is vital. Ward and Holland (2011) found in their British study that grey hair was seen as a signifier of an entrance to old age and associated with experiences of invisibility. As one of their respondents stated, “if I look old, I will be treated old” (p. 296). Similarly, in Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko’s (2010, p.1023) Canadian study, older women thought that grey hair was unattractive, as well as a signifier of dependence, poor health, social disengagement and capitulation to cultural obsolescence. Grey was a ‘non-colour’, which washed out older women’s appearance and rendered them socially invisibly. Therefore, hair dyeing is used to try to pass for younger and buffer against both discrimination (Sheng, 2022) and everyday life micro-penalties (Ward & Holland, 2011).

Women use cosmetics, such as facial creams and make-up, to reach a vital look and to alleviate the experienced angst for the ageing skin (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2012). For example, by wearing a lipstick Canadian women aged 71 to 93 both created continuous and desired sense of self and felt themselves dynamic and normal (Hurd Clarke & Bundon, 2009). In Sheng’s (2022) study, Chinese women adopt new make-up products, practices and techniques when ageing. By following social media accounts and watching make-up tutorials, Turkish women learn how to look younger (Kasnakoglu, 2021).

Because clothing “mediates the relationship between the body and the social world” (Twigg, 2007, p. 286), an up-to-date clothing style can be used for both hiding visible signs of ageing and perform youthfulness (more about clothing, see Karademir, this volume). For example,

Australian, British and Canadian older women tend to consciously choose their clothing styles to compensate for both age-related health issues, such as varicose veins with trousers instead of skirts, and hide embodied effects of ageing, such as sagging arms with logger sleeves and a skin under chin with scarves. Also, colours and styles are strategically used. Older women prefer navy blue, beige and soft pastels instead of bright colours, and favour classic or traditional style as an alternative to revealing or girly styles. (Hurd Clarke et al. 2009, Thorpe, 2018, Twigg, 2015.) As Twigg (2015, p.151) puts it, “an older woman to be socially acceptable, her body need to be hidden”.

In Kasnakoglu’s (2021) study on Turkish women, cosmetic surgery was revealed to be a convenient and quick way to eliminate some bodily signs of ageing. Women’s rationales for anti-ageing surgery were related to regaining their former selves, to get the current self and appearance match each other or to desires of a new self with a new look. Importantly, these varied responses to ageing had no correlation with respondents’ chronological age. Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) found that those 50–60 years old Canadian women who worked in health and image-oriented industries were more likely to turn to extensive beauty work—especially non-surgical cosmetic procedures—to both be more competitive at the labour-market and avoid work-related ageism (see also Kasnakoglu, 2021).

In their study on gendered and class-based social pressures regarding ageing appearances (i.e. triple standards on ageing) in Finland, Åberg, Kukkonen and Sarpila (2020) noted that ageing upper-middle-class women valued an appearance more than their lower-middle or working-class counterparts and therefore experienced loss of youthful appearance more worrisome and disabling. It has been also suggested that lesbian women do not experience cultural beauty ideals as demanding as their heterosexual counterparts. For example, Slevin (2006) and Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) found that older lesbians did not hunt an approval from male gaze or express any feelings of social invisibility. But at the same time, older lesbian women were dissatisfied with

their rising weight due to ageing and were struggling with a wish to retain a youthful appearance. Slevin (2006, p. 265) concludes that being old and lesbian provides a little relief from gendered beauty ideals, but sexual orientation does not protect from ageism. It thus seems that women’s pressures to follow cultural beauty ideals may vary by the intersectional differences, such as sexuality, but as women they still cannot escape ageism.

4 Men’s Anti-Ageing Beauty Practices

Previous research (e.g. Hurd & Mahal, 2021, Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011, Hurd Clarke et al. 2020, Lodge & Umberson, 2013, Macia et al., 2019, Thompson, 2019, Twigg, 2020, Åberg, Kukkonen, & Sarpila, 2020) suggests that older men tend to be more positive about their bodies and are less concerned with their appearance compared to younger men and older women. However, men experience the loss of youthful appearance due to age similarly as women. They feel themselves less attractive. (Åberg, Kukkonen, & Sarpila, 2020.) Empirical studies have shown that men’s worries about visible signs of ageing primarily relate to a hair loss or developing a big belly (Gough, et al., 2014; Haiken, 2000; Ojala & Pietilä, 2022; Ojala et al., 2016). For example, in Hurd and Mahal’s (2021) study, Canadian men aged 65 to 90 equated fat stomachs with oldness and unattractiveness. “Valorizing toned, slim, youthful, and strong bodies with flat stomachs, the men articulated an awareness of the ageist stereotype of the fat, sexually undesirable, slothful old man with a large belly” (Hurd & Mahal, 2021, p. 240).

Previous research (Calasanti et al., 2018, Lodge & Umberson, 2013) also shows that men above all value bodily functioning and therefore focus on appearance as a sign of a physical capacity. In Ojala et al. (2016) study, 42–70 years old men from Finland and the US emphasised the importance of physical exercise (e.g. gym training, jogging), and active, slim, fit

and energetic appearance was thought to indicate youthfulness. Maintaining a healthy diet (including vitamins), as well as sleep and rest, was also considered ‘natural way’ to control ageing appearance (Calasanti et al., 2018). Such studies evince that men primarily think about appropriate ageing appearance in terms of able-bodiedness and healthiness. To look good is to look fit enough to physically perform, which underscores the importance to avoid developing a ‘beer belly’, or other such signs that may be taken to reflect not only poor functioning but also sloppy way of life and low motivation to take care of oneself (Ojala & Pietilä, 2022). This highlights that men’s thoughts about ideals of appearance include clearly notable features of moral worth of the individual, alongside with a portrayal of a functioning and able body.

Greying of hair poses far less of a threat to ageing men than women. However, men have been reported to have mixed feelings about hair dyeing. On the other hand, Ojala et al. (2016) found that US and Finnish men aged 42 to 70 saw hair dyeing as an unnecessary beauty practice for men, and, therefore, men were willing to naturalise a grey hair and beard. Men also saw that dyeing was hard to reason with notions of masculine functionality or performance. On the other hand, Ojala and Pietilä (2022) learned in their follow-up interviews with the same middle-aged and older Finnish men that the same men who did not earlier dye their hair, and instead expressed negative stands towards it, had started to dye their hair five years later. The main reason for doing so was, as it was phrased in an interview, that “other men have started to dye their hair”. This underlines both the importance of the norms shaping men’s beauty work and how norms change over time, but also how an evaluative gaze of youth works between men.

Twigg (2020) interviewed older British men about their dressing styles and concluded that men’s clothing choices were marked by continuity both with men’s younger selves and with mainstream masculinity. Men thus did not report any experiences of the *Changing Room Moment*, by which Twigg (2018, p. 186) earlier referred to women’s consciousness that by ageing their

clothes or styles were starting to look ‘too young’, which is why they had to abandon those clothes. Men did not see dress through the lens of age in such direct way that most women did (Twigg, 2020). There were men in the Twigg’s study, who tried to avoid too old a look. This was done by keeping upbeat or not allowing oneself to slip into negativity and dullness in clothing choices.

Atkinson (2008) states that in the Canadian context men’s use of cosmetic surgery is a response to a collectively felt loss of established masculine hegemony. In their study (Atkinson, 2008), men who had undergone a cosmetic surgery (e.g. rhinoplasty, lipectomy, gynecomastia, hair replacement) reasoned their treatments with an idea of feeling ‘average’, of looking ‘regular’ and not being marginalised. This reasoning is similar to those of women (e.g. Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007, Kasnakoglu, 2021), but, in Atkinson’s study, men saw that (non)-surgical procedures represented “an act of biopower for them; a power to negotiate a portion of their public image through non-traditionally masculine work” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 76). Therefore, a surgery can be interpreted as an act of masculine ‘re-establishment’. For older women, such way of interpretation may not be possible as the technique (cosmetic surgery) is in itself considered feminine (Davis, 2002) and cannot thus offer opportunities for recreating femininity.

Similarly, as with women, intersectional differences differentiate men in their perceptions of appearance. Hurd and Mahal (2021) reported that men they interviewed in Canada were less concerned about their looks because they were either married or happily single, and therefore not currently dating or trying to find a new partner. Ojala and Pietilä (2022) found that Finnish working-class men had more negative views about the use of anti-ageing products than middle-class men. Åberg, Kukkonen and Sarpila (2020) found that appearance was experienced less important among Finnish working-class men than upper-middle-class men. Also, sexual orientation mediates men’s body perceptions as gay men are reported to express more concern about and displeasure with their appearances as compared to heterosexual men (Lodge & Umberson, 2013).

As Jones and Pugh (2005, p. 252) state, ‘gay men tread a fine line between not being threatening to heterosexual men by their style of dress and appearance and, at the same time, needing to appear attractive to other gay men’.

To summarise, previous research on men’s anti-ageing beauty practices are based on gendered body ideals, similarly as with women. Research has shown that beauty ideals are different for women and men, and those regarding especially hair may seem not be that strict for men as for women. As grey hair may not be only a threat for men but can also contribute to ageing men’s status with its culturally shared connotation as a sign of wisdom and experience, even power, men do not necessarily have to hide all similar bodily changes of their ageing as women do.

5 A Desired Outcome of Anti-Ageing Beauty Work: Passable as Natural

Despite gender differences, there are also similarities in women’s and men’s anti-ageing beauty practices. For both ageing women and men, an essential issue in maintaining appearance is to keep the balance between means that are thought of as either natural or unnatural (Hurd Clarke, & Griffin, 2007, Ojala & Pietilä, 2022). For example, in Ojala et al. (2016) study, 42–70 years old men from Finland and US underlined that their anti-ageing bodily strategies must be ‘natural’, involving hard work rather than the use of artificial products that are thought to lack scientific proof. The men held also negative views of cosmetic surgery as an unnatural means to fight ageing. Hurd Clarke, Repta and Griffin (2007, p. 84) similarly noted that surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures were beauty practices which their interviewed 50–70 years old Canadian women saw most contradictory (also Elfving-Hwang, 2016). Aesthetic medicine was primarily recognised to be connected with cultural beauty ideals, societal pressures to look younger and a dangerous normalisation of women’s faces through aesthetic medicine. Thus, women saw

most of surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures as unnatural and therefore avoided such beauty practices.

What is of utmost importance for both women and men is to maintain a natural body image (Hurd Clarke, & Korotchenko, 2012, Ojala & Pietilä 2022). In Hurd Clarke and Griffin’s (2007) study, the women distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ interventions based on how natural-looking the end result was, as well as how easily others were able to detect whether or not the woman had used non-surgical and surgical cosmetic interventions (also Elfving-Hwang, 2016). Looking unnatural or inauthentic may be socially more stigmatising than looking old (Thorpe, 2018). For example, a man who dyes his hair can be seen to deny his ageing (Ojala et al., 2016) and a woman who does not adjust her clothing to age norms by dressing in short and figure-revealing clothes faces a risk of being called ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ (Heinrichsmeier, 2019) and may therefore become blamed for being vulgar and desperate (Twigg, 2007).

However, as Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2007, p. 198) suggest, “rather than being natural per se, the natural look entailed passing for a normal, unmodified, and youthful body even as it was the product of skillful artifice and covert technological interventions”. This highlights that one should be—regardless of gender—aware of the social norms of age-appropriate appearance. Youthful but age-appropriate beauty represents capital for middle-aged and older women and men in fighting against marginalisation and discrimination caused by old age (Ojala & Pietilä, 2022).

Even if women and men are aware of the exaggerated nature of claims made by the anti-ageing industry regarding the significance of appearance, they still use products, techniques and services in a hope of looking younger or at least not looking old. The most important for both women and men is invest to their appearance but simultaneously look as not investing too much, and display themselves *discursively* as not too invested. Previous research has shown that both women and men are keen to justify their body

modification practices with health benefits (Calasanti et al., 2018, Hurd Clarke et al., 2020), such as heavy dieting (Hurd Clarke, 2002) and exercise (Sheng, 2022) for weight loss, anti-ageing creams for preventing skin dryness (Ojala et al., 2016) and use of make-up for youthful and vital healthy glow (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2012). Health is socially seen a more valid justification for beauty practices than appearance. Calasanti et al. (2018, p. 234) consequently state that when healthism blurs with ageing and appearance, “they can naturalize age relations, likening old age to poor health and unattractive appearance, and thus justify age-based exclusion”.

What also connects women’s and men’s anti-ageing beauty work is a cultural urge to stay gendered. Because youthful beauty ideals are gendered, an integral part of an avoidance to be defined as old, and thus become excluded, is to stay recognisable as a woman or a man. Therefore, involvement in anti-ageing beauty practices can be seen as a measure to ‘hang on to being a man’ (Calasanti, & King 2018) or woman, and thus keep up binary-gender order and heteronormativity.

6 New Directions

In this chapter, we have looked at middle-aged and older people’s gendered beauty work in the context of anti-ageing culture. Previous research has shown that beauty ideals and idealised body image are strict for both women and men, but women must strive harder for these ideals than men. Women need to show with their actions how they embody well-established beauty ideals and desire for wrinkles skin and thin and toned body shape even if though they might never be able to reach such ideals. Men, in turn, are allowed more freedoms in terms of their attitudes towards anti-ageing beauty work and to what extent they adopt various anti-ageing beauty practices. A double standard of ageing is still well and alive.

From the perspective of anti-ageing culture, cultural beauty ideals and compulsory beauty work can be seen as measures of both patriarchal and ageist discrimination. Therefore, this approach does not follow an idea of beauty work as

a matter of individual choice or a way for empowerment but rather it highlights the existence of an omnipresent and internalised ageism in many societies. As Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2012, p. 113) state based on their interview data with 71- to 94-year-old Canadian women, “[w]hile some women described a sense of pleasure that they derived from the use of aesthetic interventions, it was clear that this enjoyment was underscored by the internalization of ageist beauty ideals and the women’s concomitant social oppression”. People tend to deny their own internalised ageism in both how they themselves assess other people’s looks with an ageist gaze and also how they recognise their own body modification practices in relation to cultural pressures of not looking old. From this perspective, it is justified to say that all beauty work has its roots in ageism. Therefore, it would be highly important to study more connections between internalised ageism and gendered beauty work, such as how internalised ageism motivates women’s and men’s beauty work when balancing a stage being at the edge of ‘letting themselves go’ (Heinrichsmeier, 2019).

Anti-ageing culture, internalised ageism and anti-ageing beauty work are not just middle-aged and older people’s business. To reach more knowledge and understanding of ageism as a system of structural inequality, there is a need for more research on anti-ageing beauty work among young adults, i.e. how younger people’s beauty work is based on anti-ageing (see Kasnakoglu, 2021). Such research could approach topics such as how fillers, Botox or other non-surgical cosmetic procedures are used to maintain or uphold youthful appearances, instead of filling already existing wrinkles.

Majority of research on gender, ageing and beauty work has focused on women. We therefore need more studies on how middle-aged and older men deal with increasing cultural pressures of looking youthful. Also, the extent to which men are consuming anti-ageing products and services *as men* remains still a largely unknown phenomenon. Fifteen years ago, Michael Atkinson (2008, p. 69) wished for more studies on how men play with innovative forms of aesthetic masculinity beyond the context of gym

work, tattooing or other stereotypically masculine body projects. We would now like to wish the same, but in the context of ageing. In our opinion, it is important to ask how men understand aesthetics in the context of ageing masculinities and how middle-aged and older men adopt practices that have (formerly) been understood as feminine, such as use of make-up, and turn them practices of grooming.

As stated above, ageism hits everyone with an equal force but at the same time other structural inequalities structure battlegrounds of ageing beauty. There is a need for more intersectional approaches (see also Craig, this volume; Karademir, this volume) in studies on anti-ageing beauty work covering issues as how intersecting differences, such as (trans-)gender (non-conforming), class, race, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and place/location, differentiate fights against ageing. We particularly need more research located in non-Western contexts. Western perspective has dominated the existing research both regarding theory and empirical studies. Therefore, it is important to note that for example studies from China (Sheng, 2022), South Korea (Elfving-Hwang, 2016) and Senegal (Macia et al., 2019) have recently shown that current theories provide only a partial tool for understand ageing, gendered beauty ideals and beauty work in non-Western societies. For instance, Elfving-Hwang (2016) states based on their South Korean study that anti-ageing treatments and procedures that are interpreted in Western context as an evidence of age denial can be coded as signs of respect of others in Asian cultures. Macia et al. (2019) found that in the Senegalese context cultural imperatives of youth and biomedical control over bodies were experienced less limiting compared to results based on studies carried out in Western societies. If we want to understand more broadly global consequences of increasing importance of youthfulness and how ageism, sexism and lookism (about lookism, see Mason & Midtgaard, this volume) intersect across the globe, we need culturally sensitive empirical analyses. It would also be worth asking, how gendered beauty work is done and age-appropriate looks are negotiated

in transnational contexts (see Zhu & Elfving-Hwang, 2024).

Additionally, we would also benefit from research, which questions heteronormative gendered beauty ideals and breaks the connections between binary-gendered bodies and femininities and masculinities. By new and innovative theorisations, such research could dismantle both patriarchal beauty ideals and ageist age relations and by so doing set capitalist neoliberal dynamics of ageism and sexism under critical scrutiny. Perhaps such research would indeed result in better chances for people of different ages to feel themselves agentic and empowered.

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Hanna Ojala is Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland. Her research has focused on intersections of age, gender and class in the various contexts of men's ageing, such as anti-ageing, exercise, health, retirement and communities.

Ilkka Pietilä is Associate Professor of Social Gerontology at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His research has explored gendered interpretations of health and ageing, with a particular interest in ageing men and masculinities. He is also interested in age relations in ageing societies covering such themes as ageism and intergenerational relationships.

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Beauty, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender Inequalities

Ellis Monk

1 Introduction

The study of social stratification and inequality is at the very core of the social sciences. Most research in this tradition concerns itself with how various social categories (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, etc.) are associated with life chances and a whole host of outcomes from the labor market, the education system, and marital markets to wealth and health, more broadly. Put simply, research on stratification and inequality attempts to understand who gets what, how much, and under what circumstances. Globally, studies powerfully document, for instance, myriad disadvantages faced by women relative to men across various domains and how ethnoracial minorities tend to fare worse across various domains compared to their compatriots. While many mechanisms are suggested for these outcomes, discrimination tends to be the most commonly referred to factor that helps explain, at least in part, why some people get less, and others get more.

Generally, the notion that gender and sexuality are associated with a whole range of inequalities is increasingly non-controversial, though specifying the responsible mechanisms and the magnitude of disparities remains contentious. By contrast, at least outside of the United States, some remain reluctant to accept the profound role that being an

ethnoracial minority often plays in shaping one's life chances and outcomes. Nevertheless, voluminous research over the past several decades has demonstrated how being an ethnoracial minority, ostensibly facing multiple dimensions of discrimination in the labor market, educational system, criminal justice system, and more, is associated with significant inequality and stratification. In fact, one recent meta-analysis of field experiments on discrimination against Blacks and Muslims in Europe suggests that discrimination against Blacks may be stronger in Europe than the United States (Thijssen et al., 2022).

Still, there is overwhelming focus on conspicuous forms of difference: forms of difference that tend to be politicized and salient in the media, policy spheres, and in everyday life (see Monk, 2022). This focus obscures how *beauty* is also a powerful axis of inequality that structures life chances and outcomes across multiple domains, all around the world. In other words, being deemed beautiful (or not) has profound consequences for life chances and outcomes. The evidence that beauty matters for inequality and stratification is overwhelming and convincing (see Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Nevertheless, much of our understanding of inequality and stratification tends to focus on race/ethnicity and gender—and often does so without considering the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. This is unfortunate and peculiar given the inherently *cultural* nature of beauty which tends to compound inequality along other lines (e.g., race/ethnicity and gender). After

E. Monk (✉)
Harvard University, Cambridge, US
e-mail: emonk@fas.harvard.edu

all, dominants in society play a large role in shaping beauty standards and those who tend not to fit these standards will, by definition, be minorities.

Beauty is best understood as a form of bodily capital, which is a fundamentally relational and contingent property that is embodied in the “most natural features of the body, the dimensions and shapes of its visible forms” (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, beauty, as a form of bodily capital, operates as prestige or honor (i.e., symbolic capital). Less abstractly, bodily standards of valuation and evaluation are thoroughly cultural and give rise to ideas that certain body shapes and sizes are beautiful (and not others), that certain facial features are beautiful (and not others), and that certain various bodily attributes—from skin tone to hair type to eye colors and shapes and much more—are beautiful (and not others). All of which is to say is that beauty itself is a site of struggle and contestation (Kuipers, 2015; Tate, 2016a, 2016b; Kuipers et al., 2017; Cottom, 2019). Moreover, there are profound disagreements and contingencies over what is or is not beautiful. Nevertheless, across many societies around the world, there do seem to be striking patterns, which tend to lean Eurocentric (e.g., lighter skin, aquiline noses, lighter eye and hair color, etc.). This is one of the key reasons why ethnoracial minorities, in particular, face the dual penalties of ethnoracial *and* beauty-related discrimination on the labor market and beyond. They are, by definition, the least likely to appear phenotypically Eurocentric. This dynamic will be discussed in much further detail below.

The main goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of research on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender, with a special emphasis on considering the *intersections* of beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender on the labor market. That is, how these different axes of social difference interact to produce complex and, at times, counterintuitive patterns of inequality and stratification, primarily on the labor market. This is in essence what is meant by the concept *intersectionality*, the idea that one may face multiple forms of compounding disadvantages along multiple dimensions (e.g., ethnoracial, gender, beauty, etc.) and that these disadvantages, these different forms of jeopardy,

are not simply additive, but multiplicative and complex. It is also worth noting that given the reality that most research on race/ethnicity has been conducted in the United States, this chapter overwhelmingly relies on studies conducted in the United States. Before addressing the intersections of beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender, however, we begin with a brief primer on how, conceptually, beauty relates to inequality and stratification. Then we will discuss research on beauty and gender and beauty and race/ethnicity, before, finally, highlighting existing research and directions for future research on the intersections of beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender.

2 Beauty, Inequality, and Stratification: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations

Research on beauty as an axis of inequality in the United States and Europe has flourished in the past few decades. This research has shown that beauty is significantly associated with a whole host of outcomes from educational attainment, wages, wealth, intergenerational social mobility, elections, and even longevity (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamermesh, 2011; Jæger, 2011; Conley & McCabe, 2011; Mears, 2014; Gugushvili & Bulczak, 2023; Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2024; Sheehan & Hamermesh, 2024; Warren & Rumore, 2024). Speaking to the importance of beauty as a factor of inequality and stratification, studies even show that beauty explains differences in outcomes between siblings (see Conley, 2009; Bauldry et al., 2016) and that returns to attractiveness even exceed that of actual ability (Fletcher, 2009). One of the key mechanisms that researchers point to in order to explain these inequalities is the substantial discrimination against those deemed to be lacking in beauty and the substantial ‘positive’ discrimination in favor of those deemed to be beautiful. Unfortunately, even though beauty is an important dimension of inequality, it is often overlooked relative to the voluminous literature on ethnoracial and gender inequality and stratification.

Accordingly, some experimental evidence suggests that while gender and ethnoracial-biased outcomes are perceived as less fair than unbiased outcomes, attractiveness-biased outcomes tend to be ignored (Jaeger et al., 2024). Indeed, while ethnoracial and gender-related inequality has drawn considerable scholarly, activist, and legal attention, beauty is often ignored as a source of inequality worthy of such scrutiny and amelioration. In fact, in many countries, the United States among them, discrimination on the basis of physical appearance, *lookism*, is legal (see chapters by Widdows and Midgard & Mason in this Handbook). Researchers, like activists, and laypeople tend to focus almost exclusively on forms of inequality that are already socio-politically salient and recognized by governments around the world (see Monk, 2022).

An unfortunate consequence of this marginalization is that opportunities have been missed to more deeply understand how race/ethnicity, gender, and beauty intersect to produce and reproduce inequalities. This is because the study of beauty as a factor of inequality and stratification has often run in parallel to the study of race/ethnicity and gender, inequality, and stratification. Notably, Hamermesh, who is widely thought of as one of the most influential researchers on beauty and inequality concedes in an aside that he can only speculate that “the effects of beauty within the African American population might be smaller [than among whites]” (Hamermesh, 2011, p. 58). In this chapter, I will discuss the current state of our understanding of how race and beauty intersect both theoretically and empirically and suggest ideas both for further developing theoretical frameworks that better integrate race and beauty as axes of inequality and directions for future research.

2.1 Beauty As Bodily Capital: Colonialism, Culture, and Inequality

As briefly explained above, beauty is best conceptualized as a form of bodily capital. As Bourdieu instructs in *Distinction* (1984, p. 190), bodily

capital is a subtype of cultural capital which is embodied in the “most natural features of the body, the dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) of its visible forms... The body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste” (see Vandebroek & Kuipers, in volume). Bourdieu notes that “[t]he body, a social product which is the only tangible manifestation of the ‘person,’ is commonly perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature” (1984, p. 192). Extending this notion, bodily capital may also refer to other conspicuous aspects of the body such as skin tone, hair, and facial features. Beauty, as a form *bodily* capital, to be precise, is a relational property whose value is contingent upon sociohistorically informed processes of valuation and evaluation. One consequence of this relationality is that we cannot assume a given positive or negative valuation of particular components of beauty (e.g., facial features such as averageness and symmetry, skin tone, hair colors and textures, body size, and composition). For instance, while being darker skinned in the context of an labor market hiring for an front-facing executive job in a majority White country may make one vulnerable to stereotypes and discrimination against darker-skinned people (e.g., being seen as less intelligent, more violent, etc., see Eberhardt et al., 2004), being darker-skinned is also associated with *masculinity* in such a way that, at least in the United States and some parts of Europe, darker-skinned men may be seen as more attractive than lighter-skinned men, all else being equal, due to the perception of darker-skinned men’s alleged heightened masculinity. In fact, one study in Britain found exactly that—White British women rated Black men’s faces more attractive than White men’s faces (Lewis, 2011). This is the essence of relationality—the same property or set of properties may be disadvantageous in one context, while being advantageous in another.

Still, this does not mean that there are no *commonalities* across countries and across entire regions of the world. After all, notions of beauty are cultural in the sense that they are built on intersubjective cognitive agreement inculcated through imagery and behavior (conscious

and unconscious). Consider the global beauty industry, from magazine covers to skin lightening creams to cosmetic surgery (see Menon, 2023), which pushes imagery, products, and techniques of refashioning that are typically dominated by Eurocentric visions of beauty. Colonialism has shaped the global economy and various ethnoracial (and gender) orders all over the world and, so, too, has colonialism both produced and diffused Eurocentric beauty standards around the globe (Jha, 2015). This has meant that in many countries around the world, lighter skin tones, lighter hair colors, lighter eye colors, and more Eurocentric facial features have been relatively more likely to be deemed beautiful, even among non-European, non-White populations. Tracking the role of colonialism in shaping beauty standards is pivotal in understanding how race/ethnicity, gender, and beauty intersect and interact as axes of inequality and stratification (Rondilla, 2012; see also Kuipers et al., this volume).

In sum, then, there is a global tendency toward Eurocentric norms (e.g., lighter skin tones, lighter hair colors, straighter hair textures, lighter eye colors, and various hallmarks of stereotypically European facial features), but even these dominant norms tend to be refracted, to some extent, at the local level, and local /regional beauty industries are clearly gaining in power and influence, e.g., in China, Korea. We observe varying degrees of cultural autonomy from Eurocentric standards of beauty. A key constraint, however, is that ethnoracial minorities living in countries dominated by White gatekeepers will inevitably come up against Eurocentric beauty standards that the vast majority of ethnoracial minorities will fail to meet. Not only this, but many ethnoracial minorities' beauty standards are indelibly shaped by dominant Eurocentric standards, even as they operate with some degree of autonomy from these dominant standards. Certainly, the literature on colorism speaks to this dynamic (Monk, 2021). Beauty standards, then, are inherently racialized and operate as a channel of ethnoracial inequality. After all, 'Looking the part' is profoundly more difficult depending on one's race/ethnicity, gender, and the ethnoracial composition of one's

country of residence, though looking the part is often highly incentivized and lucrative (Perry, 2005).

Further still, beauty standards are gendered and racialized, simultaneously, as well. Consider, for instance, that the perception of the beauty of Asians from the vantage point of Whites is shaped, in part, by gendered and racialized stereotypes that Asians are, overall, more feminine with the consequence that more prototypically Asian appearing men are perceived as less masculine and, therefore, less attractive relative to less prototypically appearing Asian men (Wilkins et al., 2011). This example shows how beauty standards are simultaneously racialized and gendered. Bodily capital, then, a critical resource across a whole variety of different domains (e.g., labor market, education system, criminal justice system, politics, marriage and dating 'markets,' etc.), is unequally distributed at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. The probability of being perceived as beautiful and thus, competent, intelligent, likeable, warm, among other positive attributes, is unequally distributed at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender (see Webster & Driskell, 1983; Kawakami et al., 2017; Zebrowitz, 1996). Indeed, bodily capital, which tends to operate as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984)—legitimately recognized prestige or honor—is *unequally distributed at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender*.

Crucially, it is not just that beauty as a form of bodily capital is unequally distributed at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender, but also that it is unequally distributed *within* and across these categories and their combinations. The extent to which ethnoracial minorities are more or less phenotypically typical of their broader category is inextricably tied to perceptions of their beauty and, thus, significantly linked to their life chances and outcomes (Monk, 2021). While it may be true that most members of stigmatized categories do not 'look the part,' there are exceptions to the rule. These exceptions to the rule, for instance, may be African Americans who are lighter-skinned, have more Eurocentric facial features, lighter colored eyes and hair, straighter

hair textures, etc. In the parlance of categorization, these exceptions are atypical to their ethnoracial category. Research shows that these atypical members of ethnoracial categories may be handsomely rewarded, particularly on the labor market. Walters (2018) observes, for example, how when retail managers seek to “diversify” their brands, they do so by seeking atypical ethnoracial minorities who appear ‘racially ambiguous’ or more Eurocentric. Indeed, those African Americans who are visibly atypical possess an important ‘countersignal’ against pernicious stereotypes and inferred negative traits that their membership in a stigmatized category usually signals (Monk, 2021, p. 206). Possessing phenotypical cues of ‘whiteness’ tends to act as a shield, lessening the frequency of discrimination and its harshness. This is, after all, what is captured by the lay concept, colorism, which is discrimination on the basis of ethnoracialized appearance, which includes but is not limited to skin tone.

The significance of typicality, however, is not just something faced by ethnoracial minorities, even members of the dominant category vary in their perceived typicality. First, while it’s true that colonialism was pivotal in the diffusion and entrenchment of Eurocentric beauty standards around the world, it is also true that the *interior of Europe* was and is itself racialized. As Miles (1993, 89) reminds us, “the civilisation project preceded European colonialism and commenced within Europe: thereafter, it was pursued simultaneously within and beyond Europe.” McClintock (2013), for instance, documents the various stereotypes of Irish people as ‘swarthy’ and ‘dark’ and the imagery that stereotyped Irish people as ‘apes.’ Burleigh and Wipperman’s (1993) magisterial examination of the Nazi regime details how racial and eugenic theories were predicated not only upon the notion that Europeans were superior to all others, but also, crucially, that there was a hierarchy within Europe itself, upon which a mythical Teutonic/Nordic ‘race’ of blond haired, blue eyed people sat.

I would remiss not to note the seemingly unbroken broken thread of such imagined hierarchies from the times of Linnaeus to the present day

and how these hierarchies are reflected in discriminatory practices that advantage White women with blond hair, in some contexts on the labor market (Gueguen, 2012) relative to other White women and generally penalize Afrocentric hair on the labor market, regardless of context, at least in the United States (Opie & Phillips, 2015). This is something worth of further investigation in Europe and beyond where similar findings could be very likely.

Beauty matters for everyone, but there is likely variation at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender, which suggests the need for an intersectional approach that considers multiple axes of inequality simultaneously to more comprehensively understand how beauty operates as an axis of inequality and stratification. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, this sort of research is mostly lacking, at present (see Sarpila et al., 2020 for similar observations); and the reasons for this are more than just data availability, but *conceptual* and *theoretical*.

3 Thinking Intersectionally: Beauty, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender

While clearly beauty matters for inequality and stratification despite its relative marginalization compared to research on race/ethnicity and gender, it is less clear whether beauty matters more or less by race/ethnicity and whether its significance varies at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. Indeed, researchers have spent considerably more time attempting to assess whether beauty matters ‘more or less’ for men or women. Contrary to commonly held views by laypeople, a recent extensive review of 58 articles finds that while beauty matters for both men and women, existing research shows that *men* are somewhat more likely to benefit from their appearance than women for a whole host of reasons including, but not limited to stronger moral regulation of women’s beauty work and penalties for attractiveness for women in certain domains (Kukkonen et al., 2024; also see Wong & Penner, 2016).

Where differences seem to exist is in the extent to which being attractive is detrimental. Sarpila et al. (2020) find that attractiveness is more often detrimental for women than men. As they note, while much of the literature on beauty premia is rather atheoretical and assumes that beauty is a universal benefit, the reality is that the benefits of beauty for women are contextual. Paying closer attention to the contextual nature of beauty premia across gender categories would greatly improve our understanding of beauty as an axis of inequality.

To date, far less research has considered the relationship between beauty and race/ethnicity inequalities. While many theorists have pointed out that standards of beauty are inherently racialized (see above) and qualitative research (Walters, 2018) and social psychological experiments have confirmed this, quantitative research on the consequences on race/ethnicity and beauty appears to be lacking. To be sure, there are some existing studies, which point to compounding inequalities associated with race/ethnicity and beauty (see Galarza & Yamada, 2017 on Peru and Hellyer et al., 2023 on Germany). Reece (2019), for example, examines the extent to which obesity stigma varies along the skin color continuum among African Americans using nationally representative data. He finds that lighter-skinned African Americans face an obesity penalty similar to Whites, which is not the case for medium and darker-skinned African Americans. Still, with such a dearth of research on race/ethnicity and beauty, it should be of little surprise that there is also a profound lack of quantitative research on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender inequalities. Certainly, data availability is an obstacle to these sort of quantitative analyses. The majority of existing studies on beauty premia are so focused on uncovering the consequences of beauty that they simply *control* for race/ethnicity (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994). Nevertheless, I contend, perhaps provocatively, that one of the main barriers to conducting research on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender is a lack of theoretical sophistication in research on beauty premia. Specifically, the lack of engagement with intersectionality,

even in studies that conduct ‘intersectional’ analyses.

Arguably, no other theory has had more influence on the study of inequality in the social sciences in the past few decades than intersectionality. Unfortunately, in its seeming ubiquity, intersectionality has entered a sort of definitional morass (Collins, 2015). Instead of representing the idea of *interlocking axes of oppression*, many have taken intersectionality to simply mean the reality of embodying multiple forms of identity simultaneously. Making matters more complicated is that intersectionality theory was not developed with quantitative analyses in mind (Hancock, 2007; Bowleg & Bauer, 2016). Consequently, there is much debate over how, exactly, to carry out intersectional quantitative analyses, more broadly, let alone, intersectional quantitative analyses of beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender (see McCall, 2005; Galarza & Yamada, 2019; Monk, 2021). The language of *double and triple jeopardy* sounds additive (e.g., gender disadvantage added on top of ethnoracial disadvantage added on top of beauty disadvantage), but the methods to conduct intersectional quantitative analyses are not additive (e.g., interaction models, multilevel models, hierarchical models, etc.); instead they are multiplicative and complex. Indeed, “the very language used in intersectionality can create confusion for quantitative researchers” (Bauer, 2014, p. 12). And double and triple jeopardies are not themselves additive either. Instead, given typicality and atypicality (see above), some axes of difference concatenate in ways that end up advantaging some members of broadly disadvantaged groups (see Monk, 2021).

Nevertheless, there are notable exceptions in the literature that do embrace an intersectional approach to beauty premia that attempt to address the complex ways that beauty intersects with race/ethnicity and gender to produce various patterns of inequality. One such study uses longitudinal, nationally representative data to assess the extent to which beauty premia on the labor market vary at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. This study directly tests the social psychological literature on beauty and discrimination (Webster &

Driskell, 1983; Langlois et al., 2000). The ‘halo’ effect describes the tendency for those who are deemed to be beautiful are disproportionately likely to be viewed as having a multitude of other positive attributes, regardless of whether or not they actually have these attributes (Batres & Shiramizu, 2023). Inversely, the ‘horns’ effect describes that those who are deemed to be ugly are disproportionately likely to be viewed as lacking positive attributes and having negative attributes.

It is easy to see how ethnoracial stereotypes, in particular, may compound with the ‘horns’ effect to produce particularly pernicious acts of discrimination in everyday life. Consequently, we may expect double and perhaps even triple jeopardy on the labor market for African Americans (in the United States, but also in other European countries with large populations with African background), in particular, who may on the one hand deal with ethnoracial discrimination while also, on the other hand, be dealing with gender discrimination (i.e., Black women) in conjunction with beauty discrimination. Nevertheless, given the attention given to ethnoracial discrimination and the relative marginalization of beauty discrimination, it is perhaps counter-intuitive to think that beauty discrimination may somehow be *more* important among ethnoracial minorities than it may be among Whites. Accordingly, Hamermesh (2011, p. 58) surmised that “the effects of beauty within the African American population [in the US] might be smaller [than among whites].” This seemingly reasonable assumption, however, is why adopting an intersectional approach to beauty premia rooted in the concepts of typicality and bodily capital is important.

The simultaneous racialization and gendering of beauty suggest that ethnoracial minorities should, on average, be the least likely to be perceived as beautiful (i.e., the least likely to ‘hold’ high volumes of beauty as bodily capital) (Craig, 2002). Matters become even more complicated in the case of Black women given stereotypes that associate *Blackness* with masculinity (Eberhardt et al., 2004; Eberhardt, 2005; Johnson et al., 2012), though this may not be the case in Europe (see Pieterse, 1992)

and the consequences of perceived atypicality (Monk, 2022)—sex/gender prototypicality significantly affects perceptions of beauty. Indeed, Black women, on average, but especially darker-skinned Black women may face discrimination for not appearing ‘feminine’ enough (i.e., atypical in their gender appearance). Consider above that Asian men, at least according to experimental evidence, may face discrimination for not appearing ‘masculine’ enough given stereotypes that associate *Asianness* with femininity (Wilkins et al., 2011). This dynamic may also mean that darker skin may not be as penalizing for Black men given the association between Blackness and masculinity and the aligned prototypicality between darker skin and masculinity for perceptions of beauty and attractiveness.

Taken together, this strongly suggests that beauty as a form of bodily capital is unequally distributed at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender, which may produce complex patterns of inequality on the labor market. Specifically, while it may be true that, on average, ethnoracial minorities, in this case, African Americans, are the least likely to be perceived as beautiful, especially from the vantage point of Whites, it is also quite likely that those atypical members of the category ‘Black’ with phenotypical traits that lean closer to Eurocentric standards may not only be advantaged relative to other Blacks, but, perhaps, advantaged relative to nearly everyone on the labor market.

Scarcity is what drives the value of capital and in the context of the labor market, atypical appearing ethnoracial minorities are scarce. As Walters (2018) shows, employers who are seeking to diversify their workforces will tend to favor atypical, ‘Whiter’ and ‘Lighter’ ethnoracial minorities. In line with research on colorism, then, it is reasonable to contend that African Americans judged to be ‘beautiful’ will be highly sought after on the labor market, to the extent that employers are looking to diversify their workforces—especially given the relative spotlight on ethnoracial discrimination. Indeed, given the illegality of ethnoracial discrimination and the near universal legality of lookism (i.e., discrimination on the basis of physical appearance), employers

may be able to trade off ethnoracial discrimination through lookism. In other words, they may technically skirt claims of ethnoracial discrimination while engaging in lookism that ends up perpetuating ethnoracial stereotypes by favoring those who are lighter-skinned and more Eurocentric in their physical appearance. Lookism, then, may operate as a *legal* channel through which ethnoracial discrimination, albeit a more fine-grained form of it, may be maintained.

Furthermore, even outside of direct discrimination, research on colorism suggests that, on average, lighter-skinned African Americans (and Latinx) have higher levels of education, which means they may already be, to some extent, atop the labor market relative to their darker-skinned, less Eurocentric appearing category members.

Using longitudinal, nationally representative data, the aforementioned study (Monk, 2021) finds that beauty matters for everyone on the labor market, regardless of their race/ethnicity or gender. In fact, the magnitude of the beauty premia among White men, for example, rivals that of the Black/White race gap. In line with the theorizing above, however, the study also finds profound gaps in earnings between Blacks judged to be attractive and unattractive from a pool of mostly White interviewers. Black women perceived to be the least attractive (bottom fifth percentile) earn 63 cents to the dollar of those perceived to be the most attractive (top fifth percentile), which is also larger than the Black/White gap in earnings of 87 cents to the dollar, net of controls. The beauty premium among Black men is also larger than the Black/White earnings gap.

Making matters more complicated, though, is the fact that Black women at highest levels of perceived attractiveness have earnings that are essentially indistinguishable or slightly higher than White women of similar levels of perceived attractiveness. In short, the inextricable link between capital and scarcity appears to be confirmed—for a small number of ‘atypical’ African American women, beauty is profoundly advantageous on the labor market. The interlocking axes of disadvantage—beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender—give rise to somewhat counterintuitive patterns of inequality (e.g.,

lighter-skinned, ‘beautiful’ Black women making as much or more money than White women in the United States, see Monk, 2021). It is also worth noting the ‘exotic’ factor, in Europe and beyond, that may lead to higher earnings among Black women models with ‘white’ traits (see Kuipers et al. this Handbook).

3.1 Directions for Future Research

Clearly, there is quite a lot of space for future research to be conducted on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender inequalities. As I have argued above, however, this is not simply a matter of data availability, but conceptual and theoretical lacunae plaguing the study of beauty premia, which is often rather atheoretical. On the matter of actual research design, there are clear avenues to be followed. First, including measures of perceived attractiveness/beauty on large-scale surveys should become standard practice alongside the collection of data on race/ethnicity and gender. These measures, as is exemplified by AddHealth, do not require training, but should be spontaneous, naïve, snap judgments that emulate the interactions that survey respondents deal with in their everyday lives. There are many viable techniques to address interview bias and other issues with such ratings (see Wu & Xie, 2024).

Second, researchers may follow the lead of surveys such as the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, which collected pictures of survey respondents that may then be coded for perceived beauty, in addition to other pertinent attributes such as skin tone, hair, eye color, perceived masculinity and femininity, and more. Doing so would enable even more complex analyses that disaggregate bodily capital into constituent elements to examine the extent to which certain physical attributes matter more or less for inequality and stratification at the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. There is also the promise of ‘computational’ or ‘Big Data’ approaches that could take advantage of simply training algorithms to give perceived attractiveness scores to photos taken of survey respondents. A sub-sample of

photos could be judged by humans to train said algorithms and the process could be automated.

Thinking more broadly, however, the study of beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender would be greatly enriched by research that focuses on the *diffusion* of beauty standards across time and space. Research that would not only track the flow of these eminently *cultural* standards, but systematically detail when and where deviations from these standards arise and attempt to connect the variation in beauty standards with variations in the association between said standards and inequality and stratification. Such analyses may even tell us something about ethnoracial and gender hierarchies. That is, inverting the typical order of operations implicitly and explicitly suggested throughout this chapter, it may be that *beauty* has something to teach us all about how race/ethnicity and gender work. Further still, the vicissitudes of beauty standards may even teach us new things about colonialism and capitalism. Indeed, it is not only that beauty somehow *compounds with race/ethnicity and gender* to produce complex patterns of advantage and disadvantage, but that beauty *qua* beauty is a crucially important aspect of the social world in its own right that has much to teach us about larger societal phenomena. In other words, at some fundamental level, [perceptions of] beauty, and its deep, profound associations with trait inferences (i.e., what is beautiful is good, what is ugly is bad) and its undeniable role in human psychology, sexuality, and intimate relations, more broadly, may be one of the *most critical domains* through which we may develop a deeper understanding of *how race/ethnicity and gender* operate as axes of oppression (see Fanon, [1952] 2008, *Black Skin, White Masks*).

Ultimately, comparative and historical, globally minded research on beauty standards, qualitative research on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender, and more conceptually and theoretically sophisticated quantitative research on beauty, race/ethnicity, and gender inequalities will go a long way toward improving our understanding of beauty as an important axis of inequality.

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Ellis Monk is Professor of Sociology at Harvard University and Visiting Faculty Researcher at Google. His research focuses on race/ethnicity in comparative perspective, colorism, health, race/ethnicity and technology (e.g., artificial intelligence, machine learning, and computer vision), sociology of the body, social psychology, and theory—using both quantitative and qualitative methods, while drawing heavily upon contemporary theories of social cognition and categories. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, and a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He previously taught at the University of Chicago and Princeton University.

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Beauty, Bodies, and Elites

Anne Monier and Ashley Mears

1 Introduction

This chapter considers the form and function of physical appearances at the top of the class hierarchy, among elites. We begin with the observation that bodies are class coded (Bourdieu, 1984). Bodies exude class differences in their habits, manners, adornment, shape, shade, and tone, such that the body is a clear site of class differentiation (Vandebroek, 2016). However, class differentiation is not a gender neutral phenomenon, as women and men occupy different positions of power in capitalist society. Women more readily accumulate and deploy aesthetic and symbolic capital, and men more closely control material and financial capital (Collins, 1992). Beauty and appearances function as women's resources, but empowerment from beauty has clear limits (see Craig, this volume).

We apply these insights to study elites. Appearances play an outsized role in signifying elite status, and women's appearances in particular are stylized and staged to indicate wealth. Yet while beautiful women command attention and generate

symbolic value, their considerable efforts ultimately yield profits to men who control a disproportionate share of material capital. We managed to get inside elite social spaces for ethnographic observations by taking on roles as women in two paradigmatic cases—philanthropy galas and VIP nightclubs. Through ethnography and interviews, we observed how women's bodies signify wealth in elite spaces and how this perpetuates gender inequality, since men hold and direct more material capital, and women's bodily rituals and displays ultimately further men's projects of status distinctions. Women's beauty work and display convert men's wealth into symbolic capital which can be reconverted into yet more of men's capital. Hence, among the most privileged women, beauty requires extensive investment but yields a subordinated capital, a fragile asset with weak fungibility, the pursuit of which perpetuates structural inequalities *between* men and women and *among* women of different class positions.

The gendered limitations of beauty are apparent up and down the class hierarchy (Skeggs, 2004). Our focus on studying elites gives us several advantages. "Studying up" brings gender and appearance into focus, both because of the centrality of appearance for women as opposed to men, and because of the importance of women in cultivating cultural tastes and upholding the status and interest of their families. Women must keep up appearances among the elite in particular, where appearances are pressurized under greater display and scrutiny (Elias, 1983; Sherman, 2017).

A. Monier (✉)
University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland
e-mail: anne.monier@ens-lsh.org

A. Mears
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: a.e.mears@uva.nl

Furthermore, gender and appearance dynamics among the rich may differ from other classed cultures, because the stakes are potentially higher in terms of the rewards and social costs of violating social expectations, in our case, expectations of beauty and luxury.

In the following pages, we first develop our line of thinking from two main bodies of literature. We build first upon theories of elite hierarchies via Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu which have largely overlooked gender. Second, we build on theories of gender and elites, which mostly lack ethnographic grounding. Physical appearance and beauty play an important role across these two literatures, which we advance with our investigation on the role of beauty in gendered elite hierarchies.

Before proceeding, let us first clarify what we mean by “elite,” which is a difficult category to define given diversity among elites (Cousin et al., 2018). In this particular context, we think of elites as those who have vastly more economic resources than the rest of the world. In this way, we are closer in thinking to someone like Mike Savage (2014), who foregrounds the material wealth of elites, rather than Max Weber who foregrounds status and prestige as the defining traits of the elite.

Second, let us untangle how we see the concepts of beauty, appearance, aesthetics, and display, and how this set of concepts relate to the elite. We think of beauty as a strong and positive assessment of persons’ appearance, while aesthetics is the overall affect or “vibe” of persons, spaces, and experiences. Display is the act of showing beauty and/or aesthetics. In our analysis, beauty is fundamentally a social system of hierarchy (as is ugliness). Among the elite, it is not enough for one to be beautiful, but to be seen, and recognized as beautiful, and by appropriate audiences, in order to confer status. Elites give us a special window to peer into how beauty operates as a hierarchy, with penalties and rewards, because elites go to great lengths to display themselves to each other, especially at the settings we accessed. Elite social spaces let us see how beauty works, in particular how it works differently for women and for men, who are much less on display.

2 Literature: Theories of Elites, Gender, Bodies

2.1 Embodied Hierarchies

Bodies can denote social position. In Norbert Elias’ model of the civilizing process, as societies become increasingly complex, individuals become more interconnected, and so people internalize tighter social constraints on their bodies. Manners and other norms of etiquette flourish via self-regulation (1978). A key place for the dissemination of codes of etiquette was the court aristocracy. Courtiers had to regulate their conduct to maintain favor with the king and survive the status competition of court (Elias, 1983 [1969]). As Elias writes:

To keep one’s place in the intense competition for importance at court, to avoid being exposed to scorn, contempt, loss of prestige, one must subordinate one’s appearance and gestures, in short oneself, to the fluctuating norms of court society that increasingly emphasize the difference, and the distinction, of the people belonging to it. (Elias, 1983 [1969], pp. 231–232)

Elias’ thesis powerfully situates human physiological response within social figurations, and it holds unexplored insights for an anthropology of the body in social hierarchies. In particular, how bodies must be carefully controlled to both give off the right social cues and as a matter of what feels right: as Elias shows, rules on the body are social constructs, but they come to feel like second nature.

Like Elias, Pierre Bourdieu attended to comportment of the body—in fact both he and Elias used the term *habitus* to describe how social habits come to reside in the body (Bourdieu, 1977; Elias, 1983 [1969]). In Bourdieu’s words, the “differences in the way of carrying the body, of carrying oneself, of behaving” expresses a person’s relation to the social world (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 51, translation by authors).

Both frameworks by Elias and Bourdieu hold insights for an understanding of contemporary elite embodiment and behaviors. We take inspiration from Elias to trace how status among elites is constituted in subtle embodied displays, and careful control of the body. And while *habitus* is

well developed in studies of cultural stratification among the poor, we join the growing corpus of ethnographic studies interrogating *elite* habitus on the ground (e.g., Khan, 2011). From these literatures, we develop the question: how is an elite habitus displayed today?

2.2 Theorizing Gender Among the Elite

Gender is a fundamental part of elite sociality. Few classical treatments of elites have attended to gender; for instance, Elias' omission of gender has been critiqued (e.g., Hargreaves, 2010) (but see Chap. 1 of *The Court Society*). Given the overtly masculine domination of economic and political elites, it is surely an apt site for the study of gender (Cousin et al., 2018).

As such, a relatively new body of work on elite women and gender dynamics in elite families is growing rapidly (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021; Sherman, 2017; Yavorsky et al., 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Management and organization scholars focus on women in elite positions (Moore, 1988; Megan Tobias Neely), on elite careers for women (Coltrane, 2004; O'Neil et al., 2008), women elite athletes (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009), women on corporate boards (Benton, 2021; Heemskerk & Fennema, 2014), identity performances for elite women (Heizmann & Liu, 2020), and also on upper-class women (Ostrander, 1984). Since marriage is common among the elite, women play crucial roles in elite households (Glucksberg, 2018; Sherman, 2017; Yavorsky et al., 2019), as arbiters of taste and consumers (Sherman, 2017) and managers of the household servants (Delpierre, 2022).

These roles position elite women far above most other women and men, yet still subordinate to elite men. Structurally, this appears in demographic studies confirming women who marry into upper-class families have thin claims to material resources in the event of divorce (Bessière & Gollac, 2020). In Ostrander's classic 1984 work, *Women of the Upper Class*, women remain subordinate to their husbands even in their extensive women's philanthropic work which assists in

the perpetuation of their class (see also Daniels, 1988). Yet, Ostrander's study was conducted almost forty years ago, and in those decades, there have been powerful shifts in the occupational, political, and social roles of women raising the possibility of significant change. More recently, Cooper's (2014) ethnographic study of families in the Silicon Valley highlights how women actually had more responsibility and control over economic resources in the working-class families, but as families became wealthier, men become very powerful in managing the economic realm. Yet, her excellent study focused on families across the income distribution rather than on wealthy families per se. We take inspiration from these literatures on gender and the elite to consider how women's beauty figures into both their privilege and their precarious hold on capital within the upper classes.

2.3 Embodied Gendered Distinctions

Given the twin facts of gender dynamics and the signification of bodies among the elite, we now consider the role of the body at the intersection of gender and the elite.

Plenty of literature describes the greater pressure on women regarding their appearance, particularly middle-class and white women, who face the highest rates of eating disorders, as well as looks penalties in labor and romantic markets. Investment in and control of the body might be women's economic and social mobility strategy (McLaren & Kuh, 2004). Thinness has become a marker of social distinction in industrialized society (Bordo, 1993), which makes it more likely to be valued by individuals higher on the socio-economic spectrum. Vandebroek (2015) finds that the size of women's bodies gets slenderer as they move up the class ladder. Men have more leeway in range of acceptable bodies, while women's status is tied to their bodies and how they look. In general, research has demonstrated that for a given body size, socio-economically advantaged women are more dissatisfied with

or concerned about their bodies than socio-economically disadvantaged women (Ogden & Thomas, 1999; Wardle & Griffith, 2001).

For our purposes, we conceptualize the importance of embodied gendered display among elite in the two following ways:

The first way to usefully think about gendered embodiment and elites is to consider beauty as attention. In *Celebrity Society*, van Krieken (2018) outlines the importance of attention to establishing status among elites, such as entertainment elite. Women can attract and focus attention and thus, they may help to position men's status. Beautiful women like fashion models and highly-attractive people generally motivate increased attention (Lorenzo et al., 2010). These gendered status dynamics are more subtle than Eliasian forms of status competition and arguably more applicable to contemporary status hierarchies since the King's court is no longer confined to the walls of a palace.

Furthermore, elites are attuned to specific codes of beauty that others may not recognize, because any attentional subculture notices specific and small things that outsiders may miss. In Eviatar Zerubavel's work, the concept of "attentional subcultures" refers to how different groups or communities, whether based on profession, culture, or ideology, develop specific norms and practices around what is noticed, ignored, or regarded as important. Attentional subcultures shape how individuals within these groups focus their attention, essentially determining what they "see" or ignore in the world around them in patterned ways. For example, make-up artists see skin, dentists see teeth, and academics see citations and acknowledgments. Among the elites, plenty of ethnographic examples abound of the subtle and highly communicative power of, say, cuff links or the minutia of girls' school uniforms at private boarding schools (Beatrix, 1988; Khan, 2011).

The second lens is broader and illustrates the difference between class and status. Men are to class, as women are to status, quipped Randall Collins, as he reflected on how women and men are differently located in the class structure (1992). Men, historically *de jure* and *de*

facto, have greater access to financial and material capital, as owners and producers of land, machines, and corporations. Women, meanwhile, have more highly valued stores of aesthetic and cultural capital, reigning over and producing status cultures. Women's subordinate class positions (as order takers, usually not the order givers) are peppered over by status displays in the form of good-looking homes, children, and communities, the result of what Collins calls "Goffmanian labor."

In this lens, men hold disproportionate control over material resources which women convert into symbolic capital. Feminist Bourdieusians have produced a wealth of studies documenting how femininity is a resource, a kind of "sign bearing capital," that men can use (Skeggs, 2004), and a "repository" of value that can generate social capital and status for men (McNay, 2002, p. 142). Ethnographically, scholars have been documenting cases of women's symbolic value relative to men's material power. Analyses of sex work likewise document the crucial role of women's bodies in forging men's business networks. Among hostess clubs in Vietnam, women's sexualized bodies play a main role in forging men's identities and business ties (Hoang, 2015). Likewise, Allison's ethnography of Japanese hostess clubs shows how women exchange sexual capital to men, which upholds a system of male-controlled capitalism in Japan (1994). In Greek college life, fraternities gain status from women's bodily capital, typified by "the blonde" who circulates without pay through frat parties (Hamilton, 2007). Similarly, night-clubs amass women's "bodily capital" to attract men with money (Grazian, 2009; Rivera, 2010). Beyond its personal advantages, bodily capital holds value for people and organizations able to harness it, whether by wages or other means.

Throughout this literature, women's bodies in particular, not men's, do the work of communicating symbolic value. Anthropologists have long noted that women are imagined to be more "in the body" than men; that is, they are more associated with bodily functions such as reproduction, while men are imagined as rooted in the mind (Ortner, 1974). This is also a disadvantage for women

in male-dominated spaces, for instance, as business leaders, women must manage their bodies to produce respectable business femininity (Mavin et al., 2016).

The anthropologist David Graeber, in *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, also addressed the question of gender in the role of women's dress in signaling value:

It is easy to see how dress codes reinforce this. Formal male dress is designed to hide the body. Its sobriety seems intended to efface not only a man's physical form but his very individuality, rendering him abstract and, in a certain sense, invisible. Clothing for women, on the other hand, not only reveals more of the body (or at least hints at revealing it): it transforms what is revealed into one of a collection of objects of adornment—body parts becoming equivalent, as such, to clothing, makeup, and jewelry—that together define the wearer as a sight, and by extension, as relatively concrete and material. Now, as a critique of gender relations, this analysis applies only to Western society—and relatively recent Western society at that. But the basic division between a relatively invisible self-acting on the outside world and a concrete and visible one relating primarily to itself is, I think, of much wider significance. It may very well be intrinsic to the dynamics of human thought and action themselves.

The nineteenth-century economist Thorsten Veblen, in his satire among the *nouveaux riches*, described women as vicarious consumers for men's economic achievements (2009 [1899]). Veblen claimed that women function as a “trophy” for men to prove their financial power. Having an unproductive wife, whose dress and body signifies her leisurely life, is a mark of a successful man.

While these theories of elites note that women's bodies signify men's elite status, rarely are these theories grounded in empirical observation. There are exceptions. Based on interviews with wealthy Londoners, Luna Glucksberg shows the important role of women's unpaid labor—emotional, embodied, and largely invisible and discounted—in reproducing wealth which is largely concentrated among married men (2018). Rachel Sherman too has shown how women's household consumption furthers the classed projects of wealthy New Yorkers (2017). Beatrix Le Wita also examines ethnographically elite practices and behaviors (1988). An earlier

generation of research showed how elite women had main roles in philanthropy and membership on boards of nonprofit organizations, even as they were subservient to their husbands in the family (Ostrander, 1984), a finding more recently echoed by Monier and Mears (2024).

We take inspiration from these studies to frame our own original ethnographies on elite social spaces to which we now turn.

3 Empirical Cases: The Philanthropy Galas and the VIP Party Scene

Taking inspiration from ethnographies of gendered distinction, we attend to two settings of elite social worlds, philanthropy events and VIP parties. We each had access to research ethnographically and with interviews of major actors in each space, in New York and Paris (for Monier studying the American Friends galas) and New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and St. Tropez (for Mears studying promoters and their clients in this global party circuit). Both cases have similar ingredients, but some things are very different. In both of our field sites, the VIP and the galas, it was striking how we both observed the importance of staging aesthetics to display wealth and power: the “visibility” of the symbolic capital is of utmost importance. Both are scenes of leisure but which take a lot of work. They both cater to the display of ostentation and excess consumption of rich people.

The main points of variation are the populations and the legitimacy of the leisure. These are very different populations of elites, with VIP party-goers generally much younger than philanthropy gala attendees, particularly women. Young women aged 18–25 are the norm at VIP clubs, while women are well above 50 in the philanthropy world. These age distinctions correspond to different looks and habits, for instance, at the gala, attendees angle to get their pictures in the newspaper and not on Instagram, the main media for showcasing the VIP party. The VIP club is clearly less socially legitimate than philanthropy, which may be the purest way to covert money into status

(Collins, 1992, p. 226). The VIP club, in contrast, is considered “wasteful,” the hours are much later into the night, and the norms of behavior include getting drunk and dancing on furniture. As such, it is “immature” relative to philanthropy in two senses, age and legitimacy.

Still, we use both cases in conversation to further understand how *women’s* bodies and gendered rules of comportment produce elite hierarchies.

3.1 Setting the Gala Scene: The Beauty of Exceptional Experiences

Philanthropy is a way for elites to transform economic capital into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 4). In this sense, the galas, typical moments of the philanthropic journey, offer a “unique experience that you can’t just get with money” (Monier, 2019). Money is thus not enough, and access to what cannot be bought is of great value in the eyes of elite donors (“you know they are very rich people, they can afford everything, but they can’t afford this person’s private collection, or dinner in Pinault’s house”). The distinction is thus access to what is priceless (“It is so priceless”). Patrons give money and receive in exchange invaluable experiences.

A typical night at a gala event will involve long evening at a château in France or at a high-end venue in New York, lavishly decorated, where women wear gala gowns and men black tie tuxedos, a speech, a concert or a private tour of the monument, a meal by one of the best chefs in town and many important people (artists, politicians, CEOs, or celebrities).

As a true “representation,” the gala aims, for the American Friends¹ and their donors, to be seen, to “give a show” (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1996), both to each other and to the outside world.

¹ Monier’s study focuses on the American Friends groups of French cultural institutions (for ex American Friends of the Louvre, American Friends of Versailles, etc.), which are organizations that allow American wealthy donors to make gifts to French institutions while getting tax deductions.

To admire, to see and to be seen: these events are part of the “process of civilization” described by Norbert Elias, in which pleasure is shifted from the sphere of action to that of spectacle (Elias, 1983 [1969]). The ostentatious character of wealth is central here, because “it is not enough to simply possess wealth and power: they must still be brought to light, for it is only through them that esteem will be shown” (Elias, 1983 [1969]). It is therefore a question of leaving “a tangible, visible, ostensible, measurable result” (Veblen, 2009 [1899], p. 35). Symbolic capital, and the distinction it allows, must be visible, and to do this, several means are used.

For the galas, the staging work is carefully prepared in order to offer an aesthetic representation. The beauty is not only the beauty of bodies but also of surroundings—everything must be in harmony. It is a question of aestheticizing the places, by decorating them, in order to offer a true living picture. In addition to the fact that these events take place in cultural institutions that are already of great beauty in themselves (castles, monuments, etc.), the associations will carry out an important metamorphosis to magnify these places. The decoration is thus very elaborate. The aestheticization of every detail is accompanied by a high quality of the elements—fabrics, floral accompaniments, food, lighting. The best craftsmen and artists have been solicited to set up these sumptuous events, which are a true “staging of wealth.” The etiquette is perfectly respected and everything must be harmonious, aesthetic, and in “good taste.” This practice is in line with the aestheticization of the daily life of the elite. This way of decorating and staging is not specific to American Friends groups, but the way of doing it is specific to elite events.

Furthermore, American Friends groups give great importance to the production of images of the beauty of these events. Indeed, the role of appearance leads the American Friends to emphasize visibility: thus, at each event, there is a photo shoot. During the most important events, it is even a photo call. However, pictures are not only taken by professional photographers: sometimes they are also taken by the heads of the organizations or the donors themselves. The guests themselves take

many pictures, even selfies for the younger ones. For example, while visiting an embassy in Paris, from where the Eiffel Tower was visible, everyone was taking pictures of it. These pictures will then be used to promote the organization, in their documents and brochures, but also in the specialized or general press, which they will come to nourish.

Usually, donors want other people to know that they were at this “unique” and “exceptional” event, showing it to the world. Being a donor of the Louvre or the Paris Opera also means claiming and showing it. “Visibility” is thus central.

3.2 Setting the VIP Party Scene: Quantity of Quality

Around the world at various times, a certain segment of elites and a curated entourage descend upon party hotspots like St. Tropez and the Hamptons in the summer and St. Barthes in the winter (Cousin & Chauvin, 2012). They attend VIP nightclubs and brunch parties, including “pop up” club franchises from other hotspots, characterized by luxurious settings with famous brands of champagne and vodka, elaborate light and sound systems, famous DJs, and tufted leather banquettes.

Within these sumptuous settings, the bodies of women and men have clearly different aesthetic roles and expectations. Like the gala scene, in the VIP, people are almost entirely White with the exception of servers, and in the clubs, promoters who are disproportionately Black and Latino men. In the VIP scene, there is an abundance of beautiful and young women who look like fashion models: tall, thin, and young (between roughly 18 and 25 years old). From parties in New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and the French Rivera, Mears observed a homogenous look of women, who are called “girls” regardless of their age. So important is the quantity of perceived “quality” of girls that the club scene is sometimes called “Models and bottles,” as club operators assume big spenders will not come to their venues without a clearly visible excess of beautiful women.

Women deemed unattractive by the club managers are excluded from entry at the door

by bouncers and doorpersons, whose explicit mandate is to adhere to exacting beauty standards for women—not for men. One club in NYC instructed its door persons to not let any women inside if she was shorter than the “door girl,” a woman who stood 5’7” in high heels.

Older women are especially invisible and unwelcome in the VIP clubs. Gendered ageism results in sexist assessments that women over the age of 30 are “desperate husband hunting,” and that women “lose their looks” as they age. As an example, one private investor, a wealthy businessman from Europe who spends a lot of time in the global club scene, explained: “Men grow into their looks and peak later in life, for women they fall off around 35 something like that.”

These events are also held in physical spaces which are *extra*-ordinary. High-end nightclubs are often cavernous spaces with high ceilings, high-tech sound and lighting systems, ornate furnishings like velvet tufted couches and chandeliers. Clubs are often located in famous hotels in gentrified parts of cities, such as The Gansevoort in the Meatpacking District, a hotel where rooms went for over \$500 a night. When the entrance to these clubs faces the public sidewalk, the doorways are closed off with velvet ropes maintained by imposing security guards in black suits. The public facade of clubs is often designed with minimalist but chic decor, lighting, and even red carpets on which entrants wait. Inside the clubs, their decor exudes extravagance, with state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems and meticulous attention to furnishings and fixtures. One club had imported mature birch trees and wrought iron patio furniture to give it the feel of an exotic café. Another was furnished with dark suede ceilings and rich amber light, and customers walked through an arched golden tunnel to get inside. It made the club’s entrance feel like a portal to a secret rich world. Club Marquee New York City cost nearly \$3.5 million when it was renovated (Elberse et al., 2009, p. 254). Club Provocateur, in downtown New York, was a \$5 million investment, designed to be the “most luxurious” of VIP clubs in the city (Gray, 2010).

3.3 Inequalities: Gendered Conversions of Material to Symbolic Capital

Per Veblen and Bourdieu, women are a part of the conversion of material to symbolic capital, which reproduces a structural inequality between men and women, and among women.

In the VIP, this takes the obfuscated exchange of beautiful women for men's money, a "disreputable trade" akin to sex work which the club elaborately hides (Rossman, 2014). That is, promoters bring beautiful young women to the VIP clubs, where rich men purchase expensive bottles to be in their company, and the promoter, as a broker, takes on any moral opprobrium for facilitating the exchange—indeed many times promoters exclaimed, "I'm not a pimp," as if anticipating the stigma of their trade. The value of women's beauty disproportionately flows to men: "girls" are the conduits through which promoters gain access to wealthy men, how wealthy men enjoy the company of one another, and how the global nightclub industry generates millions in profits a year.

When women attempt to capitalize on their own looks themselves, they are immediately cast in suspicion for "whale hunting," "using," and sex work. Comparative historical cases illuminate this stigma faced by women—typically called "girls"—who used their bodily capital for access to men's resources. Consider the emergence of dating in commercial spaces in the early twentieth-century America: as young unchaperoned women took up men's treats like dinner or theater tickets, they were looked at with some suspicion. Called "charity girls," they were morally distinct from prostitutes because they didn't take money, but subject to critiques of sexual immorality (Peiss, 1986). For instance, in 1913, the vice society of New York City undertook an investigation of a popular working-class nightclub frequented by distinct types of women identified as "near whores" or "whores in the making," distinct from "professional prostitutes" but still compensated for their intimacy (Clement, 2006).

Beauty is thus an asset, exchangeable for some (limited) gains, but to enter such an exchange is

stigmatized. History is full of parallel examples. The early retail "shop girl" in Victorian consumer society was displayed along with merchandise for sale in stores, enticing customers with the suggestion that she herself might be for sale (Sanders, 2006). Chorus girls in fin-de-siècle Europe, young stage performers who danced in unison (such as the "Tiller girls"), were subject to both admiration for their youth and beauty and disdain for their spoiled reputations (Latham, 2000).

Women are the face of a financial operation that serves and is controlled by men, and the value they generate flows to men. As such, beauty is a symbolic resource, one that it is more valuable for men than for women who embody it. And its value is highly gendered; not just in the obvious way that women have more beauty than men, or are considered and appreciated for their beauty more than men—that is well established in literature and in life. But what is striking and novel in our insights here is that the ability to profit from beauty is gendered. If beauty is a capital, it is embodied more by women, and worth more to men than to women. As Chauvin and Jaunait note, asking "Who own my capital?" involves "raising the question of the property of properties, since the holders of a given legitimacy are not automatically its' owners" (2015, p. 67), and suggests the beginnings of a critical theory of ownership in the forms of capital. To do so one must consider the wider field of power that allows any kind of capital to be profitable, in this case, that field is structured by gender and anchored by male hegemony.

While the dynamic of conversion of capital, from material to symbolic, is clear for the philanthropic scene, the gendered aspect is often overlooked. The mechanism is a little bit different from the VIP scene as both capitals (economic and symbolic) are displayed by both genders. The wealthy use charity to claim exemptions from taxes, and to maintain control of land or other valuable assets (Farrell, 2020), but philanthropy also generates a lot of status for men and women. As Marcel Mauss reminds, charity is a gift giving ritual in which gifts not reciprocated yield status to the giver. One of the main differences is that the fortune given is often that of the man (or couple) and the body more shown off is the woman's.

Attending philanthropic galas is a way for elite women to display not only their wealth and status but also their bodies. This differs from the VIP scene where women only display their bodily capital. In the gala scene, if the places are high-end venues, bodies are also shown off. In terms of appearance, most women appear to be cosmetically enhanced to achieve more youthful faces and very thin bodies—which is not the case of men. People, especially women, discuss measures to keep thin, such as what to eat or not what to eat at events like gala dinners and restaurants, where gourmet food is abundant and prepared by top chefs. Not eating dessert, not eating at all, being on a diet, or just eating salad were common practices Monier observed among women.

Women's dress is clearly deliberate and highly decorated: dresses, accessories, fashionable clothing, and high heels. Women in both settings are typically "branded" with specific kinds of clothing and accessories to signal their status. Red-soled Louboutin high heels are a staple in both settings, as are branded handbags like Chanel and Gucci in the VIP scene, at the galas women wear Chanel suits, Lanvin dresses, or Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry—all recognizable to regulars in these worlds. Following what they refer to as the "dress code," women at galas only wear outfits from luxury fashion houses. Some make contracts with luxury companies (e.g., Cartier, Chanel, LVMH) to borrow dresses or perfume to give away in the gift bags for guests. Luxury is everywhere and brands frequently contribute to these exclusive events.

Compared to the VIP scene, attention is less centered on physical beauty than on women's performance of it. As these women were obviously not so thin and not so young, they were expected to maintain the right presentation of self. Considered unacceptable were faux-pas in terms of decoration, like wearing the wrong dress or accessories, or having insufficient make-up or improper behavior. There is also plenty of unwanted attention to women's bodies, such as critical gazes. But like in the VIP scene, men's clothes, bodies, diets, and looks are so infrequently discussed in comparison with women's

and require way less work and investment in time and money (Monier & Mears, 2024).

4 Future Directions and Conclusions

Research on elite hierarchies has often overlooked gender, while studies of gendered elites frequently lack the ethnographic depth needed to analyze embodiment. In this work, we bridge these gaps by integrating two key literatures—attention and status—to better understand the intersection of beauty and inequality.

Our two cases illustrate the gendered limitations of beauty as a resource. In the VIP field, men are particularly adept at converting "girl capital" into economic, symbolic, and social capital, leveraging women's presence to facilitate networking and ascend elite social and business hierarchies. In the philanthropy gala scene, women aid in the "pure" conversion of wealth to status, paying particular attention to looking perfect to create "exceptional" spaces and experiences. Across these settings, women are essential to creating elite environments that enable rich men to stage conspicuous displays of wealth and status. This dynamic can be summed up by Randall Collins's (1992) assertion that "men are to class as women are to status." Men exercise disproportionate control over material resources, while women are often tasked with converting men's class power into symbolic capital. This is especially evident in women's outsized involvement in philanthropy and their contributions to beauty and fashion as forms of symbolic labor.

Yet, women's investments in beauty projects primarily benefit the owners of beauty and fashion industries, generating vastly unequal returns. By centering the role of ownership, scholars can interrogate the systemic inequalities embedded in processes of capital conversion. This approach shifts the focus beyond individual advantages to a broader examination of how power relations shape unequal value extraction from embodied resources.

The double standard of aging works in two very strong ways in these elite spaces. On the one

hand, in the VIP, there is a gender- and age-typical pattern of young beautiful women and older rich men, a gendered formula of embodied and financial equivalencies. As “girls” get older, they lose their value and are no longer welcome to the party. As Susan Sontag put it, “age destroys women” (1972). But in the gala scene, older women still *do beauty*, quite visibly so. Elite women invert Sontag’s adage: these women destroy age. That is, age is something that can and *must* be conquered, by diet, dress, jewels, fitness, injections, and surgery. The “biological clock” of beauty for elite women is extended compared to other less-resourced women, and certainly compared to historical conditions of just 150 years ago, when people aged quickly and women were “old” and out of beauty by age 35 (Kuipers, 2022). Extending the clock of beauty requires strenuous work, time, and of course money, which elite women are expected to expend. And as Monier’s ethnography shows, they police and hold each other to punishing standards for doing beauty well.

Furthermore, our studies suggest the insights men’s beauty might offer into the double standards of aging. For a long time, men have often appeared to grow more attractive as they age, facing few of the penalties or pressures experienced by women in our two field sites. Yet it also seems that in our anti-aging society, pressures from aging are acute for both genders, though they may follow different logics, for instance, with men seeking to portray strength rather than attracting the gaze (Chap. 18). Further studies might consider, what embodied cues do aging men signal in different contexts, and why do these cues function differently than women’s aging bodies? These are fertile questions for the sociology of beauty, particularly as men often remain the invisible or unmarked subjects in ethnographic studies.

Future research should also investigate men and how they use appearance, aesthetically like to exude beauty or strength, cultural capital, or intellect. For instance, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu highlights how men use appearance to occupy space, such as through entourages, oversized clothing (e.g., shoulder pads), and loud or conspicuous behavior. Similarly, Norbert Elias

noted how men in court society adorned themselves with wigs, high heels, powders, a reminder that male beauty is also subject to fashion dynamics. Although the forms of male beautification evolve, the underlying practice persists and remains understudied. Where has men’s beauty gone? It clearly continues to play a role, as evidenced by high-status men leveraging attractiveness for political and social advantages. Understanding men’s investments in beauty, both in elite scenes and broader contexts, is a promising avenue.

We conclude with a truism and its sociological complication. Everyone knows that good looks have value. In both marriage and labor markets, women’s “erotic capital” does yield some personal advantages (Hakim, 2010). However, we complicate this truism: while physical attractiveness often generates rewards, these rewards are not always fully accessible to the individuals themselves. Beauty may yield benefits, but not necessarily to the beautiful ones.

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Anne Monier is a Senior Researcher at the Geneva Center for Philanthropy of the University of Geneva and an Associate Researcher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (France). She works on different topics, including philanthropy, elite sociology, arts policy, transnational relations, public-private relations, and environmental social sciences. She is the author of *Nos chers Amis Américains* (2019) and, with Sylvain Lefèvre, *Philanthropes en démocratie* (2021). She also teaches at the School of Public Affairs at Sciences Po and has been a Visiting Scholar at several international universities, including Harvard University and Columbia University. She is now developing a research project on the environmental transition of the philanthropic sector in Europe.

Ashley Mears is Professor and Chair of Cultural Sociology and New Media at the University of Amsterdam. She works in cultural, gender, and economic sociology, focusing on processes of valuation and the circulation of non-financial forms of capital. She has conducted ethnographies of fashion modeling, elite parties, Summer Work and Travel Visa holders, the Boston college party scene, and most recently, viral social media. She is the author of *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*, and *Very Important People: Beauty and Status in the Global Party Circuit*. She received her PhD from New York University, and her BA from the University of Georgia, her home state.

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Body Size and Social Class: Beauty and Stigma in a Tale of Two Habitus

Dieter Vandebroeck and Giseline Kuipers

1 Introduction: Beauty, Body Size and Social Class

An impressive number of studies attest to the fact that differences in body weight are far from being randomly distributed across social space. In *all* advanced industrial societies, researchers have found an inverse relationship between social class and weight: the higher someone's social position, the lower their body weight and vice versa, a relation that is especially strong for women (Bridger Staatz et al., 2021; Maddock et al., 2018). At the same time, in all these societies, a large body size is widely discredited. Whether called 'fat', 'overweight' or 'obesity', a larger body size is generally rejected for both aesthetic and moral reasons (Saguy, 2012; Vandebroeck, 2016). It is seen as unattractive or ugly, but also as a sign of moral shortcomings, such as laziness or lack of self-control.

habitus (n.) ('*ha-bə-təs*, plural: *-tus*):

body build and constitution especially as related to predisposition to disease.

—Merriam Webster Dictionary of English.

D. Vandebroeck (✉)

Department of Sociology, Free University of Brussels, Brussels, Belgium

e-mail: dieter.vandebroeck@vub.be

G. Kuipers

Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality, Sociology Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

e-mail: giseline.kuipers@kuleuven.be

The most stigmatized body type is therefore linked with structural, intergenerationally transmitted advantage and disadvantage. This makes the relation between body size and social class a key issue in the study of beauty and inequality: how is it possible that across societies, the most privileged groups are more likely to have the most desired body types? Why are the most disadvantaged at higher risk of having a body type that is associated not only with a range of health risks, but also with moral condemnation and aesthetic disapproval?

This relation between social class and body size cannot be adequately explained exclusively from genetic hardwiring or individual psychology. As we will explain in this chapter, the relatively fast and recent shift toward a 'thin' ideal, as well as the systematic connection with social position even in times of considerable social mobility, means that this connection must be explained from societal dynamics. However, the empirical study of the 'sociogenesis' of weight differences remains largely confined to epidemiology and the health sciences. While these disciplines have shown convincingly that body size is governed by social as much as biological mechanisms, they construct such physical traits primarily as indices of organic pathology ('obesity'). In doing so, they overlook the symbolic, aesthetic and especially moral meanings attached to corpulence. An alternative body of research, mainly driven by (social) psychology but also the critical field of 'fat studies' (Cooper, 2010) or 'critical obesity

studies' (Gard et al., 2021), shows that a large body size is a source, not only of physical, but also of mental and social pathology, leading to social exclusion and disadvantage. These studies argue that the overweight are the subject of stigmatization which affects their psychological well-being, and severely restricts their chances of social self-realization. However, by treating weight differences as the 'cause' of differences in social status (rather than their 'effect') this literature runs the risk of naturalizing differences in physical size.

In this chapter, we review existing explanations of the relation between body size and social class, drawing on insights from epidemiology and the health sciences, social psychology, sociology and fat studies. All these fields deal with the relation between body size, social dynamics and social exclusion, but with vastly different assumptions and implications. They also vary widely in their use of terminology. For instance, while epidemiologists tend to speak of 'obesity', fat scholars object to this term, which frames body size essentially as a medical pathology. In this chapter, we will point out such terminological differences. We will use the term 'weight' to refer to quantifiable body mass, and 'body size' to refer to the combination of body weight and body shape, which includes for instance the proportion of fat versus muscle, and the distribution of both across the body. Sometimes we also use the more colloquial 'corpulence' which to our knowledge has not been claimed or objected to by any research field.

After our review of existing explanations, we present an alternative sociological perspective on weight differences in general and larger body size in particular. This perspective, which draws primarily on a sociological approach to the body as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2000), moves beyond the traditional concerns with corpulence as a source of individual pathology, psychological anxiety or social stigma. Instead, we approach body size in its dual reality as both a socially structured *and* structuring physical trait. *Structur-ed*, since the weight and shape of people's bodies reflect their position in and trajectory through social space. *Structur-ing*, since the aesthetic and moral value ascribed to their bodies in turn shape how people come to understand their

social position, and the social position and status of others.

To understand how the social order shapes people's bodies, Bourdieu used the concept of *habitus*. While this term was used by classical social theorists like Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss or Norbert Elias (Wacquant, 2016), it is through Bourdieu that this concept has found its way into the lexicon of contemporary sociology. As Loïc Wacquant explains, the *habitus* refers to 'the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting *dispositions*, or trained capacities and patterned propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which in turn guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu' (Wacquant, 2016, p. 64). However, the *sociological* definition of *habitus* is not even the dominant (i.e., dictionary) definition of the term. That definition belongs to the medical and life sciences where 'habitus' refers to something quite different: the physical constitution of an individual organism (human or non-human) as an index of the state of its physical health. Medical scientists will for instance study the effects of 'body habitus' on a range of medical issues, ranging from cardiovascular disorders and bone mineral density to hypertension, glucose tolerance or arthritis. While the sociological and medical definitions of *habitus* point in quite different directions, we argue that they are by no means antithetical. In fact, by using the case of weight differences we argue that bringing together these 'two habitus'—in the sociological and the medical sense of the word—can help us to understand how social inequality is both expressed and reproduced through the body.

2 Social Class and the 'Obesity Epidemic': The Epidemiological Perspective

Both the rise and the social distribution of overweight have been documented extensively by epidemiologists and health scientists. These disciplines can be credited (more so than sociology) for showing how the apparently most 'natural'

traits, like height, body mass, blood pressure, hormone levels, etc., are governed by social as much as biological principles. Systematic review studies (e.g., Bridger Staats et al., 2021; Devaux & Sassi, 2013; Newton et al., 2017) have shown that physical size is inversely related to social position, particularly among women, but increasingly among men, too. The strength of this association varies according to the indicator of social position (income, level of education or occupational status) and according to country, but the general pattern is confirmed time and again: the higher one's social status and the lower one's average weight.

The relation between class and weight differences becomes even more apparent when studied from a comparative perspective. Whereas in advanced industrial societies, the probability of being labeled as 'obese', or having a higher Body Mass Index (BMI), is inversely related to social status, the opposite holds true for lower-income countries, where body weight systematically *increases* as one rises in the social hierarchy (Bhurosy & Jeewon, 2014). Furthermore, when the general level of affluence rises—to the point where people no longer face the threat of malnutrition and starvation—the prevalence of obesity gradually shifts from the top to the bottom of the social structure (Monteiro et al., 2004).

The rise of obesity is often described as an 'epidemic' (also known as 'globesity'), by health and social scientists but also in media and by public officials (Saguy, 2021). However, this comparison with infectious pathology obscures the fact that little in the current distribution and evolution of weight differences warrants the image of a viral pattern. As many critical scholars, from the social sciences and from the interdisciplinary field of 'fat studies' (see Cooper, 2010; Gard, 2021), have pointed out, the 'epidemic' or 'disease model' of overweight has several shortcomings. First, as we have argued elsewhere (Vandebroek, 2016), by implying that corpulence is something that is equally (and increasingly) probable for *all*, the notion of an epidemic brushes over the social conditions that favor or obstruct the cultivation of slim and corpulent bodies. Thus, it ignores

the unequal distribution of resources that enables some to realize the most valorized (and valorizing) physique, while condemning others to the most stigmatized appearance. Although obesity is still referred to as a 'disease of affluence', it disproportionately affects the *least* affluent people in advanced industrial societies.

Moreover, there is little indication that the class gradient in body weight is attenuating, as the word 'epidemic' suggests. Studies show that across societies, the 'weight gap' between those at the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy is widening (e.g., de Saint Pol, 2009; Devaux & Sassi, 2013; Kark & Rasmussen, 2005). Even if environments have become increasingly more 'obesogenic', though the increased availability of high calorie foods and the mechanization of work and transportation or decreases in labor time, this cannot explain why this affects people at the bottom of the social hierarchy disproportionately more than those at the top, who are after all equally exposed to such 'obesogenic' factors (if not more so, since they are even less likely to engage in physical labor).

Finally, the 'disease model' of obesity developed by epidemiologists constructs body weight almost exclusively as an index of *organic* pathology. This focus on the direct, physiological mechanisms that link corpulence to individual health (i.e., hypertension, diabetes, respiratory illness, etc.) often comes at the expense of the more indirect, 'symbolic' pathways that link the two together. In fact, obesity does not only affect well-being 'from within', that is, by directly affecting physiology and organismic functions (blood pressure, glucose levels, cardiovascular systems, etc.), but also 'from without', through the pervasive stigmatization that the overweight encounter in everyday life. Put differently, if epidemiological research has been instrumental in highlighting the social 'causes' of obesity, it has paid less attention to its social 'effects'. There are in fact alternative bodies of research which show that being endowed with a corpulent physique has serious consequences for the way in which the overweight are forced to negotiate everyday social life.

3 A Disease of the Will: Body Weight, Discrimination and Stigma in Social Psychology and Fat Studies

While the bulk of early research on body size (generally under the header of ‘obesity’) was done in epidemiology and the health sciences, other disciplines have increasingly shown an interesting in the topic. This started with (social) psychology and communication sciences, but now there is an entire field, rather provocatively called ‘fat studies’ (Brazier & Lebesco, 2001; Pausé & Taylor, 2021). Instead of looking at corpulence as a medical problem, these studies argue that the dominant perception of ‘fatness’ is *not* that of a disease, but rather that of a ‘characterological stigma’ (DeJong, 1980, p. 85). In contemporary societies, the size and shape of the body are seen as expressive of a person’s ‘character’ or ‘personality’ (Saguy, 2012). More than a sign of an individual’s physical state, weight differences are read as an index of his or her mental and especially moral state. To be ‘overweight’ is not to be ill, but to lack self-discipline, motivation, ambition, intellect, rationality, in short, all those attributes that define the accomplished individual and are deemed crucial for social success.

If the obese suffer from a disease, it is first and foremost a ‘disease of the will’ to borrow a term from Valverde’s medical history of alcoholism (Valverde, 1998). In health- and body-conscious societies which offer a plethora of ways to ‘stay in shape’, being fat is seen as a sign of not *wanting* to be thin, of lacking the self-determination and self-respect to make the necessary investments in one’s appearance. Even the most superficial glance at the historical or ethnographic record reveals the culturally *arbitrary* nature of any associations between physical corpulence, moral lassitude and social status. However, such beliefs nevertheless produce effects that are all too *real*. An impressive body of research shows how the overweight and especially overweight *women* (Bordo, 2003) face forms of everyday discrimination that are no less pernicious than those experienced by victims of racism, sexism or ageism (Spahlholz et al., 2016). Social psychological research conducted in

both real life and experimental situations shows how the overweight are exposed to prejudice and discrimination in a wide range of everyday settings and from a remarkably early age onward. Overweight children are one of the prime targets of school-bullying (Van Geel et al., 2014). In adult life, the overweight face workplace discrimination and even encounter prejudice from medical professionals and other care providers (Lawrence et al., 2021).

This stigmatization of their appearance affects how the ‘overweight’ relate to their own bodies and (hence) to others. A large body size has been linked to a wide range of mental health problems (Brown et al., 2022; Cooper, 2010). However, what is most relevant from a sociological perspective is that the stigmatization of corpulence not only affects the psychological well-being of the obese, but also circumscribes their chances of social self-realization. Apart from affecting their education and careers, the stigmatization of large bodies also continues later on in their professional lives, where ‘large’ or ‘fat’ people have considerable lower success rates in job interviews and are less likely to be selected for promotion or pay rises (Stahlholz et al., 2016) and prove under-represented among coordinating and managerial functions (Bartels & Nordstrom, 2013).

Whereas epidemiological and medical research treats body weight as one of the ‘outcomes’ or ‘effects’ of differences in social position, these studies tend to place weight differences on the *other* side of the experimental equation by defining them as a (proximate) ‘cause’ of status differentials. Through various mechanisms of weight discrimination, social stigma and ‘fatphobia’ (Cooper, 2010), body size is seen as (partly) responsible for someone’s social position. This is most obvious in social psychological work in this field. Some scholars in fat studies have foregrounded the systemic factors that put some groups, particularly more disadvantaged groups, at more risk of becoming fat (e.g., Monaghan, 2017; Monaghan et al., 2022). However, the focus is mostly on the systemic factors that foster the *exclusion* of the fat. For instance, in a recent review chapter on ‘gendered fat bodies’, Harjunen set out to understand the

relation between gender, fat bodies and neoliberalism. However, the guiding question is not how neoliberalism increases the likelihood that specific (groups of) people become fat (although it probably does). Instead, she investigates how ‘neoliberal thought motivate[s] the normalization of certain body practices and encourage the exclusion of those bodies that do not fit in?’ (Harjunen, 2023, n.p.)

Thus, these studies run the risk of *naturalizing* weight differences by treating weight differences as a simple ‘given’ that produces certain social ‘effects’. Thus, these studies tend to perpetuate the Nature/Culture-dualism by defining weight discrimination as the result of a set of culturally *variable* meanings ‘projected’ onto an otherwise *fixed* or at least unchangeable biological or physical reality. From this it follows that the privileged (indeed the *only*) strategy to counter such discrimination is to change the dominant ‘representations’ of corpulence and, consequently, slimness. In fact, regardless of whether the remedies for weight stigmatization are formulated in the old humanistic jargon that calls for ‘an agreement of mutual respect for the common humanity of each and everyone of us’ (Cahnman, 1968, p. 299), or are phrased in a more contemporary lingo which advocates ‘the reframing of the problem of obesity, where it is not the fat body that is at issue, but the cultural production of fatphobia’ (Cooper, 2010), or in policy recommendations that ‘academic institutions, professional organisations, media, public health authorities, and Government should encourage education about weight stigma and facilitate a new public narrative about obesity, coherent with modern scientific knowledge’ (Brown et al., 2022), in each case, they argue for the symbolic value of weight differences to be transformed to be more ‘respectful’ and ‘inclusive’ of the natural diversity in human somatotypes, that is to say, for Culture to become more attuned to Nature.

Thus, while this approach is very much attuned to a range of intersecting inequalities—particularly gender, race, age, ability, sexuality, but also social class—such inequalities are seen as primarily socio-cultural: symbolic rather than material (e.g., van Amsterdam, 2013). However,

even if one allows for a considerable degree of autonomy of biological heredity vis-à-vis the logic of social reproduction—an autonomy that effectively prevents *any* social group from monopolizing the most sought-after physical qualities *or* being wholly condemned to the most stigmatized ones—fact remains that different social classes have a highly unequal probability of being endowed with a corpulent physique and hence of being exposed to the type of discriminatory acts it provokes. To overlook this fact is to run the risk of mistaking a product of social *inequality* for a mere (biological or social) *difference* and hence to (unwittingly) reinforce the belief in a ‘natural’ distribution of attractive and stigmatized traits—which just happen to be more prevalent among dominant and dominated groups, respectively.

The only way in which the notion of a ‘natural’ diversity of weight differences can be reconciled with the existence of a class gradient in body mass is if the existing mechanisms of weight discrimination would be powerful enough to systematically funnel those who are genetically thin to the top of the class structure, while relegating those with an innate predisposition toward corpulence to the most precarious social positions. While not completely implausible, such an explanation is more hard-pressed to account for the historical evolution of weight differences. If the pace at which obesity rates have increased already renders genetic explanations unlikely (Speakman, 2007), they have particular difficulty in accounting for the historical inversions in the relationship between social position and body size—from a positive to a negative one—as has occurred in most advanced societies over the past two centuries and as can be observed in the developing world today (Monteiro et al., 2004). Given that such inversions occur(red) in the span of a few generations, they would require a degree of *inter-* or *intra-*generational mobility—with the (corpulent) rich shifting to the bottom and the (thin) poor to the top of the social hierarchy—that defies the laws of social physics. The fact that this inversion coincided with a historical shift in the *meaning* of body size and a growing stigmatization of fatness—that only started to take shape over the past

century (Saguy, 2012; Stearns, 2002)—underscores the need for a sociological perspective on body size, and particularly corpulence. A perspective that needs to move beyond the linear causal schemes that typify epidemiological, psychological and cultural approaches and instead focus on the recursive relationship whereby class differences contribute to producing weight differences which in turn help to reinforce and legitimize class differences.

4 Class, Morality and Aesthetics: Toward a Sociological Perspective on Body Size

Attempts to develop a sociological perspective on body size got off to a promising early start. In 1968, Cahnman already advocated a ‘sociogenic’ perspective which argued that the overweight are subjected to a particularly pernicious type of social defamation. While bearing a stigma that is equally apparent as that of ethnic minorities or the disabled, they differ from the latter because they are held *personally* responsible for their own ‘deviant’ identity. More than any other ‘abomination of the body’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 14), corpulence is read through a moralizing and aesthetizing lens in which neither faulty genetics nor brute misfortune, but individual choice and (lack of) personal responsibility are seen as the prime culprits. Unlike discrimination based on relatively ‘fixed’ traits like ethnicity or gender, the obese are seen as ‘choosing’ their own deviant identity, and hence fully deserving of the ridicule and scorn they bring upon themselves. Despite this early attempt at ‘socializing’ corpulence, the social dimension of weight differences would remain at the margins of sociological interest for at least two more decades. By the 1980s, when the body and all things bodily erupted onto the sociological stage, concern with its size and shape came to occupy a central place on the sociological agenda.

Curiously enough however, most texts associated with sociology’s ‘turn to the body’ broached the issue of body weight through a discussion on the increased prevalence of eating disorders, like *anorexia nervosa* or *bulimia*, rather than rapidly

rising obesity figures. A quick content analysis of the words ‘obese’, ‘obesity’, ‘corpulence’ and ‘fat’ versus ‘anorexia’, ‘anorexic’, ‘bulimia’ or ‘eating disorders’ illustrates this bias. Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (2003) mentions eating disorders 173 times, while showing only 30 entries for obesity, Shilling’s *The Body and Social Theory* (2003) mentions anorexia 6 times and has no entry for obesity (although 1 for ‘overweight’), while O’Neill’s *Five Bodies* (2004) has two entries for obesity and none for eating disorders.

One explanation for this bias is that the rise in eating disorders proves more compatible with social theories that view the body as a pliable canvas on which increasingly reflexive individuals can (and *must*) write their own stylized narratives of self (a point well noted by Crossley, 2004). Anorexia in particular has been explained as a form of exaggerated self-control especially likely to affect (upper)middle-class women whose bodies have traditionally functioned as markers of social status (Darmon, 2009; see also Mears and Monnier, this volume). This strong development of reflexive self-control—often seen as the defining feature of our current phase of ‘modernity’—seems difficult to reconcile with the rise of a phenomenon, like the obesity epidemic, that is associated with extreme forms of bodily ‘non-control’. More importantly, the fact that physical size proves intelligibly and significantly related to indices of social position runs counter to the thesis of a growing ‘individualization’ of lifestyle—including the ways in which individuals use, perceive and manage their bodies.

We propose a sociological perspective on body size that takes as its point of departure not the (admittedly alarming) rise of relatively rare eating disorders, but the much more widespread social phenomenon of large body weight or ‘obesity’. To do so, we combine the insights discussed above with sociological class analysis. From epidemiologists and health scientists, we take the insights into the social foundations of human biology and physiology—the manifold ways in which class differences become materialized in the objective, perceptible features of the body (height, weight, size, shape, etc.)—without importing their somewhat narrow focus on such features as indices

of organic pathology resulting from more or less favorable living conditions. From social psychologists, communication scientists and fat scholars, we can take the concern with the *symbolic* properties of the body which convey a particular aesthetic, moral and social value or stigma without thereby forgetting that the physical traits which elicit valorization or stigmatization are themselves social products that are distributed in a highly unequal manner across the class structure.

We argue that both the objective distribution of physical differences within a given society and the symbolic schemata through which these differences are perceived (and from which they derive their distinctive value) can be traced back to the same hierarchical principle, namely the *social division of labor into classes*. For those less versed in sociological thought: social class refers to the hierarchical ordering of (groups of) people according to their position in the labor market. Class is one of the pillars of the social order in capitalist societies and tends to be reproduced across generations: although this varies across time and societies, people are very likely to end up in a similarly privileged or disadvantaged class positions as their parents and grandparents. As Bourdieu (1984, cf. Wacquant, 2016) famously argued, one of the main reasons for this reproduction is *habitus*: in their upbringing people learn specific ways of speaking, moving and behaving that become a second nature, and that lead them to ‘fit in’ in some groups and social positions.

Being inherently relational traits (one is always ‘thinner’ or ‘fatter’ than someone else), the symbolic value that is ascribed to body size cannot be dissociated from their *social* distribution, that is, from their relative degree of rarity, and thus: value. As Pierre Bourdieu phrased it:

It is no accident that bodily properties are perceived through social systems of classification which are not independent of the distribution of these properties among the social classes. The prevailing taxonomies tend to rank and contrast the properties most frequent among the dominant (i.e. the rarest ones) and those most frequent among the dominated. (1984, p. 191)

As long as material insecurity condemns the large majority to the threat of hunger or starvation, a corpulent physique is perceived as a sign of status

and affluence (not to mention ambition, activity and self-determination) and becomes the dominant ideal to which everyone aspires. However, as the degree of affluence rises to the point where the majority is capable of physically sustaining itself, social dominance is increasingly asserted through self-discipline and moderation, through a body that testifies to its owners’ capacity for restraint and rationality and their ability to resist the manifold temptations of ‘consumer culture’. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich succinctly observed: ‘Where there are no passions to be controlled, restraint is not a value’ (1985 [1952], p. 22). Thus, a thin, smooth body becomes the incarnation of the modern middle-class virtue par excellence: self-control.

If class divisions are at both the basis of contemporary weight differences and the symbolic schemes through which these differences are evaluated, this forces sociology to adopt a dual analytical lens which focuses at once on the role that class plays in the social *production* and the social *perception* of weight differences. Vandebroek (2016) argued that the logic of contemporary weight differences can be partly traced back to two diametrically opposed relationships to the body—engendered at opposite ends of social space—which are themselves organized around a series of oppositions of the type form/function, style/substance, light/heavy, etc. On the one hand, there is the dominant relationship to the body, which asserts its distance from economic and biological necessity through an ethos of corporeal restraint, moderation and self-discipline. This ethos centers on a concern with the body as a perceptible ‘form’ oriented toward the scrutiny of others and hence demanding constant aesthetic investment. On the other hand, one finds the dominated relationship to the body which, being the product of conditions of necessity, is informed by a functionalist or instrumental use of the body: as an instrument of labor (both paid and domestic). While this often leads to a stoic attitude to the body and its needs, it also favors a ‘realistic hedonism’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 394), especially in matters of food and drink, which, in conditions that are otherwise pervaded by necessity, constitute one of the few sources

of luxury and open to dominated agents (for an outstanding empirical study of mechanism, see Fielding-Singh, 2017). Within this perspective, the social evolution and distribution of larger body sizes cannot be adequately explained without considering the class-based habitus that renders some (the dominated) particularly susceptible to the threats of an increasingly ‘obesogenic’ environment, while it in a sense ‘inoculates’ others—the dominant—from these threats, which they perceive as being part of a lifestyle that is branded as vulgar and passive. Thus, moral disdain is mixed with an aesthetic distaste for both lifestyles and bodies that are excessive, uncontrolled and ‘out of bounds’.

In addition, we draw on Bourdieu’s conception of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) as an inherently *pre-reflexive* and *pre-discursive* principle of social classification—deeply ingrained in the class habitus—to account for another aspect of human body weight (not discussed so far), namely its strong resistance to individual strategies of weight change and especially weight loss (Brown et al., 2022; Franz et al., 2007). In fact, while epidemiological research clearly demonstrates the existence of a social gradient in body size (and hence underscores the ‘constructed’ nature of weight differences), it also highlights the low success rates of dieting and the high incidence of weight regain, which seemingly lends support to theories—both lay and scientific—that postulate the largely pre-determined (i.e., genetic) character of human morphology. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ provides a way out of this apparent paradox. By situating the operation of class constraints *not* at the level of conscious strategy, but rather of embodied dispositions—of which tastes in food constitute the paradigm—it helps explain the *social* foundations of weight differences (something which the biological determinism inherent in purely genetic explanations of body weight cannot), without thereby lapsing into the voluntaristic bias implied in concepts like ‘body projects’ (Shilling, 2003), which in turn fail to explain why weight proves so intractable to intentional change.

5 Weight, Merit and the Legitimization of Inequality

The discussion thus far has left one key question unanswered, namely what is it about body *weight* and weight differences that make them into such an effective vehicle for the naturalization of social inequality? We believe there are two reasons that make physical size into an especially salient marker when it comes to the everyday justification of inequality. First, the stigmatization of obesity would not play such an effective role in the legitimization of class inequalities, if it did not latch onto some of the central tropes that have haunted social commentary on the working poor for centuries. From their inherent idleness, gargantuan appetites (both culinary and sexual), predilection to addiction, obscenity and other forms of moral depravity, working-class bodies have systematically served as the grotesque, unappealing mirror image of dominant morality, serving as the Nature against which those who occupy more favorable social positions measure their own degree of Culture (Jordan, 2001). The contemporary social distribution of weight differences provides the seemingly most tangible confirmation of such beliefs. It is in the sagging, bulging contours of the corpulent body that one finds the perfect ‘visual representation of non-control’ (Ritenbaugh, 1982, p. 352), the best proof of its owners’ inability to harness impulse and desire, to transcend nature and common animality. If a slim and toned body indicates the self-control and active personality that is associated with sexual attractiveness, social success and moral uprightness, then a corpulent physique serves as ‘the pretext for a class-racism which associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 196).

Second, when it comes to explaining and justifying social inequalities, the physical body and its visible attributes has lost much of its legitimizing force. While invoking physical or biological traits (‘blue blood’) to legitimize status differences might be acceptable in a feudal social

order, it is no longer acceptable in social systems where status, especially through the legitimizing action of the educational system, is deemed to be the product of individual *merit* (see Sarpila & Kukkonen, this volume). To exclude individuals on the basis of such characteristics as skin color, sex, age or even physical disability is fundamentally incompatible with the (formal) commitment to meritocratic principles that characterizes most contemporary societies. While racism, sexism or ageism remains rampant, they no longer provide a solid justification for class differentials and their public manifestations are not only increasingly perceived as a form of ‘political incorrectness’, but are also liable to provoke legal sanctions (see Mitgaard & Mason, this volume). However, it is precisely in this respect that body *weight* stands out. While corpulence is an equally visible source of social stigmatization, it differs from other physical stigmata because it does *not* share their ‘ascribed’ character and is instead seen as a matter of personal control and individual choice. It is precisely this ‘hybrid’ quality of body weight, suspended halfway between Nature and Culture, a gift and achievement, a being and a having—which makes it into such an effective vehicle for legitimizing class differences. In fact, the homology between (morally qualified) physical traits and positions in the social structure makes body weight into more than just a ‘sign’ of social status, but effectively transform it into the basis for ‘an embodied *theory* of the division of labor’ (Martin, 2000, p. 202, original emphasis). Physical properties like fatness or slimness do not just constitute an ‘expression’ of a given social position, but effectively provide an ‘explanation’ for that position of the type: ‘Fat people are lazy and unmotivated; The poor and unemployed are fat; Ergo: They are poor because they are passive and unmotivated’.

The moral value that is assigned to the size of the body hence provides a justification of class inequality that, crucially, can dispense with essentialist and quasi-racist narratives on innate ability and natural predisposition and, instead, invokes differences in self-determination, self-discipline and personal ambition as one of the

key explanations of inequality of opportunities. In this manner, the dominant perception of corpulence and slimness contributes to re-presenting the social order as an inherently *moral* order in which individuals are not classified, segregated and distinguished by their unequal access to the fundamental sources of social power (income, education, etc.), but ranked according to their *individual* degree of ‘character’ and moral fiber.

The key part of this phrase is of course ‘*contributes to...*’. It is not our intention to suggest that the current distribution/perception of weight differences is somehow sufficient to legitimize the complex mechanics of class domination. Even if the relationship between social class and body mass is strong and (as longitudinal research suggests) is becoming stronger (Kim & Colabianchi, 2022), their mutual ‘fit’ is still too loose for weight differences to be fully aligned with class differences (a point also noted by Martin, 2000). Furthermore, in the everyday perception of class differences, the size and shape of the body are of course but individual elements in a broader system of features which also includes cosmetic and sartorial indices, not to mention the sociological imponderabilia of gesture, posture, accent and movement. However, within contemporary ‘body-conscious’ societies (see Widdows, this volume), physical size is nevertheless a particularly salient element which is increasingly seen as providing the most indisputable marker of class (or the lack thereof). To ignore the class dimension of weight differences (in general) and the obesity epidemic (in particular) is hence not only to deprive oneself of one of the key explanatory vectors of the phenomenon, but also to ignore one of the more subtle ways in which class domination asserts itself in contemporary societies.

6 Avenues for Further Research

In its attempt to unravel the relationship between body weight and social inequality, this chapter has advanced a twofold argument. For those interested in studying appearance, beauty and the body, it highlights the conceptual centrality of social

class to both the social production and the evaluation of weight differences—and therefore to physical beauty. Through class-based differences in lifestyle (especially the relationship to the body they engender) class divisions become, quite literally, inscribed in the physical contours of the body. At the same time, the unequal distribution of physical properties—like slimness or corpulence—across social space helps to determine which of these properties are perceived as beautiful, attractive, refined or distinguished and which are denounced as ugly, vulgar or excessive. In follow-up research, this insight in the centrality of social class could inform existing work on aesthetic, erotic or beauty capital (see d Pieters, this volume), which—though it pays lip service to the Bourdieusian notion of capital—often does not refer to the class dimension of such embodied forms of capital, thus removing the critical edge of the Bourdieusian concept of capital (note that this critique does not apply to the chapters in this Handbook).

We hope this contribution opens up new possibilities for exchange between the sociology of the body and new critical approaches to the body, obesity, and social exclusion and stigmatization. While the fields of fat studies and critical obesity studies have foregrounded intersecting inequalities, they tend to focus on race, gender, sexuality and disability rather than class (cf. Pausé & Taylor, 2021). Follow-up work could address the intersections of social class and these other axes of inequality, as studied and theorized in these fields. Importantly, our approach suggests that it might not be the most productive to think of body size as simply another intersecting axis of inequality, alongside gender, sexuality or, indeed, social class. Instead, we suggest that, at least in contemporary societies, body size is better thought of as a more direct expression of class habitus, which cannot be analytically separated from this ‘axis’.

As was noted throughout the chapter, the association between body size and class is especially strong among women. We realize we have paid scant attention to the gender-class nexus, but this finding strongly resonates with arguments made elsewhere in this volume: the notion of beauty

as a subordinate form of capital most commonly associated with women as a less powerful category (Craig, this volume), and women’s bodies as a central site for signaling upper middle-class status (Monnier & Mears, this volume). However, existing research, as well as feminist theoretizations of fat, has tended to focus on middle-class women, whereas our approach suggests that women from the dominated classes are most likely to be disadvantaged by the class/weight nexus described here.

Moreover, further research could explore the intersections between body size, class and ethnicity/race. Strings (2019) has shown how in the US, the stigmatization of big bodies is connected with racial prejudice against African Americans—pointing to mechanisms that are strongly reminiscent of the class-based inequalities discussed here. Epidemiological research has documented intersections between ethnicity, migration background, class and body size (Park & Blanck, 2024), but further research could explore these relations using the two-way recursive association between social position and body size discussed here. Finally, the recent introduction of weight-loss medicine such as Ozempic has cast a whole new light on discussions of body size and social class (Oswald, 2024). The prohibitive price of such drugs establishes a more direct link between body size and social class as purely economic category. At the same time, if thinness can simply be bought, this may diminish the link between self-control and thinness that fuels middle-class habitus, and the resulting middle-class superiority.

While the primary aim of this chapter is to correct the curiously ‘class-less’ nature of much contemporary work on beauty and body size (see Darmon, 2009), we also want to challenge the strangely ‘ethereal’ or ‘disembodied’ view of social actors that typifies current research on inequality and social stratification. Indeed, far from being a purely ‘cosmetic’ issue, the aesthetic and moral value that gets assigned to the size and shape of our bodies adds its own specific symbolic force to both lay and expert justifications of inequality. By ignoring the embodied

dimension of class, the study of social inequalities ignores a particularly effective principle in the everyday reproduction of inequality. In developing this argument, we have argued for a broadening of our traditional (i.e., sociological) conception of ‘habitus’ to also include the body’s *physical features*, like its height, weight, size and shape, in addition to the more obviously learned features of posture, grooming, speech or other forms of embodied cultural capital. This enlarged understanding of habitus, which dovetails with the uses of the habitus concept in the life sciences, provides a corrective to the cosmetic voluntarism that subtends concepts like ‘body projects’, or ‘body work’ (Shilling, 2003), as well as ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim, 2011). Yet it also avoids the biological determinism of approaches that reduce the physical body to the inevitable (and immutable) realization of genetic templates or ‘lifestyle choices’ and instead points to the ways in which our physical characteristics are shaped by our *social* position and trajectory. A better understanding of *how* this process effectively occurs inevitably entails a move beyond the perspective of one single discipline. To adequately study the sociogenesis of contemporary weight differences we need to integrate sociological with psychological and physiological approaches to the body. In the case of body *weight* this means drawing on the combined insights of such divergent disciplines as health science and social epidemiology, anthropology, social psychology and cultural history.

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Dieter Vandebroeck is a Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology at the Free University of Brussels (VUB) where he directs the research lab on *Childhood, Culture and Cognition*. His research interests center around the sociology of childhood, the sociology of the body, as well as the sociological study of class inequality. He is the author of *Distinctions in the Flesh. Social Class and the Embodiment of Inequality* (Taylor and Francis, 2016) and *Socializing Inequality. Class, Culture & Cognition in Early Childhood* (Taylor and Francis, 2026, with Maaïke Jappens and Annette Lareau). His research has been published in leading journals including *European Societies*, *American Sociological Review*, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, *Poetics* and *Sociology*. He was a Visiting Fellow at the *School of Social Sciences of the University of Manchester* and is a Research Associate of the *Centre Européen de Sociologie et de Science Politique* in Paris.

Giselinde Kuipers is Research Professor at the Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven University. She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural standards and their consequences for social interactions, identities, and inequalities. She has published widely on the relation between culture and inequality, as well as beauty, fashion, media, humor, popular culture, and cultural industries, often from a comparative or transnational perspective. Currently, she directs a large comparative study on beauty and inequality funded by the European Research Council.

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Clothing, Beauty, and Inequality

Irmak Karademir

1 Introduction: Why Do Tastes in Clothing Matter?

The societal significance of physical beauty has long been acknowledged by economists, psychologists, and sociologists. Extensive research has documented that attractive appearances confer advantages in various social realms, including employment and interpersonal relationships (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Kuipers, 2015). Often described as an asset, it is referred to using the terminology of capital, such as aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010), physical capital (Shilling, 1991), body capital (Antoninetti & Garrett, 2012), and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018). Although these concepts have predominantly developed in relation to the physical attributes of the body, it is crucial to recognise that bodies that gain social advantage in everyday interactions are also clothed. By selecting the right cut, colour, and style, we enhance the aspects of our physical bodies that we wish to make more prominent, while simultaneously concealing features we consider less appealing. The ability to find the right fit and style that enhances the body's beauty while representing the wearer's identity

and fitting with conventional expectations and tastes is a skill. Recognising this, Godart (2023) uses the term 'stylistic capital', which refers to the ability of individuals to select and use styles in the realm of clothes and adornment. Research from different disciplines shows how clothing choices mark particular types of bodies, especially in the workplace, creating biases and inequalities (Chang & Cortina, 2023).

Particularly in an era when the fashion industry operates at an ever-increasing pace, achieving this can be seen as a challenge. Today, the market offers various services, ranging from personal shoppers to AI-generated wardrobe apps all promising to create unique, individual, and stylish clothing combinations. Social media platforms are argued to spread stylistic capital in non-centralised ways (Pedroni, 2023), yet paradoxically reproducing the idea that stylistic principles cannot be learned easily at the same time (Godart, 2023). Whether acquired externally or curated authentically, certain notions and standards are socially accepted as indicators of good taste in clothing (Appleford, 2020, Karademir-Hazir, 2014, 2017, 2020). When embodied correctly, good taste in clothing can function as an extension of physical attractiveness, contributing to the value of aesthetic capital. Despite the evident connection between the two, Anderson et al., (2010) review of the literature revealed that only approximately 10% of studies on beauty included clothing and adornment as defining aesthetic traits.

I. Karademir (✉)
School of Sociology and Social Policy, Law and Social
Sciences Building, University of Nottingham,
Nottingham, UK
e-mail: Irmak.Karademir@nottingham.ac.uk

From this point, a plethora of sociologically relevant questions emerge: What motivates or constrains our tastes in clothing? How does the skill of ‘getting it right’ develop? What are the social consequences of ‘style failures’? In this chapter, I will delve into these questions by examining the existing literature, with a specific focus on the inequalities ingrained in and perpetuated through sartorial choices. My primary emphasis will be on social class, and its intersection with gender, as the majority of the classic and current debates revolve around how clothing styles signify classed and gendered identities. While doing so, I will broaden the scope beyond the fashion system—or the extent to which people engage with it—to encompass everyday clothing practices. This will necessitate a discussion of inequalities in relation to the lived experiences of ‘dressed’ bodies, rather than solely scrutinising the consumption or acquisition of fashionable attire.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, I will examine the tension between macro-based structural explanations and those emphasising increased individual involvement and diversity within the realm of clothing. Second, I will discuss the advantages of perspectives in which clothing is perceived as an embodied, situated practice and ‘dressed body’ is used as a concept. The subsequent section will focus on a case study of women’s clothing practices in Turkey, a national context marked by distinct economic, cultural, and religious dynamics compared to the contexts in which dress as an embodied practice has traditionally been conceptualised and studied. In the concluding section, I will highlight areas where research on clothing and inequalities can delve deeper and expand.

2 Clothing the Female Body: Class, Patriarchy, or Individuality?

Clothing practices and tastes have long been discussed in relation to the class inequalities they represent and perpetuate. Classical theories, such as those put forth by Veblen (1970 [1899]) and

Simmel (1997 [1905]), commonly referred to as the ‘emulation’ thesis, suggested that our understanding of what constitutes good taste in clothing is predominantly shaped by the upper classes. This assumption posits that when fashionable styles are imitated by the lower classes, they lose their ability to delineate class boundaries. This, in turn, prompts the upper classes to legitimise and embrace new styles. The judgements regarding good taste are often viewed as arbitrary since aesthetically ‘impossible’ novel styles are deemed acceptable simply because they are adopted by individuals who are considered to be “generally elegant” and who pay great attention to their appearances (Simmel, 1997 [1905], p. 298). Such styles should also symbolise respectability by testifying to the wearer’s “exemption from or incapacity for all vulgarly productive employment” (Veblen, 1970 [1899], p. 179).

Clothing production has undergone significant transformations since these classical theories emerged, arguably diminishing their explanatory power. The waning influence of haute couture, the rise of fast fashion, the emergence of ‘street styles’ (Gronow, 1997), and the increasing fragmentation of the fashion scene (Sweetman, 2001) are all considered to indicate a more ‘democratised’ and diversified understanding of good taste in clothing. The expansion of the internet further contributed to this diversification. Virtual fashion scenes and databases enabled individuals from different backgrounds and localities to engage with multiple fashion trends, even providing consumers with the opportunity to co-design fashionable goods (Crewe, 2017). These developments, according to Appleford, meant that good taste and fashionable clothing no longer represented elite styles; ‘although an elite may influence how trends or tastes develop, rarely is it expected that these fashions will be adopted by the mass public’ (Appleford, 2020, p. 54). Additionally, research testing the trickle-down theory on an international scale showed that aesthetic styles do not diffuse from a core to a periphery context in a linear way, as assumed by status-based diffusion (Kuipers et al., 2023).

The shift in clothing research, moving from macro-based structural explanations to increased

individual involvement and plurality, is underpinned by broader changes in our conceptualisation of how societies function in late modernity. The postmodern cultural context, operating within advanced global capitalism, is defined by its affinity for ambivalence, uncertainty, and playfulness over fixed aesthetic categories (e.g. Kaplan, 1988; Wilson, 1985). This desire for fluidity is simultaneously capitalised upon by a new ever-expanding consumer culture offering infinite choices for self-expression. Aesthetic codes from other cultures, subcultures, or past eras are commodified, arguably providing individuals with a wide array of options to liberate themselves from previously structurally determined taste repertoires (Kaiser, 1991). As Featherstone (1982) contends, this new consumer culture fosters discourse and a novel conception of self, termed ‘performing self’, which merges the inner and outer body and heightens people’s awareness of their outward appearances. In this context, ‘appearance management’ has emerged as a term to encapsulate the deliberate choices individuals make regarding their bodies, including their clothing preferences. Notwithstanding these theoretical interpretations, empirical studies exploring lived experiences tend to show that clothing is often perceived as a way to achieve coherence, authenticity, and continuity of identity rather than fluidity and fragmentation (Guy & Banim, 2000; Van der Laan & Velthuis, 2016; Woodward, 2007).

Studies employing appearance management underscore clothing’s capacity to enhance body image and body satisfaction (Kaiser, 1997; Tiggerman & Lacey, 2009). They also imply what Tseëlon (2001, p. 443) describes as a “newly discovered freedom to engage in a carnivalistic collage of self-explorations, involving pleasure, creativity, style, and aesthetics”. Approached as an agentic response, appearance management becomes a means to shape and define one’s identity, encompassing the resolution of conflicting emotions related to various aspects of our identity and how we relate to cultural norms (Kaiser, 1991). From this perspective, the aesthetic standards of good taste in clothing remain ambivalent, but individuals possess the capacity to beautify their dressed bodies through bricolage and

self-production. Research suggests that the post-Fordist labour market requires individuals to continuously engage with this backstage labour, as this aesthetic performance is read as ‘work readiness and self-development’. This performance should go beyond creating a clean and decent-looking subject, but a flexible and adaptable subject that can make work-self calibrations through appearance management (van den Berg & Arts, 2019a, 2019b).

While the demands emanating from the employment market perpetuate the conception of performing the self, numerous qualitative studies reveal the limits of individual reflexivity, unpacking the inequalities embedded in the ‘appearance management’ processes. These include the systematic devaluation of particular embodied femininities (Skeggs, 1997), aesthetic expressions specific to particular locations (Gimlin, 2002), and class-based emotional constraints in fashion consumption (Rafferty, 2011). Also noted is how socio-economic factors create important differences in consumers’ patterns of exposure to fashion knowledge through media and virtual consumption scenes, enhancing or limiting the repertoire that the performing self is assumed to draw on reflexively (Appleford, 2020; Gowreesunker & Dixit, 2017).

The reflexive formulations of the self often hide how the intensity of judgements and norms directed at different social groups varies. Feminist approaches have extensively examined how women disproportionately face heightened expectations and standards for appearance management, potentially undermining their agency (e.g. Bartky, 2014; Bordo, 1993; McRobbie, 2015). These studies treat norms about beauty as discourses and regimes of knowledge that serve to govern women’s bodies, making them responsible for their own bodily appearance and health. For example, in her seminar work, Bartky (2014) extends Foucault’s notions and discusses how women internalise the discourse on looking good through surveillance and disciplining processes. Clothing is a significant aspect of these disciplinary practices, as it is “directed toward the display of the body as an ornamented

surface” (Bartky, 2014, p. 98). Recent empirical studies explore how the fashion-beauty complex continues to govern women’s bodies in myriad ways. For instance, Luna Mora and Berry (2021) suggest that modern yoga-wear labels uphold traditional patriarchal ideals concerning the female physique and introduce new methods of moral judgement, discipline, surveillance, and social regulation. They argue that the “yoga uniform”, working like an “invisible corset”, addresses the societal desire for similarity and a sense of belonging while also fostering distinctions of status and class.

Feminist scholars within clothing and textiles research have increasingly emphasised the need for feminist theories to account for the contradictions between dominant conceptions of a free individual and the definition of femininity that offers multiple possibilities for constructing gendered identities. For instance, clothing and textiles research edited a special issue dedicated to feminist perspectives (2000, volume 18, number 3) in which researchers explored how gender as a fluid concept adapts its expression according to class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. The papers in this issue also recognised the role clothing plays in how women understand, represent, and resist the inherent contradictions in their lives. Supporting this perspective, other empirical studies provide evidence that people’s individual experiences of clothing are not solely governed by an overarching discourse. For instance, Young (2005) demonstrates that the pleasures women derive from clothing are not necessarily tied to the patriarchal, male gaze-oriented fashion. In her analysis, Young identifies the bonds formed through sharing stories about clothing and items or through the act of shopping itself as sources of female pleasure. Similarly, Woodward’s study (2007) on women’s clothing practices shows that women are not passive recipients of the beauty and fashion industry’s dictates, as they do not necessarily compare their bodies to the images promoted by this industry in their everyday clothing practices. More recently, Johnson (2022) studied boutiques in Australia, which she suggests are socio-cultural establishments where the concentrated effort of adopting a fashionable feminine

identity unfolds—a form of embodiment that extends beyond the boutique’s confines and influences an individual’s interactions in the broader society. Using autoethnographic memoirs and in-depth interviews, Johnson shows while boutiques play a role in women’s subjugation, they also contribute to their empowerment by offering opportunities to defy internalised oppressive standards and choose whose validation they prioritise.

3 Clothing as an Embodied Practice

Within clothing scholarship, there has long been a theoretical puzzle regarding how to approach clothing in a manner that recognises individual agency and experiences while acknowledging the structural inequalities that constrain them. Several scholars have argued that the intricate relationship between dress, culture, and the body can be most effectively explored when clothing is viewed as a phenomenon with significant impacts on the lived body (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001; Sweetman, 2001). In her book ‘The Fashioned Body’, Entwistle (2000) draws on various disciplines, such as phenomenology, sociology, and anthropology, to define clothing as a ‘situated body practice’ and an integral aspect of broader embodiment practices.

Goffman’s symbolic interactionist approach (1963) provides avenues for examining how broader social inequalities may be perpetuated through the embodiment of clothes in social interactions. In Goffman’s conception of the interaction order, individuals seek to project a ‘definition’ of the situation in their social encounters, and the impressions conveyed through their bodies play a central role in the process by which participants agree on their roles and positions within that particular interaction. When referring to this ‘conventionalised form of non-verbal communication’, Goffman employs the term ‘body idiom’, encompassing dress, posture, facial adornments, and overt emotional expressions (1963, p. 33). Individuals may consciously behave in a calculated manner and manage

their body idioms to express themselves in a specific way. However, observers assess authenticity by scrutinising elements that are not easily controlled. If someone's performance appears insincere, they fail to convey the impression of being 'one of our kind' and risk sudden exposure and humiliation. The agency of individuals in managing their appearances through clothing is thus constrained by various other embodied features, including their ability to appropriate and carry themselves in a manner that commands respect.

Scholars who conceptualise clothing as a situated practice draw heavily on Bourdieu, who conducted empirical investigations into how Goffmanesque body idioms are unequally distributed in society. According to Bourdieu (1990), a range of structural factors, including the quantity, combination, and trajectory of our capitals, determine an individual's position in a social sphere. This position shapes an individual's habitus, which generates a practical sense or a feel for the game, operating on various aspects of social life, including how we engage with, present, and carry our dressed bodies. In Bourdieu's theory, Goffman's concept of the impression of 'one of our kind' arises from the practical sense embodied in the actor through a lengthy process of socialisation. This makes the dressed body "the most indisputable materialization of class taste", revealing "the deepest dispositions of the habitus" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 190). In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu goes beyond Goffman to empirically investigate what kinds of dispositions class habitus specifically generates in relation to clothing as part of broader embodiment practices. For instance, the working-class habitus, characterised by temporal and material constraints, fosters an instrumental approach to clothing, prioritising function over form and adhering to "value for money" principles. In contrast, the middle class, who exhibit a high degree of awareness of the symbolic and material advantages gained from beautifying the dressed bodies, makes fewer distinctions between domestic and formal attire or between outerwear and undergarments (1984, p. 207). It should be noted that empirical

research, especially those examining the relationship between clothing and working-class femininity, challenges this rather simplistic reading. They show how working-class women are very much aware of the significance of 'dressing to impress' and presenting 'respectable' looks, and therefore make an attempt to engage with the clothing scene accordingly (Appleford, 2020; McKenzie, 2015).

According to Bourdieu, such differences perpetuate inequalities because the competence in effectively combining a legitimised clothing style can be translated into assets in various other social domains. For example, the clothing style of upper-class individuals can facilitate the establishment of crucial social contacts in exclusive contexts, thus converting into social capital, as they successfully convey the impression of being "one of our kind". Embodied cultural capital can also translate into institutional cultural capital in the realm of education, where bodily appearance and management become evaluation criteria in private school and university entrance interviews (Shilling, 2004). Furthermore, it can easily transform into economic capital in the workplace, particularly for middle-class occupations focused on presentation and representation (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 206). The newer and compartmentalised conceptualisation of embodied capital—for instance, aesthetic capital (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Sarpila et al., 2020), stylistic capital (Godart, 2023), body capital (Mears, 2015)—all build on the economic terminology of capitals, recognising the convertibility of this asset that comes from 'skills' in adornment and self-presentation. It is not surprising to see this conceptual proliferation; as Kuipers (2022) shows, the societal importance of appearance has been growing rapidly 'as a result of expanding media and consumer cultures, social democratization, a shift to a service-based economy and the rise of new media' (p. 207). However, note that neither Goffman's body idioms and interaction order, nor Bourdieu's habitus and field conceptualisation explicitly acknowledge how dressed bodies also accumulate value in relation to the gender of the wearer. More recent explorations have pushed

theoretical and empirical studies towards more interdisciplinary avenues, encouraging us to question how cultural and moral judgements are interlinked in the class-based evaluations of clothing styles.

4 Classed Femininities: Clothing at the Intersection of Class and Gender

Several feminist researchers have extended the Bourdieusian approach to embodiment, demonstrating how clothing practices, although often regarded as markers of cultural taste, can serve as the basis for moral value judgements that pathologise specific femininities. As recognised by many, the concept of ‘respectability’ is a significant aspect of class evaluations and largely draws on women’s performances of gender and sexuality. Respectability involves restraining bodily comportment and movements—speaking in turn, remaining calm, being polite—and dressing ‘appropriately’ (Attfield, 2016), which demonstrates that the person is worthy of being taken seriously (Appleford, 2020; Morris & Munt, 2019).

As van den Berg and Arts’ study, ‘Who can wear flip-flops to work’ showed (2019), moral worth is inscribed on dressed bodies regardless of gender. However, the literature I focus on here emphasises how historically the scrutiny women are exposed to has been different in intensity as well as in terms of its implications than men’s, due to stricter norms around women’s sexuality, domestic position, and maternal roles. A seminal study on this topic is Lawler’s work (2004) in which she investigates how media portrayals of protests in a working-class neighbourhood and a middle-class suburb shape perceptions of classed femininity among the protestors. She finds that the working-class protestors were frequently vilified based on their appearance and clothing choices, with newspapers employing highly negative language and detailed descriptions. In contrast, middle-class protestors did not face the same level of scrutiny. In a similar vein, McRobbie (2004) analyses BBC TV shows ‘What

Not to Wear’ and ‘Would Like to Meet’, in which two upper-middle-class women with high cultural capital guide participants, typically from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in improving their appearance after publicly critiquing their current clothing choices. Her research reveals that not all aesthetic expressions of femininity, as manifested through clothing choices in this context, are equally affected by power dynamics. The media contributes to the creation of an evaluative scale based on dressed bodies, ranging from marking failure for those perceived as welfare-dependent single mothers to marking success for those seen as well groomed and sophisticated. This scale perpetuates symbolic violence against the former group of embodied femininities, as women internalise the hierarchy and view their clothing practices as intrinsically inferior and lacking ‘style’.

Skeggs’ ethnography of working-class women unveils that these women are aware of how societal codes of feminine sartorial styles often categorise them as ‘sexual, vulgar, tarty, pathological’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 115), potentially jeopardising the social capital they have been striving to accumulate through other means. In another work, Skeggs (2004) demonstrates that what truly earns recognition and holds exchange value is the knowledge of how to appropriate attires rather than merely acquiring them. In this context, the embodiment of working-class femininity through clothing yields less symbolic value as long as women cannot ‘achieve’ ‘how to get it right’ and bridge the gap between their dispositions and representations (2004, p. 136). From a similar vein, Appleford’s study (2020) on women’s clothing practices and aesthetic judgements across social classes shows that working-class women’s fashion choices and their attempts to follow fashion trends closely are continually misrecognised by the middle classes who are keen to distance themselves from any notion of working-classness by upholding their respectability through ‘classic, timeless, tasteful, and refined’ styles (p. 199).

Clothing practices have been scrutinised from various perspectives, unveiling the class and gender inequalities expressed and perpetuated

through apparently mundane choices about what to wear. However, it's important to note that the hierarchies mentioned, such as those between clothing preferences (e.g. quality and aesthetics versus quantity and function), or the dichotomies illuminated in qualitative studies (like subtly embellished, feminine, plain styles versus overtly visible, sexual styles), are specific to the societal context in which these associations arise. The following section will shift the focus to the Turkish context as a case study, questioning how approaching clothing as an embodied practice can illuminate class inequalities in a setting quite different from where the core literature on the subject has originated.

5 Case Study: The Turkish Field of Dressed Bodies

Turkey is an intriguing case for studying clothing practices because the policies implemented to modernise the republic assumed that changing the outer layer would result in a change in essence. According to Bilgin (2004), this created an 'obsession with appearance' that has proven resistant to change. The history of modernisation inevitably established an overarching hierarchy between Western, modern, secular forms and traditional, religious ones. When founded in 1923, the new Turkish state introduced sartorial laws (e.g. banning veiling among civil servants), educational institutions (e.g. girls' educational institutes), and manuals (e.g. etiquette books) to make citizens embody the modern Turkish identity.

However, as revealed in the analysis of these policies (e.g. Toktaş & Cindoğlu, 2006), the dissemination of modern bodily dispositions had its limitations and was primarily adopted by educated urban citizens. However, the long-established associations between religious clothing styles and lower social class positions began to loosen after the economic restructuring of the 1980s, enabling conservative factions and mid-sized small-city entrepreneurs to accumulate capital. This resulted in the bourgeoisie and middle classes splitting into two distinct segments in terms of religious motivations, developing

their consumption spheres (e.g. Özcan & Turunç, 2011). Fashionable new veil brands started to provide aesthetic variety, allowing women to express their identity in line with refined urban taste. As demonstrated empirically by Sandıkçı and Ger (2010), pious women with high cultural capital began to aesthetically embrace veiling as both a means of distinguishing themselves from rural, 'unsophisticated', and traditional women and as a way to negotiate their similarity (in terms of cultivated dispositions) with secular moderns.

Within this context, I have explored clothing tastes, practices, and emotions of women, covered and not covered, living in Ankara drawing upon a survey (N: 229) and 44 follow-up interviews. Through questionnaires, I collected information about women's brand preferences, garment choices, styles, and informative resources, along with their reasons for these selections (such as intentions to appear modern, traditional, or feminine). Through interviews, I delved deeper into women's taste in clothing and how they emotionally experience their clothing choices in various contexts.

The quantitative data were analysed using MCA (Multiple Correspondence Analysis), a geometrical data analysis method similar to what Bourdieu (1984) used in *Distinction*. The analysis revealed the most pronounced tensions in women's practices and notions of good taste in clothing visually by identifying practices that are likely and unlikely to go together. The variables indicating an informed status in fashion, consumption of Western/high-end brands, and a penchant for creating distinctively visible and feminine looks contrasted with the desire to appear pious and ordinary, shop from local and familiar outlets, and display a noticeable lack of interest in new fashions. When women's class positions were superimposed on this tension between what I call the principles of conspicuousness and sobriety, it became clear that the former approach to clothing was associated with high levels of cultural capital and upper/upper-middle-class positions (Karademir-Hazir, 2014).

Interviews added nuance to this distinction. For instance, interviewees with lower levels of cultural capital prepared their dressed bodies

for public presentation differently than those with more cultural capital. “Entering into society” was considered the primary motivation for maintaining well-kept and well-groomed appearances, making finer distinctions between social contexts less relevant. Conversely, those with high cultural capital applied elaborate criteria to create the “right looks”, each tailored to specific public social contexts. They viewed the public as composed of compartments marked by subtle distinctions, which might be invisible to women with fewer resources. Perceptions of age-appropriate clothing were also hierarchical. Those with less cultural capital, for example, assembled their appearances based on standards appropriate for their age and social roles as mothers and wives. Their dispositions were marked by the notion of ‘toning down’, resulting in recognisable corporeal style differences from their highly educated peers. Instead of age-appropriateness, awareness of one’s physical qualities was highly valued in culturally cultivated circles, implying the significance attributed to autonomous evaluation skills (Karademir-Hazir, 2020).

These class and cultural hierarchies in clothing styles are not mere differences but factors contributing to the reproduction of inequalities, as women internalise this hierarchy and develop awareness of their position within it. When women with limited resources discussed presenting their dressed bodies in public, the most salient emotions were resentment, aspiration, and indifference. On the other hand, the way culturally competent interviewees engaged with their dressed bodies imbued them with self-assurance, feelings of superiority, and complacency (Karademir-Hazir, 2017). Instead of supporting the existence of reflexive taste repertoires, the anecdotes of interviewees demonstrate the explanatory power of ‘embodied cultural capital’; certain dressed bodies easily elicit respect, attention, and approval during public presentations, while others face more emotionally stressful experiences.

Overall, my study showed that even if all the interviewees had the same wardrobe, their dressed bodies would still be distinct and consistent with their habitus-specific subjectivity. The market offers many alternatives, but, as women’s

narratives suggest, one needs to be competent enough to select what suits their body shape and combine the pieces accordingly.

There were, however, a few notable differences between Turkey and other national contexts that have been studied more intensively, such as France and the UK, in terms of what constitutes good taste in clothing. For instance, in Turkey displaying femininity became equated with demonstrating modernity and was embodied as a notion by culturally and economically advantaged women. Contrary to Bourdieu’s findings, suggesting that clothing and hairstyles involve less ‘mature’ features as one moves away from the dominant pole, sober styles were associated with the traditional in Turkey and appropriated by those with limited resources, resulting in reserved dispositions. Looking at the lived experience of clothing also revealed that the historical hierarchical ordering of the secular body over the religiously dressed one is less relevant to Turkish women’s evaluative frameworks today. The new pious female clothing styles adopted by upwardly mobile women allow them to differentiate themselves from other traditionally covered women. In that sense, the expansion of the market seems to increase covered women’s capacity to engage with their ‘appearance management’ more reflexively. However, a closer look at women’s notions revealed how class and cultural capital now intersect with the secular-religious distinction in Turkey, enabling culturally competent and globally oriented sections of each group to embody a highly valued embodied femininity through their clothing.

6 New Avenues for Research

As the case study demonstrates, approaching clothing as an aspect of broader embodiment practices enables us to bridge the gap between approaches that prioritise individuals’ capacity to alter their appearance and those that view our engagement with clothing as a product of discourse or structure. The inductive approach also enables researchers to uncover contextual differences, thereby adding nuance to our

global understanding of clothing inequalities. By employing such a framework, several avenues of research could benefit from further exploration.

First of all, there is a need to expand studies approaching dress as an embodied practice beyond Euro-American contexts. As Almila and Delice suggest (2023), there is an unhelpful disciplinary division in which sociology and cultural studies tend to focus on style and fashion, whereas anthropology focuses on dress, perpetuating the so-called duality between tradition and modernity. Moreover, when sociologists focus on clothing tastes and styles in the Global South, there is also the tendency to focus on the 'exotic' aspects of clothing, such as veiling fashions in Turkey. This creates a gap in our understanding of how the lived experience of ordinary dress can mark and reproduce gender and class inequalities beyond Euro-American contexts. Such disciplinary and geographical fragmentation also obscures sartorial and aesthetic elements of change and hybridity in the Global South. As the case study presented in this chapter shows, when regional differences are contextualised into national repertoires, they can improve the explanatory power of concepts.

Secondly, and linked to the first point, there seems to be merit in consumption scholars' call for a shift from a focus on the conspicuous to the ordinary. This shift would require researchers to delve into the lived experiences of consumer goods, the processes of meaning-making, and the appropriation of objects and items (e.g. Woodward, 2007). Scholarship on clothing and inequalities would further benefit from adopting this approach, as inequality has traditionally been explored in relation to fashionable clothing and the fashion system, rather than its everyday use. As Partington suggested, the new production and consumption landscape can potentially create "finer distinctions and a more complex vocabulary in the language of clothes for the articulation of class relations" (1992, p. 152). Emphasising the appropriation and embodiment of ordinary clothing can shed light on how different aspects of inequality intersect and are experienced in various social contexts.

Examining the lived experience of clothing can also help us view clothes beyond their value as objectified forms of capital, which can be

used to gain privilege and recognition simply through acquisition. This is especially important in today's context, where accessible AI tools are beginning to play a prominent role in shaping individuals' taste repertoires and practices (Beer, 2013). Stylistic coaching is not new (Godart, 2023), but the new AI technologies are potentially making 'style improvement' more accessible. Today, numerous personal styling apps aim to "empower" consumers "to feel good" and "to make informed clothing choices". Combining the expertise of image consultants with AI technologies, these apps promise unique styles that complement the user's skin colour and body shape. A quick search yields numerous apps in the development process, such as AI Outfit Assistance and 3D Virtual Wardrobe (Baje et al., 2023), Smart Closet (안지윤, 2020), and 'What do I wear?' (Shinkaruk, 2019), each offering a different technological platform, including the use of VR, to digitalise wardrobe moments. Questions about whether such AI-curated looks can enhance one's embodied cultural capital and how individuals experience the gap between their authentic clothing taste and the one generated by the app are important to ask.

Another approach to enhance our understanding of dressed bodies is to systematically examine various domains of social life. For example, sociological research on inequalities has shown how displaying the right presentation style is crucial in recruitment for well-paid jobs, highlighting the significance of legitimised clothing styles in the realm of employment (De Keere, 2022). Other studies hint at sectoral differences within the field of employment, with certain cultural jobs placing a higher value on "studied informality" (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). There is also fascinating research exploring how younger generations appropriate clothing as they navigate their way through higher education and transition from rural to urban settings (Chen, 2022). The embodiment of clothing tastes considered to create a good appearance is also observed to build and expand friendship networks, making the wearer confident and capable. However, finding the balance between authenticity, morality, and appropriateness is particularly challenging for

women, as clothing is often seen as a marker of women's sexuality (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013), motherhood (Appleford, 2020), religious identity (Ashraf et al., 2023), and age/life stage (Twigg, 2010), which according to Pilcher and Martin (2020) indicates that 'women are forever becoming'. All of this research directs us to closely examine the lived experiences of clothing in different social fields, which would lead to a deeper understanding of the processes that reproduce intersecting inequalities.

Last, but certainly not least, it's worth noting that studies examining clothing from the perspective of class inequality, including the case study presented in this chapter, have predominantly approached gender as a binary category in their discussions of embodied femininities and masculinities. This results in a gap in our understanding of how social class intersects with fluid gender identities as they are expressed through clothing practices. Research emerging from gender studies has revealed how individuals within the LGBTQ community convey their sexual and gender identity through their physical appearances, as well as how they navigate various fashion styles and concepts of beauty in this process (e.g. Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). Within this stream of research, studies are hinting at the impact of intersectionality, albeit with contradictory findings. For instance, Barber (2016) and Casanova (2015) found that privileged men face less risk when engaging in feminine appearance expressions compared to men in less privileged positions. However, Barry (2018) demonstrated that men who disapproved of adopting feminine clothing belonged to the most privileged social classes and professions, and they were reluctant to openly indicate their gender identity, as doing so might jeopardise their status and authority. Despite differences in the directionality of the findings, existing research suggests that social class significantly influences the process of expressing queer identities through clothing. Future research on the dressed body can bridge this important gap by enhancing its dialogue with gender studies.

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Irmak Karademir is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham. Her research centres on the cultural dimensions of class inequalities, consumption practices, and the sociology of art and taste. She is a co-editor of *Consumption and Society*, published by Bristol University Press.

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Beauty, Gender and Parenthood

Amélie Keyser-Verreault

1 Introduction

It is not new that women's identity and personhood are intimately associated with their bodies. Women are continuously tied up in bodily matters that impact their being with and in the world. Much has been said about this strong and enduring association between femininity and body work resulting from the quest for ideal beauty in different societies (e.g., Wen, 2013; Widdows, 2018). Yet, what is new and striking is not this association itself but the increasing intensity of this linkage and the extension of the beauty to moments in life that once eluded it, for example childhood, pregnancy, parenthood or the old age (Elias et al., 2017). Today, appearance matters more than it ever has before. In critical beauty studies, many scholars point out how neoliberal and postfeminist¹ discourse causes intensified beauty pressure and mobilize an individualistic language that describes beautification as an act of "pleasing oneself" (Gills, 2008), something

women do for fun. Yet, this chapter aims to analyse the close link between beauty and parenthood, focusing on how the emphasis on appearance reproduces and reinforces existing social inequalities and how the penetration of beauty pressure into parenthood creates new inequalities.

The existing literature about the link between beauty, parenthood and (re)production of social inequalities is very limited. In Westernized cultures and many other cultures, body dissatisfaction has long been considered "normative" for women and is also on the rise for men nowadays. For example, it is now well known that "male beauty" or the trend of "pretty boy" in South Korea has a great impact upon people in other countries in East Asia (Jang et al., 2019; Khai & Wahab, 2017). Despite this, as Mears (2014, p. 1338) points out, the work needed to look good remains a highly "gendered aesthetic labour". As a result, most of the limited existing literature focuses on motherhood or mother-daughter relationships.

The scholarship on women's beautification pertains mainly to Europe and North America and research is still dominated by an individualistic frame (Keyser-Verreault, 2022a). For example, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) point out the importance of "an ethos of autonomous individualism" in women's bodily makeover. In neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric, the individual is "required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action" (Gills, 2008). A huge emphasis of personal responsibility of becoming agent of

¹Regarding the definition of neoliberalism seen as a political economy, see Harvey (2007). Regarding neoliberalism as a governance, see Foucault (2004). Foucauldian scholars generally define neoliberal rationality as an "entrepreneurial subjectivity", see, e.g., Scharff (2016). Gills (2017) describes postfeminism as a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism.

A. Keyser-Verreault (✉)
Academia Sinica, Institute of Ethnology, Taipei, Taiwan
e-mail: amkey@as.edu.tw

their success and failure underlines the practices and discourse about body transformations. Moreover, neoliberal and postfeminist discourses not only tend to disavow the existing structural inequalities (Scharff, 2016), but under the emphasis of personal responsibility, beautification, contrary to the second wave feminism analysis of it, is seen as “pleasing oneself or feeling good about oneself” (Gills, 2008). In this perspective, regarding their quest for beauty, women are not objects but subjects. As Gills (2008) cogently underlines, a crucial aspect of the shift from objectification to subjectification is that bodily grooming is framed through a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice.

Despite their merits, this part of research about neoliberal rhetoric on women’s beauty is limited in several important ways. An individualistic conception of women’s bodies needs to be examined and challenged in critical beauty studies. Moreover, the modern individualizing injunction plays out differently in non-Western societies in which notions of “individualism” do not have the same history or traction. Hence, we should pay particular attention to the trans-individual dimension and the interactive nature of women’s bodily transformation. Moreover, what is eclipsed in this individualistic frame emphasizing personal choice, freedom, “pleasure and playfulness” (Elias et al., 2017) is an investigation examining the relational dimension and the close link between beautification and (re)production of social inequalities. Hence this chapter offers an investigation of how the increasing influence of beauty culture upon parenthood participates and reinforces social divisions and structural inequalities. While the influence of parenthood upon appearance is multiple, I will focus on two points: first, the impact of motherhood in the pursuit of beauty. Second, the role of beauty-seeking in parent-child relationships, especially mother-daughter relationships.

The chapter is divided into two broad parts. In the first, I discuss the changing norms about transition to motherhood, focusing on demand

of “getting your body back into shape” as an extension of the beauty cult. Via the analysis of the phenomenon, such as “pregnant beauty” and “yummy mummy”, the first part of this chapter discusses how an aestheticization of maternal body participates in the construction of discourse of good motherhood. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the transmission of aesthetic value which is often determinant in mother-daughter relationships. This part of analysis will focus, on the one hand, on how some parents, especially mothers and female family members, control and invest in women’s appearance and body shape and, on the other, how some mothers try hard to transmit a healthy body image to their daughters in a context of hyper-sexualization of the female body.

2 Quest for Beauty and Becoming a Mother

Historically, motherhood was not about being ‘on the market’ and ‘as a market’ and there was an absence of the quest for beauty in motherhood. Yet the increasing extension of the beauty cult penetrates into parenthood and mothers become consumer of fashion and beauty maintenance and treatments. Feminine beauty has become increasingly present in discourses around “good” maternal subjectivities. In the transition to parenthood, new questions such as “Do you still find me attractive?” (Blickman, 2023) began to haunt mothers’ subjectivities in contemporary societies. In the following sections, I will firstly present the existing literature about the impact of beauty pressure upon pregnancy and the postpartum period. Secondly, I discuss the existing research on mothers’ beautification in non-Western societies. I also indicate how the use of social media has greatly impacted mothers’ beauty pressure for both Western and non-Western mothers. Thirdly, I will discuss how the new aesthetic imperatives reinforce the existing social inequalities and create new ones.

2.1 Beauty, Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period

Several studies have attempted to explain the huge impact of pregnancy and maternity upon mothers-to-be and mothers' care for appearance by emphasizing the increasing penetration of beauty pressure into motherhood. The existing works on pregnancy and beauty, which focus on a Western context, are contradictory (Nash, 2014, p. 242), particularly in regard to how expectant mothers cope with weight gain and how women feel about their pregnant bodies. There are two major interpretive directions. Some scholars (Bailey, 2001; Fox & Neiterman, 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2014; Huntley, 2000; Upton & Han, 2003; Young, 2005) frame pregnancy as a release from beauty pressure, and argue that pregnant women and motherhood are associated with asexuality and the functional conception of women's bodies. In other words, women were seen to adopt their mothering role through acknowledging the newfound functionality in their bodies. For example, while Hodgkinson and her colleagues (2014) point out that women perceive themselves as excused from adhering to the socially construct aesthetic ideals and legitimize corporeal changes through the functional and mothering identities of their body, Bailey (2001) even underlines that physical changes may facilitate challenging the dominant beauty norms. However, it is important to emphasize some nuances in these findings. Despite Fox and Neiterman (2015) holding that motherhood afforded women a new appreciation of their bodies and a positive embodied sense of themselves, they also found that concerns about appearance persisted and become especially salient when women faced return to paid work. Hodgkinson (2014) also found that after pregnancy, body dissatisfaction dominated the postpartum period, echoing to the importance of regaining ownership of a postpartum body in Upton and Han's (2003) study.

In contrast, recent writing emphasizes a heavy impact of beauty cult upon pregnancy and motherhood. Tyler contends that "pregnant women are no longer released, however briefly, from either

the relentless pursuit of beauty or the pressure to perform sexual availability" (2011, p. 27). Echoing her, important and increasing scholarship stresses the redefinition of the pregnant body and motherhood due to recently intensified beauty pressure; from "Yummy mummy" (Littler, 2013), "Pregnant beauty" (Tyler, 2011) and "pregnancy chic" (Musial, 2014) to some more sophisticated descriptions such as "Getting your body back" as "the third shift of bodywork" (Dworkin & Watchs, 2004), or the task of performing an "aesthetic/maternal labour" (De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017, p. 105). Similarly, Nash (2012, 2015) stresses that, in the context of moral panic of obesity and maternal obesity in particular, body image concern during and after pregnancy is more common than ever. Nash (2012, p. 3) cogently points out, "having a pregnant body requires a constant renegotiation of 'public' and 'private' discourses in light of the obsessive cultural surveillance of pregnant bodies". In their study of the "yummy mummy" phenomenon in Denmark, Prinds et al. (2019) describe this trend as the "ideal of not looking like a mother" and underline the emphasis on bouncing back and weight losing. Littler concludes that "it involves the extension of a fashion and beauty complex to the pregnant and post-pregnant body" (2013, p. 230).

In fact, many scholars contributed this changing cultural landscape to the 'skinny' celebrity pregnancy trend in the 1990s (Littler, 2013; Nash, 2012). American actress Demi Moore is seen as the first 'glamour mum' in her groundbreaking naked and pregnant *Vanity Fair* portrait. She has been viewed as the figurehead for this trend, creating the cultural message that women's bodies are not permitted to be 'fat' or 'large' even during pregnancy. Since then, a growing legion of mainly North American and British celebrities has allowed the 'yummy mummy' movement to gain momentum and nowadays this phenomenon is globalizing.

In the majority of recent publications, findings indicate a clear colonization of motherhood by beauty culture and underlined the negative effects of high aesthetic standard upon mothers.

For instance, Beech et al. (2020)'s systematic review revealed strong evidence of societal objectification of mothers and self-objectification by mothers. Effects such as body shame, fear of the impact of childbirth on appearance, concerns about the negative impact of breastfeeding on breast which impact the willingness of women to breastfeed, eating disordered and greater appearance concerns were found for pregnant and postpartum women in both community and university samples of mothers. Relevant studies also consistently found a positive association between body image dissatisfaction and perinatal depression (e.g., Silveira et al., 2015). It is also widely noted in the literature that physical appearance is linked to the idea of a 'good mother in contemporary societies' (e.g., Hadfield et al., 2007). It is worth noting that the term such as "Hot Mom" or "MILF (mothers I'd like to fuck)" (Littler, 2013) also clearly indicates a sexual objectification of mothers. In sum, Tyler (2008, p. 93) concludes that the "maternal body has never been so hyper-visible".

However, previous research has also found that, to a varying degree, some factors such as motherhood status or emotional supports from women's partners moderate the relationship between motherhood and appearance anxiety (e.g., Keyser-Verreault, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2019).

2.2 The Association Between Beauty and Motherhood in Non-Western Societies

Elias et al. (2017, p. 29) argue, "[i]f, at one point, pregnancy represented, for some women, an escape from or relaxation of the demand of beauty, this is no longer the case, at least in the West". In fact, this statement is also true for many non-Western societies. In their research in the Canadian context of multiculturalism, Jette and Rail already (2014, p. 8) highlight the striking uniformity of concern for weight gain about feminine bodily norms across age, culture and ethnicity, underlining that "all of the participants expressed concern about gaining too much in pregnancy, not necessarily for their health or

that of their baby, but for how it would impact their figure postpregnancy". Indeed, the scarce literature available in sociology or anthropology on the link between motherhood and quest for beauty in non-Western context also suggests an intensifying extension of beauty cult into pregnancy and motherhood. The normalized task of bouncing back after childbirth during the postpartum period penetrates into contemporary societies in both Western and non-Western societies. For instance, Keyser-Verreault (2021) points out that women in Taiwan reported that society expected them to reclaim control of their body following the birth of their baby, and described this as a distressing and fearful prospect. In her work about the dilemma between becoming a mother and quest for beauty in Taiwan, Keyser-Verreault (2018) indicated three difficulties between motherhood and quest for beauty in Taiwan. First, "becoming a mother" symbolizes the end of "youth", and this change in social status is interpreted as a "downgrade" in the beauty ideal favouring an eternal youth; second, due to the importance of "thinness", the weight gain and various physical changes caused by pregnancy are seen as a depreciation of beauty capital²; and lastly, due to child-raising, the lack of time and resources makes it impossible for Taiwanese mothers to invest in their own appearance capital. Despite these difficulties, the exposure of sexy and slim pregnant celebrity bodies may have familiarized women and mother-to-be with the notion that pregnancy can be sexy or that pregnant women should be slender. The idealized pregnant body is defined partly by mass media image of celebrity or personal selfies on social media as having the 'perfect' pregnant body, illustrating the binarity between good-appropriate-successful or bad-inappropriate-failed performances of pregnancy. In her analysis of the cult of beauty and the ideal of the 'yummy mummy' in a non-Euro-American society (2022a), Keyser-Verreault challenges the automatic connection

² In Taiwan and elsewhere, beauty pressure is closely associated with fat-shaming because of valorization of slimness, see, e.g., Keyser-Verreault (2023a, 2023b) and the chapter by Dieter Vandebroek and Gislinde on habitus in this volume.

and fusion between the undertaking of regaining one's body and the postpartum period, highlighting a continuum of the beauty-related deliberations and different forms of aesthetic labour of Taiwanese women before, during and after pregnancy. She underlined modern Taiwanese mothers' entourage expect them to exert control to such a degree that their postpartum body snaps back in shape as quickly as possible. However, scholarship on the configuration of the association between motherhood and physical attractiveness in non-Western context is very limited. Further research should be done to explore in more detail and in different socio-cultural contexts, how mothers deal with the increasing globalizing beauty cult.

Before continuing, it is important to underscore the increasing influence of social media upon the quest for beauty and parenthood. Fashion blogging, in particular, is considered one of the most commercially successful and publicly visible forms of digital cultural production. Duffy and Hund (2015) underline how social media production by female creators has greatly expanded in association with the traditionally feminine domains of fashion and beauty. Devos et al. (2022) note that Instagram influencers need to perform high aesthetic labour to appear pretty and they are often moderately sexualized. Regarding parenthood, (digital native) parents frequently turn to social media and blog to find advice, information and support regarding their everyday parental practices (Abidin, 2017; Archer, 2019; Van den Abeele et al., 2024; regarding the impacts of socio-cultural beauty ideals in media, see the contribution of Ella Guest and Elizabeth A. Daniels in this volume). Social network sites allow users participation such as sharing of information, exchange of ideas and presentation of themselves. Beuckels and De Wolf (2024) underscore that social media influencers become new agents of parenthood. Most of the research has been disproportionally devoted to mothers, mom influencers and discourse on motherhood; therefore, mothers feel the intense burden of performing motherhood flawlessly online as they should project a positive self-image (e.g., Degroot &

Vik, 2021). As a result, the phenomenon of the display of maternal bodies on social media conforming to feminine beauty standards continue to grow. Wegener et al. (2023) point out that the compliment for daughter's prettiness such as "I see exactly where you got your beauty from" is clearly gendered and located in well-established social imperatives around feminine beauty. Kirkpatrick and Lee (2022), in their study of "picture-perfect motherhood" on social media, underscore that idealized portrayals of motherhood and parenting on Instagram not only increase envy and anxiety, but favourize greater social comparisons. They conclude that such social media use "can be harmful to new mothers' mental health". Similarly, Nagl et al. (2021) also indicate social media use may play an important role in postpartum body dissatisfaction and eating disorder psychopathology. In sum, due to the regular exposure, engagement with InstaMums means comparison and stress, including appearance pressures. In a digital era, the use of social media, despite its various advantages, often incites women to place excessive value on their appearance and aggravate mothers' social appearance anxiety.

2.3 Beauty, Motherhood and Social Inequalities

Broadly speaking, in this trend of individualization, aestheticization, sexualization and commodification of motherhood in both Western and many non-Western societies, mothers' normalized quest for beauty obviously lead to reinforce multiple social inequalities, since glamour requires time and money. In other words, if the idealized 'Mommy Myth' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) is already "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive" (Kinser, 2010, p. 8) and "aesthetic labour is now part of the endlessly rising and heavy price of motherhood" (De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017, p. 103), it is urgent to think about the consequences of such beauty cult in terms of social inequalities.

Goodwin and Huppatz (2010, p. 78) underline that these aesthetic practices are exclusive—they are unavailable to many groups of women. For example, it is evident that there are inequalities in the means to afford those beauty practices and products which are time and money consuming while welcoming a child is, in many societies, a financially costly decision. In order to maintain their social class position, upper- and middle-class women often undertake an invisibilized and concealed work to lose their pregnancy weight and this is often done via beauty treatments, plastic surgery and expensive nannies assistance and housecleaners.

While there is significant variation between cultures, in the regions where the beauty pressure is high, for example in East Asia, it is well known that many Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese and South Korean undertook various kinds of cosmetic surgery (e.g., Acquino & Steinkamp, 2016; Lindridge & Wang, 2008; Keyser-Verreault, 2022a, 2022b; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023; Wen, 2013; Wu et al., 2022). Thus, association between motherhood and quest for beauty contributes to the “production of classed mothers (ibid., p. 70). The increasing aesthetic labour demanded upon mothers makes visible inequalities and the discourse of intensive motherhood and practices of maternal consumption make working-class mothers distanced from respectable femininity. In such conditions, “being poor equates with failed motherhood” (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, p. 80).

In the case of the yummy mummy trend, many scholars have considered it as a middle-class figure and such ideal becomes a part of classed code femininities (McRobbie, 2013). Littler (2013) underlined that the figure of yummy mummy is a “classy subject” who has the ability to afford a plethora of beauty treatments and ‘good’ clothes as well as the time to plan to buy them. While yummy mummy is constructed as an aspirational figure connoting attractive, well-groomed and well-dressed mothers with high spending ability, slummy mummy is her classed other, being perceived as having “let herself go” and is excessive, slothful and unfeminine (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, p. 85). Echoing

her, in Tyler’s (2008, p. 18) analysis of yummy mummy and slummy mummy, she cogently points out that yummy mummy is an “intrinsic part of a larger process of class making”. Yummy mummy, as Allen and Osgood (2009) conclude, “falsely universalises middle-class femininity”.

Finally, it is noteworthy that normative beauty cult and its unachievable ideals aggravate the gap between men and women. As Goodwin and Huppatz (2010, p. 84) underline, “Motherhood in general is scrutinised in ways that fatherhood is not”. Thus, expanding beauty cult contributes to widen the gap between motherhood penalty and fatherhood premium in term of becoming a parent.

3 Beauty, Parenthood and Transmission of Care for Beauty

Another important part of research about beauty and parenthood focuses on body image construction in mother-daughter relationship. While some mothers feel they have a responsibility to pass on cultural norms regarding appearance to their daughters, others are interested in helping their daughters avoid the oppressive dictates of beauty. As mentioned above, bodily transformation or aesthetic investment is often understood in an individualistic way in research about body transformation and in this perspective, body is seen as an individual property for women, motivating by “an ethos of autonomous individualism” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Yet as Hache (2007) argues, the idea of an independent self is problematic in theory and in practice. In fact, like other scholars, Adrie Kusserow (2004) claims that various types of individualism in the USA are reproduced through different parenting practices. Similarly, Murray and Tizzoni (2022) convincingly emphasize the idea that hyper-agentic individuals are often coming from what they call “hyper-agentic motherhood”. Therefore, women’s notion of care of appearance and their aesthetic practices are often heavily influenced by their parents, especially their mothers. Whist research dealing with the relationship between parenting and class has proliferated, focusing on the social reproduction

of class through parental activities and involvement, I contend that construction of daughters' body image should be included in what Annette Lareau (2002, 2003) coined as 'concerted cultivation', especially in privileged, middle-class ways of parenting. In other words, how mothers integrate the formation of their daughters' aesthetic values into their ideal mothering is determinant for both women's care for beauty and their related bodily work and women's resistance to beauty tyranny.

3.1 "Mother, May I?": Care for Beauty and Transmission of Aesthetic Capital in Mother-Daughter Relationships

Despite we live in societies that become ever more dominated by new forms of visibility, appearance and looking (Elias et al., 2017, p. 38) and both women and men have body concern, the close link between womanhood and appearance persists (Mears, 2014). A great deal of research indicates the omnipotence of aesthetic transmission between mothers and daughters regarding the role of beauty and physical appearance. Studies in this field acknowledge that the mother-daughter relationship constitutes a unique site in which young women learn about "proper" femininity and the appropriate feminine look (Borello, 2006). Women learned from their mothers how 'to do gender' through their bodies and specifically their physical appearances. Tannen (2006) found that women are particularly sensitive to criticism from their mothers, especially when that touches on their physical appearance. Moreover, Clarke and Griffin (2007a, 2007b) highlight mothers' influences on their daughters' socialization into body image and beauty work, and exert accountability across the life course. Goslin and Loons-Beauchamp (2022) also suggest that the mother-daughter dyad is a powerful relationship known to impact health and daughters' body image throughout their life.

More precisely, Beech et al. (2020)'s systematic review indicates a strong link between

self-objectifying mothers and their sexualized behaviours and body surveillance for their children. Many researchers have found familial, and more specifically maternal influence, to impact daughters' development of body dissatisfaction and researchers have demonstrated that mothers who struggle with body dissatisfaction tend to transmit and reinforce harmful weight-related attitudes and behaviours to their daughters, which has been found to result in the development of daughters' own body dissatisfaction. In this gendered socialization or conscient transmission of aesthetic values, lessons on the importance of an attractive appearance are passed down from mother to daughter. Several studies have attempted to explain this transmission by emphasizing the impact of "female body image conversation" (Tompkins et al., 2009), including beauty talk, body talk, diet talk, fat talk and old talk. For example, the link between fat talk and body dissatisfaction is well established in the existing literature and for instance, in both Shannon and Mills (2015), and Mills et al.'s systematic reviews (2017), they highlight not only fat talk contributes to body dissatisfaction, but it is related to a broader range of body image constructs, including body surveillance, body shame, pressure to be thin, thin-ideal internalization, body checking and appearance-based comparisons. This entails noticing that despite many adult women are critical of the beauty cult and thin ideal, they are still not completely free from the dominant societal view of beauty, since the idea and feeling about what is an appropriate body weight are often internalized at an early age (Nichter, 2000). Indeed, while Nichter (2000) mentions that fat talk and communications about dieting are important between mothers and their teenage girls, McCabe et al. (2007) point out that fat talk and weight losing are already mentioned in relations between mothers and preschool children. Maor's work (2012) about fat women in Israel indicates many women emphasize their mothers were often the only person who made comments regarding their weight and appearance as children and adolescents (2012, p. 100). It is also important to note that DeLara's research (2020) on family bullying in childhood shows the

existence of bullying based on appearance and weight.

In some non-Western contexts, coercive parental controls are frequent in East Asia and appearance and body shape control is commonly seen as a part of motherhood. For example, in her study, Keyser-Verreault (2023a) indicates that Taiwanese parents are facing increasing pressure to check or control their children's body shape and a daughter's corpulence or non-standard appearance provokes interrogations regarding a mother's ability to be a 'good' parent, tightly associating with the parents' and more often the mothers' face saving or face losing. Keyser-Verreault (2022b) highlights three important aesthetic transmissions in mother-girl relation in Taiwan: mothers teach their young girl to avoid the sun in order not to have a tanned skin, learn to appear "cute" and eat with parsimony, since possessing a white skin, a slender body shape and enacting cutesy is crucial in local ideal of beauty. Keyser-Verreault (2022a, 2022b) also analyses how, in Taiwanese families, the disciplining of female bodies takes a great variety of forms, including gentle advice, material aid (e.g., for beauty services, products, even micro cosmetic surgery), emotional support, information sharing (e.g., beauty talks) and positive reinforcement, on the one hand, and violence through bullying, body shaming or physical aggressions (e.g., pinching women's 'imperfect' part of body) on the other. Not coincidentally, mothers' regular or occasional blames provoke their daughters' counterattacks is a common situation within the family. Finally, it is worth noting that regarding beauty in mother-daughters' relations, it is probable that under beauty culture, daughters exert an influence and aesthetic judgment upon mothers. Mother-daughter relation is interactive and reciprocal, not merely a modelling role from mothers to daughters. The question of "Mum, may I?" coexists with another question: "Mum, you are not going out dressed like *that*?" (Elias et al., 2017). Since much research indicates that, under beauty culture, aesthetic labour is largely included by many into a good "aging" for women (e.g., Clarke & Griffin, 2007a, 2007b; Gosselink et al.,

2008), it is of interest to examine the interactions between mothers and daughters, especially daughters' "girl gaze" upon their mothers' appearance.

With regard to the cause of such maternal care for beauty transmission, it is widely noted that maternal aesthetic *transmission* is highly linked to the factor of social class. Previous research has found that white, middle-class women are particularly influenced by beauty ideal (e.g., Littler, 2013; Nichter, 2000). Hence, staying fit and keeping a slender figure become a 'status discrimination within the middle class and with classed others' (Jackson & Benson, 2014, p. 1198). Doing gender intersects with performing class.

Meanwhile, some parents have a more strategic orientation in aesthetic investment, especially when the circumstances and family history entail a lower probability of success. Wu et al. (2022), in their work about the body transformations of women in China and the Netherlands, highlight that compared to their Western counterparts, Chinese women's belief in the socio-economic benefits of female beauty is particularly strong. Yang et al. (2023) also point out that beauty is a symbolic capital for maintaining self-identity reputation and status, while self-perceived physical attractiveness positively predicted subjective social class. Thus, due to the strong belief in the socioeconomic gains from female beauty, daughters' beauty becomes an important part of family investment for the sake of social mobility. Indeed, the literature suggests that many Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese and South Korean parents often put pressure on or give material support to their daughters' bodily grooming, including paying for their cosmetic surgery (e.g., Acquino & Steinkamp, 2016; Lindridge & Wang, 2008; Keyser-Verreault, 2022a, 2022b; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Therefore, "borrowed beauty (Acquino & Steinkamp, 2016)" or "buying beauty" (Wen, 2013) becomes a powerful mean for many parents for the sake of their daughters' social mobility or maintaining their social class.

3.2 Maternal Duty of Constructing a Positive Body Image

In the Western context, literature has shown mothers are considered as having a moral obligation to promote a positive body image for their daughters (e.g., Cook & Wilson, 2019; Maor & Cwikel, 2016; Quirke, 2016). Body image satisfaction can be defined as the “degree to which individuals are satisfied with their physical appearance, especially weight and shape” (Holsen et al., 2012, p. 201). In their study of Swedish adolescent with a positive body image, Holmqvist and Frisén (2012) emphasize that these adolescents are able to define beauty widely and flexibly and see beauty as a subjective perception, underlining the importance of looking like ‘oneself’, and conveyed the idea of personality as outplaying looks. In Wood-Barcalow et al.’s study (2010) of young-adult college women in the USA, findings also indicate that participants with healthy body image appreciate the unique beauty and functionality of their body and can define beauty broadly and filtering information in a body-protective manner, while minimizing perceived imperfections. Choate (2005) emphasized the family of origin as providing a basis for a positive perception of the body, gender role satisfaction and effective coping strategies in dealing with transition and stress. Thus, the same conditions that make the mother-daughter relationship a vehicle for the transfer of mainstream, negative messages about female bodies could also provide fertile ground for the development of body self-acceptance (Maor, 2012; Maor & Cwikel, 2016). According to the above-cited authors, among others, mother-daughter relations can be liberating and empowering and can be a source of resistance to the oppressive ideology of feminine beauty.

Goslin and Koons-Beauchamp (2023) stress thus the importance of positive body talk and communication in mother-daughter relation. Arroyo et al. (2020) highlight that consciousness-raising discussions between mothers and daughters were associated with higher levels of daughters’ feminist ideology, which was in turn associated with daughters’ positive body image. In

their study with Israeli women and American-Jewish women, Maor and Cwikel (2016) offer five strategies to strength their daughters’ body image, including being cautious and sensitive in communicating about body image issues, transmitting awareness of the dangers of eating disorders, providing positive reinforcement in regard to daughters’ bodies, providing tools for criticism of the dominant body-related social discourse and shifting the focus from food, body-size and weight loss to making healthy choices and taking pleasure in food.

Interesting though this is, we can’t help but underline the weight of responsibility that mothers bear in transmitting attitudes to beauty. Another (gender) inequality stems from differentiated parenting between the two parents—especially in heterosexual couples—where the mother is held responsible for raising the children.

3.3 The Social Role of Children’s Appearance

Finally, other than the psychological perspective on body image and appearance-related self-esteem, it is important to mention the sociological research on parents’ conveyed appearance relationship and children as symbolic capital for parents. Many studies indicated that by investing in children’s appearances, such as on the purchase of branded clothing, parents can show in a visible way not only their love and care for their children, but their socioeconomic status (e.g., Huopainen & Satama, 2020; Kallioharju et al., 2023). Child’s appearance and their cloth carry meanings that are intertwined with cultural expectations and norms of good motherhood. For example, Huopainen and Satama (2020) point out that clothing children belongs to the plethora of mothers’ gendered “aesth-ethic practices” (that is, both aesthetic and ethical) and child’s clothed body could quite easily become a trophy telling other people directly and indirectly about parental financial status and ‘care’ (p. 10).

Another example illustrating close link between children’s appearance and parents’

socioeconomic status is the practices of sharing; this concept that combines sharing and parenting includes sharing children's pictures. It defines how parents distribute content about themselves as parents through images of their own children. Children's fashion photos can be used to express a mother's taste and aesthetic skills, to express values, to fit into peer groups and to store memories of oneself and the children. These practices are linked to the idea of children as the extended self and to parental self-performance (Kallioharju et al., 2023). Jorge et al. (2023) note that influencers on social media are amplifying the traditional division of parenting labour. Mobilizing and managing child's appearance seen as a symbolic capital becomes a gendered and classed digital labour for many mothers. Mothers' increasing digital labours could be seen as a rising class-making process via the valorization of mother and children's physical attractiveness.

4 New Directions

In this final section, I provide a few directions for future research paths. Firstly, the existing literature on beauty, parenthood and (re)production of social inequalities is very limited, especially in non-Euro-American context. In other words, there actually is very little information not only from outside the West, but even that the literature from 'the West' is very limited and specific. More research on the intersection of gender, motherhood, beauty, social class, race, handicap, etc., is urgently needed and we recommend that future research continue to explore this topic in different socio-cultural contexts.

Secondly, scholarship taking place in more economically privilege setting has focused on the role of mother-daughter relationship in the construction of women's body image. However, explorations of how fathers influence both negatively and positively their daughters' appearance concerns remain under-researched. Nearly all research on parent influence on body image has focused on mothers, leaving fathers' attitudes and experiences poorly understood (Siegel et al.,

2021). The link between fathers' parenting and their daughters' body (dis)satisfaction in various socio-cultural contexts requires scholarly attention.

Thirdly, as Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012, p. 422) aptly outline, body acceptance in the era of beauty cult and hyper-sexualization is "an ongoing *process of resisting*" rather than an "achieved *position of resistance*". Future research should explore further the interactive and processual nature of positive body image building between women and their parents. Further research is necessary to document and to examine the developmental journeys of individuals who have overcome negative body image and developed a positive body image within the family, with or against their parents, and in various socio-cultural context, shedding light on how women experience this incredibly transformative journey.

Fourthly, the configuration of the construction or deconstruction of the close link between femininity, appearance and parenthood in the LGBTQ+ community is not yet well understood. Virtually no research examines how mainstream gendered norms about appearance intersect with race, age, social class or other social identities among the LGBTQ+ community. It is relevant to investigate the how appearance and parenthood are (dis)articulated in the LGBTQ+ community.

Finally, there is little literature on undoing beauty (e.g., Keyser-Verreault, 2024), and even less on how criticism of or resistance to mainstream beauty norms affects parenting practices or how it is enacted through the parent-child relationship. From my own fieldwork, I found that some parents not only criticize the mainstream society's excessive pursuit of physical appearance, but also convey this message to their children in order for them to have critical cultural capital, which is an issue worth exploring.

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Amélie Keyser-Verreault postdoctoral fellow at the university of Tübingen, is an anthropologist researching body politics and gender with a focus on the family, migration and resistance in East Asia. She also has a deep interest in qualitative art-based, decolonial and intersectional methodologies. Her work has appeared in academic journals including the *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Feminism and Psychology* and *The Gerontologist*.

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Beauty Regimes and Global Inequalities

Giselinde Kuipers, Emmanuel Narh, Narges Pirhayati,
Carolina Rabasa Rucki, and Wanying Zhou

1 Introduction: Beauty Regimes and the Waning Power of “the West”

This chapter investigates the relation between beauty and global inequalities. While most studies of beauty and inequality focus on a single society, we zoom out to the global level: to what extent are beauty standards, practices, and institutions around the world shaped by unequal power relations between countries or regions? In particular: how are they shaped by the global dominance of Western Europe and North America? How is this changing as this dominance is increasingly challenged, and arguably in decline?

G. Kuipers (✉) · E. Narh · N. Pirhayati · C. R. Rucki · W. Zhou
Centre for Culture, Conflict and Inequality, Sociology
Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: giselinde.kuipers@kuleuven.be

E. Narh
e-mail: emmanuel.narh@kuleuven.be

N. Pirhayati
e-mail: narges.pirhayati@kuleuven.be

C. R. Rucki
e-mail: carolina.rabasarucki@kuleuven.be

W. Zhou
e-mail: wanying.zhou@kuleuven.be

Around the world, we can see the influence of “the West”¹ on beauty and appearance. Global beauty icons, models, and celebrities are often of European descent, spreading and confirming the idea that white Europeans are more beautiful than people from other regions, races, and ethnicities. Global styles of clothing and grooming reflect standards originating in Western Europe: men downplay their looks with pants, short hair, and muted colors, while women accentuate their beauty with long hair, bright colors, skirts, heels, make-up, and jewelry. This global pattern supplants an earlier variety of codes and styles, sometimes with notably different gender patterns, that existed until the twentieth century. Social norms dictating which parts of the body are sexualized and need to be covered (e.g., buttocks, female breasts) and which parts are neutral and need to be exposed (faces, hands) have also converged toward European standards, with considerable pushback when people or societies adopt different styles, such as hijab or exposed breasts. Unsurprisingly, this pushback

¹ We refer to “the West” here, although we realize this a vague and problematic category: it includes most of Europe, and several prosperous countries where the dominant population claims European ancestry (sometimes, confusingly, it includes Japan). The same category is increasingly referred to as the “Global North”. While similarly problematic, this term has the advantage of complementing the “Global South”, an umbrella term denoting roughly all regions previously colonized by European imperial powers.

concerns mainly women's appearance that does not conform to dominant standards.

Today, the dominance of European beauty standards is no longer self-evident. Especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, critiques of Eurocentric beauty standards have become more vocal. Representation of people of color in global media and fashion has—slightly—improved (Mitchell et al., 2023). Although white, “Western” beauty standards still dominate global fashion and advertising, local and regional beauty cultures in the Global South are developing quickly, and beauty standards and practices from outside the West are spreading globally. Examples include new pan-Asian beauty ideals, supported by Korean popular culture (Yip et al., 2019), “modest fashion” from the Middle East (Lewis, 2017), and Latin American cosmetic practices such as the “Brazilian butt lift”.

In this chapter, written by a team of researchers from four continents, we review perspectives on the relation between beauty and transnational inequalities, and present a new framework for understanding how the everyday experience of beauty is shaped by global power dynamics in the twenty-first century. Building on critical and constructivist approaches (see the introduction to this Handbook), we adopt a broad understanding of beauty, including standards, practices, institutions, and norms related to the aesthetics of human appearance. This allows us to sidestep debates on cultural variation versus universality of beauty. There are universal patterns in what people find beautiful in other humans, but such patterns are embedded in *beauty regimes*: normative frameworks link aesthetic and moral standards for appearance with standards for social and self-control, and social and self-worth (Kuipers, 2022). Such regimes are always specific to a time and place. They regulate who is expected to embody beauty, and in what ways, and how and when beauty contributes to social worth. Such norms are rarely explicit or codified, but instead implied in practices and institutions, ranging from everyday judgments and routines to specialized roles and institutions related to beauty. Crucially for our current discussion, regimes legitimize some forms of beauty, while discrediting others.

We first review how scholars from different fields have studied the global variety of beauty cultures, moving from an understanding of cultures—including beauty cultures—as self-contained entities toward a conceptualization of cultures as embedded in transnational social, cultural, and economic relations. This opens up the question how beauty standards, institutions, and practices spread from one location to another. As we will show, the answer to this question inevitably leads to power dynamics. Studies have identified two common ways for beauty cultures to spread. First, through force, as happened with the expansion of a Eurocentric or “Western” beauty regime in the wake of European colonization and imperialism. Second, this spread happens when people imitate high-status beauty practices from more powerful countries. An example of this is the global adoption of beauty standards, products, and fads invented by the global beauty industry. We also discuss the limits of cultural hegemony, pointing to possibilities of resistance, and beauty regimes that seem not, or only partly influenced by Eurocentric norms.

We present evidence from our own research to explore how beauty standards relate to transnational inequalities in today's multipolar world. Using findings from a visual Q-sort study in four “peripheral hubs”, Accra (Ghana), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Hong Kong (China), and Tehran (Iran), we show how local beauty standards are shaped by various inequalities at the local, regional, and global level. Our findings show considerable variation in the embrace of Eurocentric beauty standards, and a variety or “repertoires” for evaluating beauty.

Contemporary beauty regimes find themselves at the crossroads of two major societal shifts: the reshaping of global power relations, and the expanding possibilities for representing and embodying beauty. The latter results from many interlinked factors: the rise of new and social media, the growing visibility of beauty cultures outside the West, and expanding possibilities for modifying one's appearance. This raises many new questions on beauty, power, and inequality in today's hyperconnected world.

2 Beauty Cultures and Unequal Power Relations: A Transnational Perspective

2.1 Beauty Cultures Do Not Exist in Isolation

All recorded human societies have beauty cultures: somewhat shared understandings of what counts as beautiful or not, for whom, under what circumstances. Most research studies such beauty cultures in the context of a specific, usually Western society without much consideration for local specificity. Such approaches (also prominent in this handbook) have been criticized for their “methodological nationalism”—taking the nation as the unquestioned unit of analysis—and their focus on WEIRD individuals: people who are White, Educated, and live in Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic nations (Clancy & Davis, 2019). These critiques have been addressed, for instance, by designing comparative studies outside of the West (Lidborg & Boothroyd, 2025).

There also is a long tradition of studying what one could call beauty as culture: studies of the beauty standards and practices of a specific group. Such studies mainly focused on cultures removed from Western modernity in time or space, and were typically carried out by disciplines associated with studying “the Other”: anthropology and history. This “National Geographic” approach (Edmonds, 2008) has been under fire for its suggestion that cultures are seen as delineated, self-contained entities. Since 2000, studies of beauty cultures have stressed the embedding of beauty cultures in wider economic, social, and cultural relations. Osman (2002) analyzed beauty salons in three cities, Casablanca, Paris, and Cairo, showing how what happens in such salons is shaped by global flows of fashion images, beauty products, and general cultural flows between these cities. In all three cities, beauty promises freedom from status, nation, religion, and nature—however, it recreates all these categories in distinct, place-specific ways. Edmonds (2010) argues that the thriving Brazilian beauty culture needs to be understood “in relation to larger contradictions in modernity” (Edmonds,

2010, p. 33). He shows that Brazilian beauty practices are shaped by global consumer culture and neoliberal beliefs, but also by the country’s distinct political trajectory, its position in the Global South, and local inequalities related to race, gender, and class.

Beauty cultures do not exist in isolation and never have. Humans, and therefore cultures, always meet and interact. Arguably, beauty practices are among the easiest cultural forms to spread. They appeal to some of the most fundamental of human experiences—the aesthetic and erotic appeal of human bodies, the desire to see and be seen. Moreover, beauty practices are easy to emulate: they are highly visible, appeal directly to the senses so don’t require translation or adaptation and are easily uncoupled from wider cultural contexts. This makes beauty practices easy to exploit and commodify, and susceptible to cultural appropriation (Kawamura & De Jong, 2022): the unacknowledged, forceful or exploitative adoption of cultural practices by more powerful groups or institutions.

Once we acknowledge that (beauty) cultures are interconnected, power relations inevitably enter the analysis. Studies of beauty and transnational inequalities generally draw on critical approaches. Maxine Craig (2023) has introduced the notion of “beauty politics” to capture this: beauty is political because it is always shaped by the unequal divisions of power and influence, within a society (Craig, 2025) but also across societies. The notion of “beauty regime” that we use here also foregrounds power relations: beauty is a form of normative control that (among other things) creates and reproduces status hierarchies.

2.2 Three Approaches to Beauty from a Transnational Perspective

Over the past decades, many studies have analyzed the globalization or transnational diffusion of beauty standards, practices, or institutions. Generally, such studies are based (often implicitly) on theoretical center-periphery models assuming that cultural forms spread from more powerful centers

to less powerful peripheries (Kuipers et al., 2022a, 2023). Within this general theoretical model, scholars have interpreted cultural diffusion in three different ways, depending on their theoretical and disciplinary background, and on the context of the study.

A first group of studies shows how beauty cultures spread through force. In situations of political, social, and economic domination, those with higher status actively enforce their beauty regimes upon others—forbidding some practices, styles, or tastes, making others mandatory. Such enforcement of “superior” beauty often goes hand in hand with the disparagement of the appearance, beauty tastes, styles, and practices of less powerful people. The paradigmatic case of this process is European colonialism and imperialism, as it unfolded between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. In the wake of increasing European domination, European styles of dressing, grooming, and beautifying the body became dominant, and a racial “beauty hierarchy” was created that persists until today (Craig, 2002; Kuipers et al., 2025; Monk, 2025).

From the beginning, the European expansion was accompanied by stories of hideous and highly attractive natives (Pieterse, 1992; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Especially from the nineteenth century onward, European imperialism and colonialism were supported by the categorization of people along ethnic and racial boundaries, with white Europeans at the top of the racial hierarchy. While such categorizations were often presented as factual or even scientific, they had strong aesthetic undertones (Craig, 2002; Taylor, 1999). This led to the creation of a race-based aesthetic hierarchy which proclaimed white Europeans (especially those from Northern and Western Europe) most beautiful. In colonial settings, we find many examples of forceful imposition of beauty standards, from missionary churches that glorify images of white beauty to colonial institutions regulating dress or hair styles (Ross, 2008). The superiority of white beauty was legitimized through an expanding visual culture replete with idealized images of white people contrasted with unappealing, laughable or overly sexualized Blacks,

Asians, Latinos, and Middle Easterners (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Thus, the European expansion was not only about politics, war, slavery, and trade. It was also an encounter of human bodies and human cultures, in unequal and often violent circumstances, that went hand in hand with the spread of a colonial beauty regime that connected beauty, race, and Western domination. Many elements of this regime can be recognized in global beauty cultures until this day.

Until today, the glorification of Eurocentric beauty is contrasted with two forms of denigration of racial “Others”. First, colonized peoples were often described as “ugly”. In line with the racial ideologies of the nineteenth century (that also legitimized slavery), people of African descent were generally placed at the low end of this racial hierarchy. Pieterse (1992) traces a long European history of portraying people of African descent to resemble monkeys, which created an aesthetic opposition between the clothed, smooth, refined appearance of European whites versus the naked, crude, hairy appearance of Blacks.

This was complemented by a second pattern, as Eurocentric beauty was contrasted with various forms of beautiful “Otherness” (Schmidt, 2015). Next to representations of people of African descent as unattractive, the colonial beauty regime spread exoticizing stereotypes of Africans and Blacks as hypersexual and attractive. A similar ambiguity can be found in the images of Asians, who were typically cast as “feminine”, leading to double-edged representations of beautiful, though submissive Asian women and “unmasculine” Asian men (Saraswati, 2013; Schmidt, 2015).

These two processes—esthetic denigration and exotization—are two sides of the same coin. However, they are often studied separately. In social science, ethnic and racial studies, the focus was on the dominance of Eurocentric beauty standards (see Monk, 2025). Scholars in film and media studies, post-colonial studies, and scholars from outside the West foregrounded more ambiguous processes of exotization and self-exotization (e.g., Shohat & Stam, 2014). Both processes reflect and support unequal power relations, and to this day they are accompanied by

processes of domination and (sexual) exploitation (Staszak, 2015). In the Global North, we still see the same double-edged racial stereotypes. In the Global South, studies report continuing dominance of Eurocentric beauty standards, accompanied by various forms of self-exotization, for instance in tourist representations of “exotic” beauty (Rivers-Moore, 2013).

A second literature stresses how beauty standards and practices spread without such overt enforcement, through dynamics of cultural status and hegemony. In today post-colonial world, cultural diffusion works primarily through status rather than raw power. People often emulate the aesthetic standards and styles of those with more prestige, and consequently beauty standards, practices, institutions, and normative regimes tend to spread from most to less powerful countries and regions, transforming or even gobbling up existing beauty cultures in the process (Kuipers et al., 2023). The paradigmatic case of the spread of beauty through status dynamics is the global beauty industry, which shaped the global beauty regime not through force, but through tempting images of successful people with luxurious lifestyles and visible markers of status (Jha, 2015; Jones, 2010).

Many studies have demonstrated how the beauty styles commodified by the beauty industry reflect the styles of dominant groups. Until today most fashion models around the world are often white, tall, and thin because they represent, first, the global dominance of white people, and second, the thin, tall aesthetic of middle-class people showing bodily restraint—the quintessential middle-class virtue—in an obesogene world (Mears, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2023). In recent years, this is changing somewhat, as social media (Kim, 2023) and emerging fashion and beauty hubs outside of the West (Lewis, 2017) provide space for more “diverse” looks and styles. Another example is the global popularity of skin-whitening products, which appeals to the desire of people to look white (Jones, 2010) or cosmopolitan (Saraswati, 2020). This beauty-as-status logic also drives the influence of “fashion capitals” like Paris, Milan, New York, and Tokyo (Kuipers et al., 2022b). Today, this mechanism is boosted even

further by “beauty influencers” (Lawson, 2021) on social media that, through algorithms, reinforce the success of the successful, and thus the status of the high status.

Many studies of beauty diffusion have analyzed the interplay of “local” and “global”. Beauty practices are rarely taken over “as is”. Especially when they spread without force, beauty styles can be adapted, transformed, and incorporated into existing cultures and regimes. This ranges from the incorporation of a single cultural element—say, a pattern on textile, or a hairstyle—in a fashion collection, to the diffusion of entire institutions, like the various versions of global magazine franchises like *Vogue China* or *Vogue Brazil*. In most cases, the spread of beauty styles and standards leads to the emergence of new, hybrid, or “localized” forms that combine elements of the global (typically, from a global center in the West) and a specific place. Around the world we see beauty pageants that have diverged from the American original: they reward different kinds of beauty and glorify very different values. Balogun (2020) shows how Nigerian beauty pageants embody the Nigerian nation through representation of ethnic diversity and “African beauty”. Cultural intermediaries are central to such processes of adaptation. In a comparative study of cosmetic surgeons in the US and Malaysia, Menon (2023) describes cosmetic surgeons as intermediaries who select and adapt procedures they see as fitting for clients, depending on gender or ethnicity.

A third strand of research critiques the assumption of hegemony and cultural domination that is implied in much research on global beauty cultures. In their analysis of aesthetic surgery on Korea Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) critique understandings of Korean beauty practices as attempts to look “Western”: arguing that the “globalized body is already ‘mixed’ and bears little resemblance to actual women in either the West or the East. Rather, the ‘western’ body links to idealized (and, of course, exceptional) characteristics in many countries. Paler (than average) skin, for instance, in almost every country, has historically signified distance from (agricultural) labour, representing high-class status. (...) Positioning blepharoplasty as westernization ignores the fact

that wide eyes have local significations such as youthfulness and active desire, and that western women also routinely undertake similar surgeries” (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 75).

While most research on beauty and transnational inequalities argues that beauty standards reinforce hierarchies, beauty also offers possibilities for resistance (see Brans & Pieters 2025; Dowrick & Holliday, 2022). Beauty provides solidarity and empowerment under suffocating colonial or racial regimes (Craig, 2002). In contemporary contexts, local beauty styles may function as visible signifiers of cultural, racial, and ethnic self-confidence and resistance in a global world (Balogun, 2020; Yip et al., 2019). Such beauty styles that escape dominant patterns connect people around the world, in networks that include people in the Global South and (minorities in) the Global North. A notable example of such a beauty regime that runs counter to patterns of Euro-American hegemony is Islamic “modest fashion” (Lewis, 2017), which constitutes an alternative beauty culture that connects Muslims throughout the Western world with fashion hubs in the Middle East.

Status-based dynamics also work in the other direction: beauty practices and standards, and embodiments of beauty itself, are taken over by groups or cultures with higher status. The meaning and implications of such “trickle up” vary widely. In some cases, it arguably goes hand in hand with emancipation and empowerment (cf. Dowrick & Holliday, 2022; Kim, 2023). However, while the adoption of beauty styles from less powerful groups may be intended or understood as a form of respect or admiration; it can also be considered a problematic form of cultural appropriation (Delice, 2024). Examples are recent controversies regarding the adoption of African or Black hair and fashion styles both by European and American fashion designers (Kawamura & De Jong, 2022, p. 66), and by Korean K-pop artists (Delice, 2024).

Finally, we want to point out two blind spots of this beauty-and-power framework. First, not all cultural spread is about power: the quest for aesthetic novelty and variation, beauty practices, and styles can also spread to people that are

more or less equal in terms of transnational status (Osman, 2002). As Edmonds (2010) argues, physical beauty has its own logic and (like all aesthetic forms) cannot be reduced to power. Second, the spread of the beauty cultures of the powerful does not necessarily mean that existing beauty cultures or regimes vanish. Historically, beauty regimes have shown a great capacity to incorporate new practices, as long as they are not framed as clashing with the dominant regime. Often, “local” aesthetics continue to exist alongside new and possibly more prestigious “imports”. For instance, in West Africa two body ideals co-exist: a preference for large bodies, alongside a “thin” ideal that is pushed by global media and health discourses (Agyapong et al., 2020). Existing beauty-as-power approaches tend to interpret this as a moment in a gradual process of “Westernization” or “hybridization”. As we will see in the next section, such interpretations tend to disregard the persistence of beauty cultures, and the resilience of aesthetic styles and regimes in global peripheries.

3 Beauty and Inequality Around the World: The View from the Periphery

Most studies of beauty and transnational inequalities are shaped by theoretical center-periphery models dating back to the previous century. In the twenty-first century, global relations and inequalities are less straightforward (Almila & Delice, 2023). The dominance of the West is increasingly challenged, also in the domain of beauty. The internet, moreover, has radically changed the nature of cultural diffusion and influence, making cultural flows more networked and less top-down. Consequently, one may wonder whether it still makes sense to understand beauty regimes from the perspective of dichotomies of Eurocentrism versus exoticism, global/Western versus local/non-Western, or resistance versus hegemony.

We present evidence from our own research to explore to what extent beauty standards around the world are still shaped by the dominance of the West. We draw on an ongoing comparative study

of beauty and inequality that aims to map beauty standards in four “peripheral hubs”² in the Global South: Accra (Ghana), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Hong Kong (SAR of China), and Tehran (Iran). These cities are not among the main global economic, cultural, and political centers, but have their own distinct beauty cultures. Such peripheral hubs are particularly useful for observing global-local dynamics, and are understudied, as most research on beauty and inequality focuses on the Global North (see this Handbook).

For this study, we used visual Q-methodology (Kuipers et al., 2022b). We asked participants to rank four sets of images of female and male faces and bodies on a predefined grid (see also Kuipers et al., 2025). During the sorting interviews, participants were invited to reflect on their preferences. This method allows participants to organize images intuitively based on “beauty repertoires”, while simultaneously providing quantifiable data about people’s preferences. With the team, we collectively developed four Q-sets for each city. Because of different demographics and beauty standards across cities, we jointly constructed a matrix of features for both faces (24 categories) and bodies (14 categories), such as skin color, hairstyle, and tummy shape, to select a diverse range of photos relevant for each city. Some images were shared, while others were only used in one, or several cities.

The study includes 160 semi-structured interviews, 40 from each city. Sampling was done using quota sampling, ensuring equal representation of age group, educational level, gender, and other criteria relevant to each city, such as ethnicity and religion. The Q-sorts were analyzed

quantitatively; the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA.

Table 1 shows the images that were, on average, the best-liked for each city. It clearly shows that beauty ideals are not the same across the world, and moreover, that beauty ideals are not always Eurocentric. In the next section, we give brief snapshots of our interviews to explore the dominant beauty standards and repertoires in each city. We organize our discussion in order of the extent to which the participants in each city appear to be influenced by white Eurocentric beauty standards: first Buenos Aires, then Hong Kong, Tehran, and finally Accra. We focus on the images of women (even though we presented men as well), as around the world people primarily identify beauty with women, which meant that participants accessed these beauty repertoires more easily and confidently.

3.1 Buenos Aires

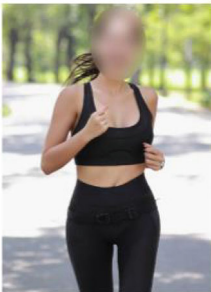
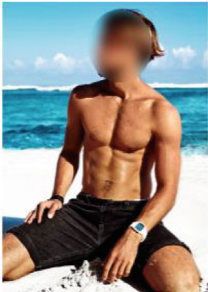
Marked by five centuries of Spanish colonization and several immigrational waves (European in early twentieth century, internal between 1940 and 1950, neighboring countries and East Asia in the twenty-first century), views on beauty in Buenos Aires are fairly homogeneous, with considerable agreement on both the least and the most beautiful images. The Q-study scores show that light mixed-race female and male faces and male bodies were considered most beautiful, while white European female bodies were generally perceived as most beautiful.

The participant’s enthusiastic comments on lighter skin tone and eye color, and hegemonic Western-style gender-conformity, show that people embrace an idea that doesn’t fully match the Argentinian reality: almost all participants preferred tall and slim people, whereas short and curvy bodies are more characteristic of the region. Many participants were critical and reflexive about their own Eurocentric preferences. This was most evident when looking at the images classified as least beautiful.

Negative repertoires were associated with brown (indigenous) and Black people, who were

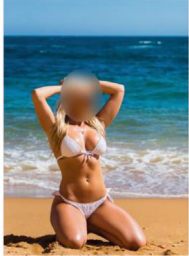
²This study was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Grant agreements No. 101052649. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. For more information on this study, see sociology-ofbeauty.eu. The study also includes a fifth city, Brussels (Belgium), but as we wanted to foreground the experiences from outside ‘the West’, this city was not included in this analysis. For a similar study in five European countries, see Kuipers (2015).

Table 1 Highest ranking images for 4 Q-sets: Average and standard deviation on a scale of -4 to +4

Accra: most beautiful			
Female face ^c FF21 ($\bar{x}$: 1.93, σ : 1.82)	Female body ^c FB15 ($\bar{x}$:1.73, σ : 1.50)	Male body ^b MB23 ($\bar{x}$: 2.33, σ : 1.16)	Male face ^b MF11 ($\bar{x}$: 2.10, σ : 1.50)
 21	 15	 23	 11
BA Q-sort images: Most beautiful			
Female face ^b FF09 ($\bar{x}$: 1.02, σ : 1.33)	Female body ^c FB09 ($\bar{x}$: 1.12, σ : 2.23)	Male body ^c MB15 ($\bar{x}$: 2.15, σ : 1.56)	Male face ^a MF07 ($\bar{x}$: 1.82, σ : 1.62)
		 23	
Hong Kong Q-sort images: Most beautiful			
Female face ^b FF17 ($\bar{x}$: 1.6, σ : 1.87)	Female body ^a FB06 ($\bar{x}$: 1.88, σ : 1.3)	Male body ^b MB23 ($\bar{x}$: 2.05, σ : 1.4)	Male face ^b MF23 ($\bar{x}$: 1.7, σ : 1.5)
 17	 6	 23	 23

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Accra: most beautiful			
Tehran Q-sort images: Most beautiful			
Female face ^c FF16 ($\bar{x}$: 1.58, σ : 1.76)	Female body ^b FB24 ($\bar{x}$: 2.27, σ : 1.33)	Male body ^b MB08 ($\bar{x}$: 2.65, σ : 1.04)	Male face ^b MF03 ($\bar{x}$: 2.13, σ : 1.58)
			

^aImage source Pexel
^bImage source Freepik
^cImage source Unsplash
^dImage source iStock.com/Parkpoom
^eImage source depositphotos.com

widely dismissed as least beautiful, and referred to as lower in status, undisciplined, and sad/angry—a mix of racial, class, moral, and aesthetic evaluations. Asians were defined as “hard to classify” and therefore also as less beautiful. As Amber (21 y/o, Black female) commented: “I’m not surprised I put FF3 [indigenous woman] as least beautiful. She is considered ugly in society. [...] She doesn’t have a type of beauty that is usually considered beautiful. Now that I think about it, I’ve never even been drawn to a person with indigenous features. [...] She clearly has indigenous features. The round face, the thick straight hair, slanted eyes, the skin color...That, in Argentina, it’s not a type of beauty that is admired”.

The relative consensus, the high ranking of relatively light European-looking persons, and the denigration of people of color reflect the colonial roots of Argentinian beauty culture. Beauty is a salient domain for the reproduction of racial otherness and hierarchy. Although it is explicitly criticized and contested, people aesthetically denigrate people of color. However, mixed-race physical traits, often referred to as *mestizos*, were judged

most beautiful. This opens up two (possibly overlapping) perspectives on the aesthetic side of post-colonial beauty regimes: *mestizaje* can be seen as a colonial form of whitening that reproduces Eurocentric power hierarchies, but it also offers an opportunity for de-shaping and reshaping Latin American identities.

3.2 Hong Kong

Of the four cities, Hong Kong has the most recent experience of decolonization from a Western colonial power (Kuipers et al., 2025). The ongoing political and societal transformations foster a hybrid, fast-changing beauty regime, with considerable variations in the beauty repertoires of the research participants. Our Q-study revealed how the Eurocentric white beauty ideal still persists, but it has been hybridized with post-colonial and mainland-Chinese influences.

We can see these layers of repertoires vividly in the discussion of the most beautiful female face by Xavier, an 18-year-old student:

I like No.17 [see Table 1] the most. Her skin is white, to my beauty standards. The second most preferred one is No.15 [not shown here: East-Asian young face, light skin, in a Chinese ancient costume], because her style is eye-catching. Together with No.21, it's a Euro-American style, but not too exaggerated. She looks innocent and pure. I like that. And her eyes are prominent. I like prominent face features, like Euro-American style.

Although Xavier singles out East Asian faces, her preference for the “prominent features” and “Euro-American style” reveals the significance of white European beauty, which is wider than skin color, encompassing style and facial traits. The ambiguous, if not somewhat positive Hong Kongese attitude toward the recent British colonial era may account for the preference for European-style beauty. As Table 1 shows, this is more pronounced for men (see also Kuipers et al., 2025).

However, China's long history and cultural traditions present parallel repertoires that lead to similar preferences. Xavier's favorite female faces have white skin and innocent look, beauty ideals dating back to ancient aesthetics (Li et al., 2008; Zhang, 2012). She particularly likes a woman in ancient costume and make-up, a trendy beauty style recently, also among the young, that emerged in the wake of revitalization of traditional Chinese culture, supported by Chinese government. Alongside a “Hong Kong” style, a growing influence from mainland China brings another set of repertoires regarding white and East Asian beauty (and ugliness). This mainland beauty culture takes what one could call a “Sinocentric” approach, reflecting a nationalistic narrative that legitimizes learning from the West historically. This mindset diffuses from technology to education, from materialistic products to aesthetic repertoires. China's active engagement in global platforms (e.g., TikTok) and its catch-up with modern development paradoxically leads both to the adaption of Chinese styles and to closer embracement of prevalent white beauty styles.

3.3 Tehran

Iranian beauty culture blends global beauty ideals with a strong preference for local traits and styles. It is shaped by ancient beauty traditions, religious beliefs, and state regulations over physical appearance. In the early twentieth century, the Pahlavi government's modernization policies promoted Westernized beauty standards as symbols of progress and modernity. In contrast, the post-revolutionary religious government enforced modesty norms (Dezhamkhooy, 2022). The absence of a strong beauty industry (which is sanctioned by the regime) has made Iran more receptive to global beauty trends, including Hollywood's visual industry but also, for instance, Korean aesthetics. Iran is one of the countries in the world with the highest acceptance and use of cosmetic surgery, which is not sanctioned by the regime (Cohen, 2021; Moradi, 2023).

Our Q-study shows a strong divide between global and the local repertoires, dividing people into two groups. First, we find fans of fair skin, light eyes (especially blue and green), and blonde hair, often considered a European look in Iran. This contrasts with supporters of darker features like black eyes, thick eyebrows, long lashes, and large eyes, which is perceived as an Eastern, Iranian, and authentic look. This is known as the so-called Eastern look, which is especially preferred in men's appearance, especially when combined with a light black beard. A 61-year-old woman describes the best-liked female face, as an example of this Eastern look:

This photo is attractive to me because it reflects the kind of image I've always had in mind. I've always really liked long, straight, thick dark hair. To me, it gives off an Eastern look—an Eastern girl, with thick, black eyebrows and big, beautiful eyes. Ideally, I would've preferred black eye color, but still, it's attractive. She has plump lips—though I think she might have had lip fillers, and maybe even cheek fillers too, but I'm not sure—it's not too obvious, so it's okay. She has a beautiful face, with a certain innocence that really appealed to me.... European faces are beautiful too, but they feel cold and lack expression. I don't get that sense of warmth and intimacy from them.

Note how this woman appreciatively mentions cosmetic surgery. Tehran stands out from the other cities in that the favorite images show the results of intensive beauty practices, filtering, and cosmetic surgery. Strikingly, this beauty shows a fusion of influences beyond the European-Iranian dichotomy. In line with the Iranian style, a woman-might microblade her eyebrows for a fuller look and tattoo permanent eyeliner to make her dark eyes appear larger. But she may opt for what is known locally as Hollywood-style contouring, Russian lip injections, and facial fat reduction to achieve what is seen as a more European-like face or chose Korean-style make-up and undergo a Brazilian butt lift for a curvier figure. This fusion of imported beauty practices leads to a beauty ideal that stands out from the ideals of other cities for being clearly “worked on”, for both women and men.

3.4 Accra

Given Ghana’s history of colonization (with several European powers involved from 1480 to 1957), Ghana’s beauty regime shows a commonly-existing awareness of Eurocentric or Western beauty repertoires. However, strong local beauty repertoires are thriving, with a notable degree of consensus around key aesthetic markers such as a “not too skinny, not too thin” body size, and skin that is medium to light brown. Such ideals today are central to Ghanaian national pride and identity. This was evident in the best-liked images of the Q-sort, as described by 69-year-old Frank:

Ghanaians, our beauty is extraordinary. God has given us black color which is beautiful. Our beauty standard is far different from the European standards. when you see a German or a Canadian lady, compare to a Ghanaian lady (he points to FB15), when you see the hips, the buttocks, they are natural. You see a Canadian or a German lady, they don’t have buttocks. They have flat buttocks. that one don’t [sic] count into beauty. And then our natural color which is the black or the chocolate color is very beautiful and attractive, and they are also

strong. Very very very strong and resistant to sickness. But the Europeans, their body is watery [Interviewer: Do you mean it is soft?]. Yes, and not strong than African or a typical Ghanaian woman.

The quote demonstrates that local repertoires not only express pride, but also resistance against Western or Eurocentric beauty standards, which are openly discredited. The dominant and widely shared beauty ideal for women involves round, curvy, and fuller bodies (“coca cola” shape), wider hips, large buttocks, medium breast, well-shaped calves, chocolate (brown), or dark skin color. The highest ranked female body is a case in point. For Ghanaian men, hair on the chest (even though not seen in the highest ranked male body), tough skin, dark or “chocolate” skin color, moderate body size, and height were seen as beautiful/handsome. Note also that while in the other cities, people tended to talk more extensively about the faces, whereas in Ghana beauty is clearly located in the body. This, too, suggests a certain independence from global repertoires.

This African beauty ideal is oddly absent in cosmetic products, billboards, and television stations which project white beauty ideals such as thinness. However, this “media” repertoire was not captured in the highest scoring images. Despite its omnipresence, most people apparently have not internalized this ideal. A possible explanation which we are pursuing in further research is that the British colonial tradition of “indirect rule”, and the great perceived distance between (post)colonial elites and the (post)colonized particularly in the Africa context has preserved a distance between Ghanaian and global/Western/colonial beauty standards that, paradoxically, has allowed local beauty regimes to remain relatively independent. More recently, however, local media institutions and contemporary beauty institutions, have become more explicit in their embrace of local beauty cultures, which are strongly communicated to the Ghanaian populace in various forms, such as in pageantry (Balogun, 2020). A growing cultural self-confidence, also on legacy and new media ensures that Ghanaian standards remain dominant despite external influences.

4 Beauty Regimes and Global Inequalities in the Twenty-First Century: Avenues for New Research

The preliminary findings from our research project only present brief snapshots of the dynamics of beauty cultures and regimes in today's multipolar, hyperconnected world. These snapshots show that, although the influence and status of European-style beauty are still notable, beauty standards are never purely Eurocentric, but represent a mix of influences that varies from one place to another. Moreover, in all places, beauty regimes and standards are in flux.

Contemporary beauty regimes find themselves at the crossroads of two major societal shifts: the reshaping of global power relations and the expanding possibilities for representing and embodying beauty. In the emerging new world order, the dominance of the West is increasingly challenged, also in the domain of beauty. We see this, for instance, in mounting critiques, both by dominated groups in the Global North and from the Global South, of the whiteness of fashion and beauty industries (Entwistle et al., 2019; Kuipers et al., 2014), and of cultural appropriation in beauty (Delice, 2024).

New research could explore, first, how such challenges to Western or Eurocentric beauty regimes unfold: who makes which claims, and when and how are they taken up? Such challenges are embedded in a wider move of "ideologization" of fashion and other cultural fields, in which seemingly neutral aesthetic claims are critiqued from a more explicit ideological angle (Brans & Kuipers, 2025). Moreover, researchers could explore whether such challenges have any effect. Although research is few and far between, our review suggests that interest in "diverse beauty" in the (traditional) fashion and beauty industries may have waned after a flurry of interest in the 2010s (Mitchell et al., 2023). Finally, it would be relevant to comparatively study such challenges of the "West" in beauty and other fields: are pleas for "diverse", "decolonized", "non-Eurocentric" beauty easier to disqualify than

similar pleas for, say, politics or art? Or alternatively, might the seemingly frivolous nature of beauty allow for alternative routes to address transnational inequalities?

New research could also explore the impact of possibilities for representing and embodying beauty, which expand at a dazzling pace. As we could see in our research snapshot, new centers for beauty have emerged outside traditional "beauty capitals". These centers create new beauty standards or styles, and contribute to new beauty regimes and cultural flows. Research in this field is only emerging, and possibilities for new research seem wide open. For instance, the budding research on Islamic or "Modest Fashion" (e.g., Lewis, 2017) pays little attention to the beauty regimes, ideals, and practices implied in this transnational cultural industry. Research could explore the transnational influence and flows from new "beauty hubs" in Korea, Nigeria, or Brazil, or low-budget cosmetic surgery hubs such as Turkey, and the new beauty institutions emerging there.

Third, the rise of internet and especially social media has radically changed the nature of cultural diffusion and influence, making cultural flows more networked and less top-down. This has paved the way for new "tastemakers", like influencers, content creators, and digital entrepreneurs—and given old tastemakers, such as cosmetics companies, new ways to spread beauty standards and beauty products. The wide reach and accessibility of social media platforms have made it easier for tastemakers in the Global South to reach audiences and customers, both locally and in networks outside of global centers. While many of these new tastemakers spread messages that are largely in line with existing beauty regimes, social media also offers new possibilities to challenge dominant representations (Lawson, 2021), and to create new beauty cultures (Kim, 2023). New research could explore how these shifting dynamics in digital beauty production and distribution reshape global beauty regimes and contribute to the reproduction or contestation of global inequalities especially in the Global South.

Fourth, the online beauty world offers unprecedented possibilities not only for spreading, but also for reshaping beauty images. Simultaneously, cosmetic surgery and other forms of body modification become increasingly mainstream (Menon, 2025). New research could explore how such new possibilities to create and embody beauty ideals reshape beauty regimes, particularly in the Global South.

Finally, new research could address more explicitly the positionality of researchers. Much of the research on beauty and inequality is done by scholars from the Global North, often analyzing contexts in the Global South without fully accounting for the asymmetries in power, privilege, and perspective that shape both the production and interpretation of knowledge. Although our study aims to do this, a more reflexive approach would critically examine how researchers' own embodied experiences, cultural backgrounds, and institutional locations influence their framing of beauty norms and their understanding of inequality. Hopefully, this can also inform other studies in the field of beauty and inequality.

Beauty regimes today function not only as sites of personal expression but also as arenas where power, identity, and social status are continuously negotiated and contested on both local and global scales. Understanding these complexities is crucial for unpacking how beauty practices contribute to the maintenance or transformation of global inequalities in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Giselinde Kuipers is research professor at the Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven University. She is a cultural and comparative sociologist who studies the social shaping of cultural standards and their consequences for social interactions, identities and inequalities. She has published widely on the relation between

culture and inequality, as well as beauty, fashion, media, humor, popular culture and cultural industries, often from a comparative or transnational perspective. Currently, she directs a large comparative study on beauty and inequality funded by the European Research Council.

Emmanuel Narh is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequalities—KU Leuven, Belgium, working on the Beauty and Inequality (BINQ) ERC project, focusing on Accra. He gained his bachelor's degree in (B.A.) Social Sciences (Economics and Sociology) and master's degree (M.Phil.) Sociology respectively, both at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. His research interests include culture and inequality; and medical sociology.

Narges Pirhayati is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequalities—KU Leuven, Belgium, working on the Beauty and Inequality (BINQ) ERC project, focusing on Teheran. Having completed her Master's degree in the sociology of law at the University of Isfahan, Narges redirected her research interests to the sociology of beauty. Her work involves examining the social and cultural dimensions of beauty in Iran as she strives to deepen the understanding of beauty-related phenomena within the Iranian cultural context and contribute to the discourse on social justice and equality.

Carolina Rabasa Rucki a PhD candidate at the Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequalities—KU Leuven, Belgium, working on the Beauty and Inequality (BINQ) ERC project, focusing on Buenos Aires. Her research explores beauty in Argentina and the political elite in Buenos Aires as they use appearance to deal with power. She holds a Master's in Public Policy and a Bachelor's in Social Work. Carolina has worked across academia and government on gender rights, justice, and social policy in Argentina.

Wanying Zhou a PhD candidate at the Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequalities—KU Leuven, Belgium, working on the Beauty and Inequality (BINQ) ERC project. Focusing on Hong Kong, she is investigating self-transformation and self-presentation through beauty in her PhD project. Holding a Bachelor's degree in English from Beijing Foreign Studies University, she graduated Magna Cum Laude from Master of Sociology in KU Leuven with an exchange to Waseda University in Japan. Prior to her PhD, she worked in the local and international non-profit sector, including NGOs in China and the United Nations.

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Part IV

Fields

Cosmetic Surgery

Alka V. Menon

1 Introduction

Cosmetic surgery is a permanent, comparatively expensive beauty practice, a set of elective medical procedures that modifies the body with the aim of improving appearance. Procedures range from invasive surgical procedures performed under general anesthesia, like abdominoplasties (tummy tucks), to minimally invasive injections of fillers or neuromodulators which can be done multiple times. Cosmetic surgery is generally performed by medical professionals trained in plastic, facial plastic (otolaryngology), or general surgery. While once accessible primarily to wealthy elites, cosmetic surgery has come within the reach of a broader public with the advent of medical tourism and the entry into the market of a variety of providers offering services at different price points. These range from physicians from other medical specialties to nurses to aestheticians who lack formal medical training (Sullivan, 2000). Cosmetic surgery is a concrete case in which to examine the relationship between beauty and inequality.

The best known scholarly perspective on cosmetic surgery is the feminist critique of it. Feminist scholars have argued that cosmetic surgery is a patriarchal, masculinist project that

molds women's bodies into conforming with men's heterosexual desire (Dull & West, 1991; Morgan, 1991). Feminist scholars point out that cosmetic surgeons carve women's bodies in order to make them conform to a conventional youthful, feminine aesthetic, a literal inscription of societal expectations. As some scholars note, this aesthetic look was often implicitly or explicitly white (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2005; Kaw, 1993; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Most cosmetic surgeons are men, and most cosmetic surgery patients are women. In the U.S., about 85% of academic cosmetic surgeons are men, though the number of women in the profession is increasing; women currently comprise 57% of plastic surgeons in residency training (Swanson, 2024). By contrast, estimates of the proportion of total cosmetic surgery procedures undergone by male cosmetic surgery patients range from 7% in the U.S. (Aesthetic Society, 2024, p. 20) to 14% globally (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2024, p. 60). These figures are more gender balanced in some countries and for specific procedures, like rhinoplasty or nose jobs (see Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). However, it remains the case in most places that women obtain more cosmetic surgery procedures. The core feminist insight that cosmetic surgery reflects and reproduces, rather than challenges, conventional expressions of femininity remains important and relevant.

A. V. Menon (✉)
Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven,
CT, USA
e-mail: Alka.menon@yale.edu

Building on this, recent scholarship situates cosmetic surgery against the backdrop of additional and intersecting forms of social inequality, broadening the lens to consider how cosmetic surgery reinforces (and occasionally challenges) hierarchies based on class status, nationality, and race. As more women enter the profession of cosmetic surgery, as more men seek cosmetic surgery procedures, and as cosmetic surgery patients and techniques circulate around the globe, what can cosmetic surgery tell us now about the relationship between beauty and inequality? Analyzing cosmetic surgery in transnational perspective yields fresh insights: that beauty ideals are not singular, universal, nor static, but that they have expanded and proliferated. Transnational flows of beauty ideals and cosmetic surgery techniques have given surgeons and their patients more options for the cultural and political meanings of any given cosmetic surgery look. This has the potential to subvert, in particular, the dominance of a globalized ideal of “cosmopolitan whiteness” (Saraswati, 2013). Ultimately, instead of marginalizing the practice as exceptional and extreme, we can see cosmetic surgery as a window into understanding the aspirations and motivations of an increasing number and kinds of people.

2 Current State of Research

Cosmetic surgery has a history dating back at least to the fifteenth century. Beginning with the advent of the modern practice in the twentieth century, surgeons relied on facial beauty norms from Renaissance art (Gilman, 1999; Haiken, 1997). Each cosmetic surgeon specialized in producing one profile, and patients selected their surgeon according to his or her aesthetic taste, in addition to what he/she could afford.

Modern plastic and reconstructive surgery emerged during World War I, with advances in surgical care facilitated by the widespread use of anesthesia. After the war, plastic surgeons pursued cosmetic applications for their newfound expertise, the result of reconstructive surgical experience repairing wartime injuries (DiMoia, 2013; Gilman, 1999; Haiken, 1997). Surgeons in Japan,

as well as practitioners trained by American military surgeons in Korea, further advanced the field of plastic surgery. From the outset of the discipline, doctors sought to create and maintain a distinction between reconstructive and aesthetic or cosmetic uses of plastic surgery. The former was covered by health insurance, and the latter was regarded as more lucrative and potentially more morally suspect (Haiken, 1997; Sullivan, 2000). However, the boundary between reconstructive and aesthetic uses of plastic surgery remains contested. Cosmetic surgeons, as well as patients, have long “extend[ed] the definition of reconstructive procedures to include cosmetic ones”; Dull and West (1991, p. 54) show how cosmetic surgeons construct some candidates (notably almost exclusively women) as fit candidates for surgery, so as not to grant cosmetic procedures to anyone desirous of changing their appearance. Surgeons make distinctions between fit and unfit candidates in part to maintain their status as medical practitioners at the margins of what other physicians considered to be medicine (Sullivan, 2000). The tension between the reconstructive and cosmetic wings of plastic surgery continues and is particularly apparent in discussions of procedures undergone by patients who would like to transition genders (Plemons, 2014). Despite the similarity in surgical techniques between some common aesthetic and gender affirming procedures, for instance, many cosmetic surgeons in the U.S. eschew performing facial feminization procedures or top surgeries, arguing that it falls under the reconstructive branch of the field (Menon, 2023).

Cosmetic surgery has taken on some of the legitimacy of medicine while remaining on the margins—in terms of social acceptability and in its economic and cultural structure. The existence of cosmetic surgery as a medical specialty implies a connection between beauty and health that ultimately remains controversial. Cosmetic surgery has been proposed as a treatment for psychological issues such as low self-esteem or depression (Edmonds, 2010; Haiken, 1997); the claim is that cosmetic procedures bolster general health and well-being. Historically, physical beauty was interpreted as a sign of good health, with ugliness constituting a potential sign of ill health

(Schweik, 2010). But the idea of an “aesthetic medicine” that moves beyond a focus on illness and disease to achievement of self-enhancement and beauty has taken on new life (Edmonds, 2013). Cosmetic surgery, like other forms of aesthetic medicine in gynecology, dermatology, and endocrinology, allows doctors relatively more autonomy. Aesthetic medicine also appeals to patients who might otherwise think of themselves as healthy but capable of further improvement in the ongoing pursuit of wellness.

Cosmetic surgery can be considered as one practice along a spectrum of interventions on the self-promoted by beauty culture, a form of “body work,” akin to exercise and dieting, that women (and increasingly, men) employ to shape their bodies and self-identities (Bordo, 2003; Gimlin, 2003). Cosmetic surgery is part of a suite of practices that can be mobilized to modify the body as a project (Shilling, 2003). Patients and surgeons have multiple potential goals. Individual motivations include enacting a social identity more clearly on the surface of the body (Davis, 2002) or binging external appearance in line with an (imagined) internal self-image (Gimlin, 2003). Patients have reported improved psychological well-being after undergoing surgery (Margraf et al., 2013). Patients also cite a desire to remove or mitigate markers of race or ethnicity, feminize or masculinize their appearance, and change prominent features associated with negative cultural stereotypes about one’s personality (Gilman, 1999; Pitts-Taylor, 2007; Talley, 2014). Some patients reconceive their surgically altered bodies as normal, authentic, and natural by casting it as a restored past version of themselves. In this analysis, cosmetic surgery has the potential to empower individuals, which some argue can allay feminist concerns about adherence to a patriarchal society’s beauty norms (Bordo, 2003; Davis, 2003). By undergoing cosmetic surgery, patients gain the prospect of improving their social status (Kuipers, 2022). Those who are perceived as more attractive and having invested in themselves accrue higher status, and in turn, better prospects in labor and marriage markets (Berry, 2008).

The ideal “look” or end result of cosmetic surgery depends on the cultural milieu that a

patient is within. Scholars have traced how physical appearances have been linked to desired racial identities in different countries. In Brazil, cosmetic surgery patients can move along a continuum of racial categories—or take incremental steps along the racial hierarchy—by modifying the nose or obtaining a breast reduction (Edmonds, 2010). While a similar racial continuum exists in Venezuela, cosmetic surgery patients aspire to whiter features, epitomized by “a thin, straight nose with a well-defined point” (Gulbas, 2013, p. 331). In the U.S., where the nose is also a common target for surgery among patients of color, surgeons present different options for patients of Black, Middle Eastern, and Latino descent (Menon, 2017). Similarly, Hoang (2014, p. 522) shows that sex workers and escorts in Vietnam seek different looks depending on their intended audience: those seeking to impress Asian businessman elect nasal augmentation for a “modern Asian look,” whereas patients looking to attract American travelers opt for breast augmentation. The specificity of body parts and how they map onto social identities varies.

An important insight from anthropological and sociological work is that beauty as a social phenomenon is relative rather than absolute. While there may be wider agreement as to what constitutes ugliness or disfigurement (Talley, 2014), the fact that beautiful bodies can be compared to one another and depend on context is one justification that cosmetic surgeons make for their services. Beauty can be understood as a form of symbolic capital (see Monier & Mears, this volume) that has moral and affective properties that transfer from relationships between race, class, and gender (Jarrin, 2017, p. 18). This does not mean, however, that beauty necessarily maps neatly onto racial hierarchies; evaluations and judgments of beauty navigate the registers of race, class, gender, and age simultaneously, which cannot be disentangled. In practice, surgeons recognize that race, class, and gender are intertwined in the desires and looks of specific patients.

Where do cosmetic surgery beauty ideals come from? Cosmetic surgeons recognize multiple

influences, citing ostensibly “universal” principles of “symmetry” and “harmony” from art and evolutionary biology. They also draw upon changing trends and fads over what constitutes a desirable look over time. Fears that a white or Western beauty ideal would be disseminated from the U.S. to the rest of the globe as the singular and universal beauty ideal have given way to multiple different globally circulating ideals for men and women. A proliferating number of beauty ideals, including “Asian,” “Korean,” and a racially ambiguous “ethnic” look, have also been promoted by multinational corporations from Japan, South Korea, Europe, and the U.S. to sell cosmetics and other lifestyle products (Gimlin, 2014). Cultural media, including film, television shows, and music videos, also export ideals—including a white ideal that is recognized as unattainable even for most white women but signals a transnational mobility and sensibility (Saraswati, 2013). Women, in particular, can choose which look to “put on” from these global looks and from competing local and nationally-specific ideals, as research shows in Ecuador (Casanova, 2004), Vietnam (Hoang, 2014), and Nigeria (Balogun, 2012).

Thus, rather than one single global universal ideal, several beauty ideals circulate in a given place at a given time. As aesthetic laborers, cosmetic surgeons weigh competing ideals and meanings in deciding whether and how to modify patients’ appearances. Transnational flows of beauty ideals are multidirectional and are interpreted through the lens of local meanings, histories, and constraints. Within Asia, media from South Korea, China, and India clearly showcase distinct beauty ideals (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). Social media circulate and shape diverse beauty and fashion regimens globally as well. Aesthetic laborers, from cosmetic surgeons to hairstylists, beauticians, and manicurists, translate transnational beauty ideals onto the bodies of local consumers. Cosmetic surgeons act as gatekeepers, selectively facilitating the translation of beauty ideals across industries and country borders. All of these aesthetic laborers evaluate and interpret the narratives of change and transformation that patients put before them, a necessary step before

physically rendering them on bodies. This gives aesthetic laborers aesthetic agency, too: through their participation on social media and in popular culture, they do not just translate but also shape the cultural and racial meanings that people assign to specific physical features (Menon, 2019).

In addition, a global beauty ideal can take on different local meanings in specific local contexts according to local racial hierarchies. One example is surgical procedures to achieve a double eyelid and rounder eye in women of East Asian descent, which is often described by observers as achieving a “white” or “Western” beauty ideal. What this procedure and the resulting look means, however, depends on national and local context, even if, at first glance, “may seem to align with European and North American ideals” (Gimlin, 2014, p. 161). In the U.S., these procedures have been interpreted as a sign of self-hatred and a desire for assimilation into whiteness (Kaw, 1993), to the point that some U.S. surgeons came to become reluctant to perform them (Menon, 2023). My research in Malaysia shows that surgeons make gradations in racial meaning based on the precise height of the eyelid and gesture to Korean and Chinese traditions of physiognomy to explain the preference (Menon, 2019). Research on South Korea suggests that while cosmetic surgery seekers recognize that the ideal of a rounder, wider eye as influenced by beauty ideals from the U.S. and Japan, they themselves do not report seeking a “Western” look (Elfvig-Hwang, 2021). Other research shows a discrepancy in racial meaning between how surgeons and patients regard the same look: South Korean surgeons describe giving their patients from China a “Korean” look even as their patients explicitly reject that moniker (Holliday et al., 2017). In exceptional cases, single eyelids and a more slanted eye shape have become marks of distinction to aspire to through cosmetic surgery procedures. Zane (1998) finds that in particular ethnic enclaves (e.g., a wealthy ethnic Chinese community in the Philippines or Peruvians of Japanese descent trying to migrate to Japan), a slanted eye shape and/or lack of a double eyelid helped connote difference from the majority population within a country and similarity and proximity to a desired nationality

(Zane, 1998). Competing understandings of the contextual racial significance of physical features abound. The narratives of what patients seek and why and what surgeons deem acceptable or appropriate provide insight into racial meanings and racial structures more broadly.

In addition to beauty ideals and expertise, increasingly, patients also travel in cosmetic surgery. Nations like Brazil and South Korea are internationally renowned for plastic surgery and extol beauty as a symbolic resource, claiming expertise in cosmetic surgery as a form of national identity and pride (Edmonds, 2010; see also Leem, 2016). Increasingly, surgeons anticipate that they may face competition from international, as well as domestic, competitors. Among other countries, Turkey, South Korea, Malaysia, Tunisia, and the Dominican Republic encourage prospective patients to travel to their countries to receive cosmetic surgery, creating infrastructures to promote and facilitate medical tourism (Holliday et al., 2019). Across international borders, price differentials and regulatory differences enable working-class and middle-class patients from wealthier countries (e.g., the UK, U.S., Australia, and New Zealand) to obtain cosmetic surgery at more affordable prices (Ackerman, 2010; Holliday et al., 2019; Ormond et al., 2014). While many cosmetic surgeons focus primarily on treating patients close to home, a subset has embraced cosmetic surgery tourism, aided by international regulatory bodies and companies set up for this purpose.

3 Lessons from Cosmetic Surgery in the U.S. and Asia

In this section, I discuss some key lessons on beauty and inequality from my 16 months of fieldwork in the U.S., Malaysia, and Singapore, comprising interviews with board-certified and/or registered plastic surgeons, observation of professional conferences on plastic surgery, and observation of clinical consultations (see Menon, 2023 for more information). When I asked cosmetic surgeons in the U.S. and Malaysia to define beauty, the range of responses surprised me. Some

surgeons echoed common sayings like “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” gesturing to beauty as relative rather than universal. Others pointed to the cover pages of beauty and fashion magazines, like *Vogue*, granting popular culture the authority to identify appearances as desirable and attractive and describing themselves as technicians who help people achieve those ideals. Still other surgeons considered beauty to be a matter of *personal* aesthetic taste, developing their own individual aesthetic sense and judgment through the amateur practice of fine arts like painting or sculpture. I found that even among those who had received similar and extensive medical training, cosmetic surgeons drew different lines about what was beautiful on the body and who should decide.

The economic engine of cosmetic surgery depends on a continuing investment in the cultural, economic, and symbolic elevation of some physical appearances as beautiful. In my research, I show how cosmetic surgery is a transnational racial project, or a set of practices and beliefs that makes racial categories like “Asian” material and coherent as an embodied identity (Menon, 2023). The idea is that instead of seeing race as essentially rooted in the body, race is a sociopolitical category, with a definition that changes across time and in different places. Racial projects are part of “an ordering discourse that systematically subordinates some types of bodies over others” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 13). That is, race is not a neutral description of differences among human beings, but the product of a set of projects that holds up some people as socially, morally, physically, or otherwise superior to others. Racial projects, and the larger racial structures that they give rise to, can extend beyond the boundaries of one nation.

Beauty ideals and practices are one way of tracing national and transnational racial projects. Beauty ideals and practices are often associated with and shared by members of a racial group, and can reflect and reinforce racism and white supremacy. For instance, in U.S. popular culture, physical features and beauty ideals associated with Black people are devalued relative to those associated with white Americans. More generally, the physical features, hairstyles, and clothing fashions of the racial group in power in a nation are

seen as more beautiful than those associated with those at the bottom. Cosmetic surgery tends to reinforce and maintain existing socioeconomic, gender, and, especially, racial hierarchies.

Many patients say they obtained cosmetic surgery in order to invest in themselves. I found that patients tended to modify physical features in ways that made them conventionally legible—in terms of race or gender especially. Because of a long history of fears of Black patients obtaining procedures to “pass” as white, U.S. cosmetic surgeons were reluctant to grant patients of color explicit requests for a white or whiter look. Instead, most surgeons espoused a goal of “ethnic preservation,” that is, the idea that surgical procedures should modify patients’ features in a way that left them still legible as belonging to the same racial group afterward. U.S. surgeons scrutinized patient requests for racial implications in deciding whether to grant them, preferring more incremental change to transformation. For nose jobs, for instance, patients often requested procedures to straighten or smooth out the nose. This was often acceptable to surgeons and granted by them as a racially neutral framing. As one Chicago-based surgeon put it, referring to a request for an adjustment to the nose bridge, patients did not ask surgeons to “‘Keep my beak-like nose’—they won’t say that. They’ll say, ‘Oh, straighten this part’” (Menon, 2023, p. 105). That is, patients rarely asked surgeons to add or enhance racially-marked features like a “beak-like nose,” which were associated with patients of Middle Eastern and Indian descent; they generally sought to mitigate physical features that stood out, and surgeons were happy to oblige. Specifically, cosmetic surgeons preferred to smooth out rough edges or to re-focus attention with a chin implant so the “beak-like nose” was less prominent. If a patient were to ask to get rid of a “beak-like nose” or a “Middle Eastern” nose explicitly, that was a red flag to many of my respondents not to operate. Surgeons interpreted explicitly racial requests as a sign that patients may have had deep and unresolved identity issues that could not be resolved by surgery, and that patients were likely to remain unsatisfied if surgeons did operate.

In interviews, surgeons sometimes acknowledged that while they were *technically* able to depart from conventional beauty norms and cross racial lines, they were generally not willing to do so. Another Chicago-based surgeon made this explicit in his explanation of why he refused requests from white and Black patients for an “Asian” or almond “eye”: “The reason why I don’t do that is that they don’t look Asian afterwards. An Asian face—it’s not just the eyes. It’s the cheekbones, the proportions, the chin, the hair, the skin type—all that makes it look Asian.” Seeking to avoid probing patients’ motives for such requests, he categorically ruled them out (Menon, 2023, p. 107). This was even clearer in U.S. surgeons’ discussions of racially mixed patients. Some, like Dr. Boutros, extolled the beauty of mixed-race people: “It’s been a lot of fun navigating through the features because of that mixing. Its results have been some incredibly magnificent faces” (Menon, 2023, p. 108). But none of the surgeons I interviewed, in the U.S. or Malaysia, wanted to try their hand at creating a mixed-race look. They left it to nature to engage in this kind of aesthetic experimentation, admiring the outcomes from a distance and offering to “correct” nature if and when it departed too much from conventional notions of appearance. To be clear, while surgeons thought they had the technical ability to aesthetically experiment in this way, the social value and payoff was too uncertain for them to try it. Respondents did not want to court controversy for fear of scaring off other, more conventional patients.

However, I also found examples in which cosmetic surgery could complicate taken-for-granted hierarchies. In my fieldwork, class status, race, and gender intersected with one another and, most importantly, with nationality in ways that occasionally disrupted the centrality or supremacy of the West or of whiteness. Take, for example, the idea that any cosmetic surgery is about conspicuous consumption. Whereas cosmetic surgery once cost so much that it was simply out of reach for all but the wealthy, costs have become more affordable with the advent of minimally invasive procedures, competition spurred by nonmedical providers and by international medical providers, and consumer credit and financing plans. So

cosmetic surgery looks can signal class status, with higher status signaled through more subtle signals of cultural capital (Kuipers, 2015). For example, in the U.S., wealthy white women opted for natural, invisible looks that were not clearly the product of cosmetic surgery. By contrast, “obvious” or “artificial” cosmetic surgery was associated with middle or working class (Gimlin, 2013) who may have wanted to showcase their investment in specific body parts, for instance, through breast augmentation with large implants. Furthermore, in Malaysia, I found that some cosmetic surgeons sought to discourage wealthy women from “obvious” or “artificial” procedures like high volume breast augmentation precisely for its lower class, sexualized connotations. To emphasize its poor cultural fit with a Malaysian Indian patient, for example, one Malaysian surgeon, Dr. Shanmugan warned her that she risked appearing like the hyper-sexualized figure of Dolly Parton (Menon, 2023, pp. 119–120). Malaysian cosmetic surgeons used celebrities from the U.S., like Dolly Parton, as negative examples to steer their Malaysian patients away from certain looks. U.S. celebrities were cautionary tales that sometimes highlighted the excess of whiteness, and sometimes the excess of the U.S. To index the complicated cultural associations between the body and race, class, gender, and sexuality, they also discussed celebrities from India, China, and Malaysia with their patients.

Opting for “obvious” or “augmented” cosmetic surgery looks could also signal patients’ orientation toward regional or global audiences rather than local ones. For instance, though Malaysian surgeons criticized them for appearing “obvious,” “artificial,” or “weird,” they granted their Malaysian Chinese patients’ requests for a “Korean” or “Western” look in eyelid surgeries because they recognized that their Malaysian patients were trying to adhere to a regional (Korean) or global (Western) aesthetic. In these cases, surgeons also tried to dissuade patients, criticizing past patients who had done this. Though they did ultimately continue to grant requests for such looks, their discussion of Western looks made it clear that surgeons were not celebrating a Western or Caucasian look but interpreted patients

who requested them as “flexible elites” who were only dubiously Malaysian (Menon, 2023, p. 121). Orientation toward regional or global audiences was not always or automatically valued by cosmetic surgeons.

Though it can be easier to see in the examples of Malaysian surgeons and patients, U.S. cosmetic surgeons also navigated local, regional, and global registers in adjudicating patient requests. In the U.S., cosmetic surgeons encountered requests from patients for Brazilian butt lifts or Asian eyelid surgery from U.S. patients who wanted to cultivate an alternative racialized aesthetic and sensibility themselves, rooted in other national contexts. A buttocks augmentation was a decisive departure from a slender, white standard of feminine beauty, and some surgeons expressed surprise or skepticism about such requests from white, Black, or Latina patients. But, even if reluctantly, U.S. surgeons would ultimately grant these requests, interpreting them as a form of racial pride for Black and Latina women—even as these procedures naturalized stereotypes of Black and Latina women as hyper-sexualized (Menon, 2023, pp. 136–137).

Cosmetic surgery is a fascinating case for examining the interplay between inequality, beauty, and the body, offering insight into how nationality, race, gender, class, and age intersect. Though cosmetic surgery destabilizes the presumed correspondence between social identities and the body, showing the fluidity in racial and gender categories, cosmetic surgeons generally act to maintain the boundaries of those categories. Cosmetic surgeons represent a class of professionals who render abstract notions of race and beauty into material and embodied form on the body. Surgeons take existing inequalities as a given that they can only ameliorate individually for those who elect to come through their doors. Despite their technical capabilities to do otherwise, their preference to uphold conventional norms and expressions of beauty reinforces existing social inequality.

4 Avenues for Future Research

The variable mapping of body parts onto social identities across locales suggests a series of complex relationships between the medical marketplace, social identities, and bodies that could be traced through comparative work. Comparing multiple racial and ethnic groups and adopting a transnational perspective will be fruitful for future research. It can show how cosmetic surgery may have different consequences and implications across racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., Asia, and elsewhere, and by gender. By comparing multiple countries rather than focusing on one setting, it is easier to see and imagine how “looks” (Mears, 2011) could be otherwise and how global ideals can be translated into new local forms. In addition, more research could elucidate the relationship between the expansion and shift in media and beauty ideals. It is an empirical question how changing media forms and hierarchies, in particular, the rise of influencers from around the world, might affect inequalities in this field and drive cosmetic surgery tourism. Finally, research that compares and takes on different market conditions for cosmetic surgery can help highlight how the market perpetuates not only economic inequalities, but inequalities based on race, gender, and nation as well.

Cosmetic surgery offers a unique window on the relationship between beauty and inequality. As an invasive and expensive practice (relative to other forms of beauty and body work), cosmetic surgery sheds light on beauty hierarchies and how they differ and change across contexts. Cosmetic surgery reflects existing social inequalities and forces like sexism and racism while also constituting a terrain for some men and women to challenge and shift beauty ideals.

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Alka V. Menon is an assistant professor of sociology at Yale University, where she is also affiliated with the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, the Program in the History of Science and History of Medicine, and the Council on Southeast Asian Studies. She is the author of the book *Refashioning Race: How*

Global Cosmetic Surgery Crafts New Beauty Standards, which shows how cosmetic surgeons re-shape race on patients' bodies and at the broader level of culture through a comparison of the accounts of surgeons in the U.S. and Malaysia. Her research has been recognized with awards from the American Sociological Association Section on Body and Embodiment and has been supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. She received her PhD in sociology from Northwestern University.

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Beauty and Work: Continuity and Change in the Analysis of Aesthetic Labour

Dennis Nickson and Chris Warhurst

1 Introduction

Aesthetic labour has become an important concept in contemporary research on interactive service work and beyond. Definitionally, with aesthetic labour employers seek employees with a particular look or sound which is intended to positively shape customer or user perceptions of the employing organisation and, in the private sector, stimulate customer product demand. The concept was initially developed to consider how employers in industries such as hospitality and retail mobilise and commodify employees' physical attributes, through employment practices such as recruitment, selection, training, monitoring, discipline and reward, intending to produce a service encounter that appeals to the senses of customers (Warhurst et al., 2000). These practices are operationalised through elements such as appearance standards and dress codes, managing employee body language and seeking to recruit people with appropriate accents or even modifying their speech once employed. Importantly, these practices are driven by employers, are a feature of

the employment relationship between employers and employees and so are part of the paid labour of employees.

Because aesthetic labour is sometimes short-handed to refer to employees 'looking good', it is often equated with the employment of beautiful workers. Undoubtedly, some employers deliberately recruit good-looking workers, with employers' aesthetic labour demands more stringent in what is termed the 'style labour market' for boutique hotels and designer retailers (Hall & van den Broek, 2012). As one such employer stated in other research in high-end hospitality, 'We don't give a fuck how good they are as long as they're good looking' (quoted in Knox, 2013). Early in our research we even identified what we termed a 'new labour aristocracy' in this style labour market (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Such workers have a different—higher—status than other retail and hospitality workers, act disdainfully to customers and can even, with their good looks, intimidate those customers. However, different market segments have different types of employer aesthetic labour demands and aesthetic labour is more about the fit of employee aesthetics with those specifically demanded by particular employers. In this respect, it is important to recognise that what is deemed the 'right' look or sound will vary in line with employer (and customer) expectations of the service encounter and its attendant 'good service' (and see De Keere et al., this volume).

D. Nickson (✉)
Department of Work, Employment and Organisation,
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK
e-mail: d.p.nickson@strath.ac.uk

C. Warhurst
University of Warwick, Warwick Institute for
Employment Research, Coventry, UK
e-mail: C.Warhurst@warwick.ac.uk

In our book, *Aesthetic Labour* (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), we sought to synthesise over 20 years of our own and others' research assessing aesthetic labour. Whilst the primary focus of the book was on the way hospitality and retail organisations sought to create the right look and sound, it also gave us an opportunity to extend our analysis to recognise how aesthetic labour could be found in contexts beyond these two industries, such as musicians, PR practitioners and recruitment agency consultants. Importantly, beyond private sector workplaces we recognised more recent research, which extended the exploration of aesthetic labour into the public sector, noting, for example, the way in which traffic wardens in Denmark and China were recruited based on their appearance, dressed in restyled uniforms and instructed in body language as a means to lessen the potential for verbal and physical attacks from the public. Importantly, too, the book allowed us to contextualise our research with ongoing debates about the aestheticisation of society, as exemplified by talk of an aesthetic economy (Postrel, 2004). Within this discussion, we were able to recognise the importance of how individuals engage with impression management to enhance their employability and career success. Consideration of these issues allowed us to acknowledge the huge growth in the beauty industry, including cosmetic (or, as it is increasingly known, aesthetic) surgery as a means to fully leverage our personal aesthetic capital in an organisational context.

This chapter offers a state-of-the-art review and update of current issues and developments in the analysis of aesthetic labour, focusing on two developments: first the continuities in this research and second the changes in this research. The main section of the chapter discusses both the continuities and changes across five issues and developments. It outlines the empirical foci of research by, first, industry and then, second, cultural context. It then discusses conceptual developments that, third, draw on an intersectionality approach and, fourth, seek to further understanding of lookism (or discrimination based on appearance; see also Mason & Mitdgaard, this

volume). Fifth and finally, it examines the disciplinary basis of aesthetic labour. We conclude the chapter by considering how these issues and developments in the analysis of aesthetic labour are likely to inform future research endeavours.

2 Continuity and Change in Research Analysing Aesthetic Labour

Since we developed the concept in the mid-1990s, an aesthetocopia has emerged, by which we mean the abundance of research now examining aesthetic labour. Indeed, borrowing and adapting a phrase coined about emotional labour (Bolton, 2000), we suggested in *Aesthetic Labour* (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020) that research on aesthetic labour was discovering it to be 'here, there and everywhere'. Our state-of-the-art review of that research for this chapter draws on two recent pieces of work: first, a bibliometric analysis of aesthetic labour by Mann and Raiwat (2023) and, second, a systematic review of lookism research by Jones et al. (2024).

Over these two pieces it is clear that since 2020 a number of publications which have utilised aesthetic labour could be characterised as simply continuing, if supplementing, approaches in much of the earlier work presented in *Aesthetic Labour*. First, in this respect, much research mirrors that presented in *Aesthetic Labour* in terms of industry focus, with a clear continuing empirical focus on the hospitality and retail industries. Second, there is a continuing predominance of empirical research emanating from Western contexts, especially the US and UK. Third, much of what has been published to date could broadly be characterised as sociological in disciplinary basis. That said, some of the more recent research offers empirical, conceptual and disciplinary expansion to what we considered in *Aesthetic Labour*. One such change is the emergence of empirical research undertaken in differing cultural contexts, highlighting how aspects such as appearance standards, dress codes and body adornment can be culturally constructed for the 'right' look. Another

is the manner in which the concept of intersectionality is utilised and relatedly the growing research on intersectionality and the racialised nature of aesthetic labour. A further conceptual development centres on the legality of lookism or discrimination based on appearance. Finally, more recent research suggests what we describe as a psychological turn in aesthetic labour, and which seeks to measure the impact of aesthetic labour on employees and apply the resulting understanding for managerial benefit. We outline these empirical, conceptual and disciplinary issues and developments in this section.

2.1 The Empirical Focus on Hospitality, Retail and More

Mann and Raiwat's (2023) bibliometric analysis usefully highlights work that has been conducted since the concept of aesthetic labour emerged in 2000. It reveals a clear continuing empirical research focus on the hospitality and retail industries. Two recent publications are indicative of our initial focus examining aesthetic labour in hospitality (Stevens & Connelly, 2024) and retail (Oluyadi & Dai, 2023). These authors discuss the notion of fit within, respectively, the Canadian food service industry and UK fashion retail, drawing on interviews with employees, managers and supervisors, and trade union and employment agency representatives. Their findings affirm the importance of how employees are expected to 'fit' the desired organisational brand (and see De Keere et al. in this handbook). Other work since 2020 which has usefully considered aesthetic labour specifically within the hospitality and tourism industry includes ongoing debates about the utilisation of aesthetic labour in the airline industry and particularly its gendered nature (see, for example, Gerçek, 2024; Small, 2022; Smith et al., 2023).

The work of Vonk (2024; also Vonk, 2021) again supplements and also extends existing research on aesthetic labour by analysing organisational contexts beyond hospitality and retail—in this case the rail industry. More specifically,

the focus of Vonk (2024) is the experiences of employees' working in fine dining restaurants and as train conductors through the lens of wearing uniforms. Employees would see their uniforms as a means to shape their identities to offer the 'right' kind of performance, as mandated by management, in their dealings with the customers. Within such a process, uniforms would often have the effect of disciplining employees to adopt appropriate postures and maintain an appropriate size. Additionally, the wearing of the uniform would act to encourage employees' to engage in sometimes risky behaviours or accept behaviours from customers they would not otherwise accept, such as having to confront irate passengers or tolerate sexual harassment.

Nonetheless, the industry scope is widening. Recent empirical research has sought to extend aesthetic labour into different organisational contexts, including higher education and a focus on the aesthetic labour of female academics with a consideration of the role of dress and gender (Lipton, 2021) and dance, with the experiences of black ballerinas (Robinson, 2021) and particularly the extent to which they are marginalised and discriminated. Another new strand of work worth recognising is that concerned with social media influencers (see, for example, Drenten et al., 2019; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020; Xie et al., 2023). Much of this work seeks to assess the manner in which influencers use their aesthetic labour to present themselves on social media. As such, it is concerned with studying the visual presentation of the influencer's body and image, which is moulded to the specific standards and expectations which their intended consumers are seeking from the influencer. It is argued that this requires a particular skill set and characteristics, which are used by influencers to 'interpret, assemble and flaunt a particular aesthetic via the construction of vivid social media images, hashtags and commercial sponsors' (McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020, p. 401). While reaching into different organisational contexts in some cases, much of this work represents a consolidation of existing research on aesthetic labour.

2.2 Aesthetic Labour in Non-Western Contexts

To date, much of the analysis of aesthetic labour has focused on Western contexts with empirical research examining aesthetic labour in non-Western contexts less developed. Our empirical research presented in *Aesthetic Labour* was wholly drawn from the UK, although we did work with colleagues on international projects that included Sweden and Australia (e.g. respectively, Huzell & Larsen, 2012; Hall & van den Broek, 2012). In *Aesthetic Labour*, we also did briefly consider work emanating from countries such as China, Taiwan and India. For example, the work of Nath (2011) examining the need for call centre workers in India usefully highlighted how they have to sound right in their interactions with Western customers based in the US. In addition, our consideration of aesthetic labour in these contexts highlighted that in countries such as China and Taiwan companies were very overt in their aesthetic requirements and, moreover, that discrimination based on appearance is widely practised and accepted (and see, for example, Luoh & Tsaur, 2024; Niu, 2024).

Nonetheless, the general Western empirical focus is confirmed in the bibliometric analysis of Mann and Raiwat (2023), who find that the majority of work published emanates from the UK or US, with a smaller number of publications coming from countries such as Australia, Canada, Sweden and the Netherlands. Similarly, Jones et al. (2024) in their systematic review of lookism within the hospitality and tourism industry recognises the Western focus of research. Both Mann and Raiwat and Jones et al. recognise there are far fewer publications coming from non-Western countries, with a much smaller number for China, Taiwan and India for example.

In this respect, a further area which has pushed the empirical boundaries of extant research on aesthetic labour is more research set in non-Western contexts. Further consideration of aesthetic labour in other less researched non-Western contexts is important as it can usefully highlight the ways in which aesthetic labour interacts with national discourses and cultural

constructs to create localised views of what denotes the 'right' look. A good example is the issue of how religion may impact appearance and dress codes (see, for example, Lewis & Aune, 2023). More specifically, there is an emerging stream of research which has considered the specific issue of hijab, or the wearing of headscarves. For example, Sarioğlu (2014) and Sayan-Cengiz (2020); see also Sonmez et al., 2023, for an experimental study of how American customers perceive headscarf wearing in fine dining restaurants) usefully consider the issue of headscarf wearing by female employees in Turkish retail organisations, locating this discussion with ongoing debates over the religious/secular divide in Turkey (and see Karademir, this volume). Sarioğlu (2014) and Sayan-Cengiz (2020) found that some Turkish retail organisations, especially large retailers and those located in shopping malls, exclude women who wore headscarves as it was felt that this would be incompatible with the urban, secular, educated middle- and upper-class customers with Western lifestyles. On the other hand, in *tesettür* (chain stores which are selling hijabs), the headscarf is a requirement reflecting the Islamic middle-class image that retail workers in this context are expected to embody.

Many other parts of the world remain under-researched and in particular there is limited research examining aesthetic labour within the African context, though a notable exception is Adisa et al. (2024). This study, focusing on the overt and debilitating discrimination from both co-workers and customers faced by those with tribal markings, offers novel insights on the experiences of customer or client-facing employees in Nigeria. In particular, it shows that their tribal markings are increasingly out of step with regard to what is considered the 'right' look in modern-day Nigeria. This point opens up wider issues about aesthetic ideals. As we noted in *Aesthetic Labour*, Western cultural (and Western-owned beauty industry companies) ideas of what is perceived to be beautiful can be pervasive: typically thin, blond, blue-eyed and young (Jones, 2010). In this respect, concerns have been raised about the promotion by some of these Western companies

of skin lightening cosmetic products which are targeted at Black women in Africa (Binns, 2017). Research into aesthetic labour in non-Western contexts is therefore important, highlighting the need to understand how individuals' aesthetic labouring is shaped within different national discourses and cultural contexts whilst yet vulnerable to Western cultural colonisation. Aesthetic labour thus needs to be understood with regard to the notion of what is deemed to be the 'right' look may be culturally and historically constructed.

2.3 Taking More Account of Intersectionality and the Racialised Nature of Aesthetic Labour

In *Aesthetic Labour*, our analysis enveloped issues of gender and class. However, there was only limited consideration of the way aesthetic labour can be racialised, in large part because of the paucity of research on this issue by us and others. Thus, it is clear that there is significant scope to consider the racialised dimensions of aesthetic labour. We did suggest that an intersectionality approach that included the issue of race in future research would be useful.

A key conceptual development since 2020 is the more explicit consideration of this intersectionality. For example, one of us has sought to assess how aesthetic labour has the potential to be discriminatory, specifically drawing on the concept of intersectionality to appreciate how people can be characterised by their membership of multiple social categories, which leads to discrimination in frontline service work (Nickson, 2022). Referring back to the issue of 'organisational fit', Oluyadi and Dai (2023) point out, 'the construction of "fit" represents the vector of an intersectional space where gender, race, status and ethnicity construct an ideal food service candidate' (p. 16) (and see De Keere et al., this volume). Within this context, Stevens and Connelly (2024) note that within the Canadian food service industry young, attractive white women are especially privileged, whilst more vulnerable populations such as people from

minority ethnic backgrounds and migrants faced a more mixed experience. For example, whilst some workers from minority ethnic backgrounds might be marginalised in the recruitment process others were hired, due to being 'exoticised' and seen as an asset for a business wanting to burnish its equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) credentials. The one group of workers who were consistently overlooked and excluded were indigenous workers, with employers usually holding negative views of this group.

Many of the themes from this research resonate with findings from our own and others research reported in *Aesthetic Labour*. For example, in their focus on a group of racially diverse women working at a fashion retail outlet in London, Oluyadi and Dai (2023) note how the store manager would examine all employees' personal appearance daily and would often criticise employees for lapses in uniform or appearance standards. Beyond these themes though the concentration on an ethnically diverse group of women workers allows for some important insights around the racialised nature of aesthetic labour. In particular, Oluyadi and Dai note the experiences of Asian employees who faced the double pressure of having to 'look good' but also 'sound right'. For the latter aspect of sounding right, they recount how a Korean-born employee was hired to serve Asian customers and although she had limited English she was still regarded as valuable because she was perceived to be good looking, but also because she spoke Korean and Mandarin. By contrast, another British-born Asian employee who was a native English speaker did not speak Mandarin and although they 'looked right' the inability to sound exotic or foreign led to them being fired. The same fate befell an employee originally from China, whose strong Chinese accent meant her inability to sustain an English accent with the 'right' degree of foreign accent led to her leaving the organisation.

The work of Oluyadi and Dai (2023; also Robinson, 2021; Stevens & Connelly, 2024) takes its place alongside the excellent work of Misra and Walters (2022) examining the clothing retail industry in the US and how it is explicitly racialised. Although we briefly considered

an earlier work by Walters (2018) in *Aesthetic Labour*; the much fuller treatment of race in Misra and Walters shows the manner in which the visibility or otherwise of customer facing staff will often be influenced by their skin colour. They outline a racialised three-tiered hierarchy or what they describe as 'tri-racial aesthetic labour', which saw managers particularly favouring white beauty standards in their frontline employees. Thus, they recognise the manner in which clothing retailers such as American Eagle or Abercrombie and Fitch prefer to staff their stores with slender white women and muscular men. The second tier in the hierarchy are lighter skinned and racially ambiguous looking Asian, Black, Hispanic and multiracial employees, who are employed as a means to diversify brand representations. The third tier at the bottom of the hierarchy are darker-skinned Black women, who are devalued and consequently are more likely to face discrimination, thus being unlikely to get a job or, if they are employed, likely to find themselves working backstage and not in contact with customers. Misra and Walters clearly show how race is embedded in aesthetic labour in terms of being both hyper visible and invisible. The visibility of often good looking, white-skinned employees in frontline positions serves to signal very clearly the expected type of employee in at least some service settings. At the same time many workers of colour who do not 'fit' the store brand find themselves marginalised or invisible, either not employed or if employed likely to working away from customers. Recent research has thus applied an intersectionality approach to aesthetic labour and, in doing so, significantly enhancing the understanding of race as an issue within aesthetic labour, adding to previous analysis that incorporated issues of gender and class.

2.4 Developing Better Understanding of Lookism

In *Aesthetic Labour*, we highlighted the relative lack of legislative interventions with regard to discrimination based on an individual's appearance, often framed as 'lookism', unless such

discrimination is explicitly tied to a protected characteristic such as gender, race or disability. Moreover, a significant body of research from economics and law (see, for example, Hamermesh, 2011 and Rhode, 2010) has highlighted the tangible pay and career premiums and penalties that accrue to individuals who are perceived to be good and worse looking, respectively. We believe there is scope for further analytical work on the issue of lookism and also scope to use that work to support development of interventions. Recent research has attended to the first issue.

On this point, it is useful to refer to Jones et al.'s (2024) work on lookism. These authors develop a systematic literature review of nearly 50 articles to offer a multilevel conceptual framework that identifies institutional-, organisational-, job- and individual-level antecedents and employee outcomes of lookism in hospitality and tourism. For example, at the institutional level the lack of legislation means that organisations essentially can act with impunity with regard to how they choose to frame their aesthetic requirements, a point to which we return below. Organisationally, impunity is evident through aesthetic hiring and other HRM practices, such as induction, training and performance management. At the level of individual decision making, there is a recognition of how managers will often base their hiring decisions on what they believe customers are looking for, with an obvious potential to create discriminatory, stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes. Finally, with regard to job-level antecedents, Jones et al. particularly note the gendered nature of aesthetic labour and the manner in which women are much more likely to be aestheticised and sexualised for example. On the point of employee outcomes, Jones et al. recognise how individual outcomes encompass elements such as job and career-related outcomes, job attitudes and turnover intentions and psychological and physical health outcomes. One of the most obvious outcomes with regard to job and careers is the often-adverse job prospects for applicants who fail to conform to physical appearance requirements, albeit within the context of how different organisations have different aesthetic requirements and judgements of an appropriate 'fit' (and see De

Keere et al. in this handbook). Similarly, on the issue of job attitudes and turnover intentions, there is evidence that lookism can reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover intention, though in some contexts when there is a strong fit between the organisational aesthetic and employees this fit can serve to have the opposite effect and lead to enhanced job satisfaction. Whilst the findings with regard to job and career outcomes and job attitudes and turnover intentions largely mirror many of the findings from our own and others research we reported in *Aesthetic Labour*, the issue of psychological outcomes for individual employees is one that is largely unexplored in our work. In this sense, Jones et al. note that there is now an emerging stream of work which seeks to assess how aesthetic labour impacts on psychological outcomes, a point which we develop further below. Finally, on the issue of how lookism affects physical health outcomes, it is important to recognise how, particularly in occupations which have a weight requirement, such as flight attendants, servers in casinos and waitresses in Hooters-style restaurants, employees may resort to unhealthy weight control practices, and even cosmetic surgery in order to comply with weight standards and generally enhance their overall physical appearance.

In addition to the manner in which views of aesthetic labour may, as we noted above, be culturally constructed, it is also important to acknowledge the potential for aesthetic labour to be shaped by the prevailing legal framework. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly the only national level legislation that exists is in France. Although there has been a very small number of cases taken forward through the legislation in France, it has been argued that the legislation has served to raise awareness of appearance discrimination, which has arguably served to lessen the incidence of such discrimination (Barth & Wagner, 2017; Huggins, 2015). Beyond France, a very small number of states in the US and one state in Australia have legislation seeking to address appearance discrimination, though again the impact of this legislation remains minimal. As one of us has noted recently, there are real practical challenges to demonstrating lookism legally. These challenges include

the lack of definitional clarity over lookism and the evidentiary difficulties establishing discrimination on the basis of looks (Warhurst et al., 2024). Within this context, since the publication of *Aesthetic Labour*, unsurprisingly there has been no real shift with regard to legislative intervention.

That said, there has been some interesting work which usefully adds to the extant work considering attempts to legislate lookism. To date much of the debate about legal approaches to lookism, such as arguments for and against such intervention, has invariably emanated from an American socio-legal tradition. There has been much less interest in such issues within the UK, though a recent exception is Mason and Minerva (2022). Mason and Minerva argue that morally there is a strong argument to extend the provisions of the Equality Act (2010) to include direct appearance discrimination, unless there is a bona fide reason for an organisation to require a certain appearance. This reasoning chimes with much of the discussion in the US around the extent to which demanding a certain appearance is at the heart of 'the essence of the business' and a 'bona fide occupational qualification' (BFOQ). Specifically, as we noted in *Aesthetic Labour*, it seems questionable as to the extent to which organisations can legitimately claim that their often-stringent appearance requirements can be construed as being at the heart of the business and a BFOQ in the hospitality and retail industries and indeed beyond. Ultimately, Mason and Minerva, mirroring some of the arguments around the French experience highlighted above, argue that whilst introducing legislation will not lead to appearance discrimination disappearing overnight it will serve to change societal attitudes so that less importance is given to appearance in employment decisions. The law, then, would be a means to formally signal what is and what is not acceptable. In a similar vein, Niu (2024) recognises widespread lookism in China. Their research found that appearance requirements are routinely outlined in Chinese job advertisements, which will often have clear stipulations with expectations of a 'good image' and aspects such as age and height. In particular, Niu examines gender-based lookism in hiring, revealing again a clear intersection between gender and

physical appearance requirements in the Chinese job market meaning that women will often be expected to conform to very specific requirements, especially in customer facing roles. As with Mason and Minerva, Niu argues it is important to increase awareness of the extent of lookism in China and advocates legislation to make it illegal, whilst arguing that in the meantime there is a need to encourage Chinese HR professionals to think much more about the importance of diversity in hiring decisions. This newer research thus continues to conceive aesthetic labour as a problem, as we did in *Aesthetic Labour*. However, it is actively seeking to identify the challenges in addressing lookism legislatively and, importantly, there are now arguments that doing so would have a useful wider and important societal impact beyond employment.

2.5 A Psychological Turn?

Our disciplinary starting point in developing the concept of aesthetic labour was primarily sociological, and more specifically the sociology of work. This sociological approach has informed much of the research that has followed. While the bibliometric analysis of aesthetic labour by Mann and Raiwat (2023) notes that aesthetic labour has been studied from different disciplinary standpoints, much of what has been published to date could broadly be characterised as reflecting a sociological tradition. Illustratively, the journal which has published the most work on aesthetic labour is *Work, Employment and Society*, a journal of the British Sociological Association, followed by *Gender, Work and Organisation*, a journal which is dedicated to gender relations and explicit engagement with sociological as well as gender theories.

That said, one of the more original research strands that has emerged since the publication of *Aesthetic Labour* seeks to measure the psychological outcomes of aesthetic labour on employees. In *Aesthetic Labour*, we noted how aesthetic labour complements emotional labour and it is interesting to note that this psychological turn in aesthetic labour echoes the analytical evolution

of emotional labour. Yang and Chen (2021) in their systematic review of the emotional labour literature suggest that the concept has evolved in three phases. Firstly, with the seminal work of Hochschild (1983) the concept was introduced and then further developed and refined by the likes of Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) and Morris and Feldman (1996). Yang and Chen characterise the second phase as the ‘measurement stage’, in which increasingly the focus moved towards developing measures of emotional labour and testing relationships between emotional labour and antecedents and outcomes via cross-sectional research. Beyond this second phase, the final and current phase that they note is the model development phase. In this phase, they suggest that the focus is on research designs with greater sophistication and novelty which, amongst other things, allow for greater understanding of the antecedents, consequences, mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions of emotional labour.

This characterisation of the evolving nature of emotional labour can usefully be applied to aesthetic labour. As noted above, our disciplinary starting point was sociological. Over time, though, the disciplinary base of aesthetic labour expanded with insights coming from disciplines such as mainstream HRM and marketing. For example, we recognised in *Aesthetic Labour* an emergent stream of research from marketing scholars which sought to assess the views of customers towards organisations’ use of aesthetic labour. This research found that the appearance of frontline service employees, especially if they are judged to be attractive, did have a positive impact with regard to: attracting customers; facilitating customers understanding of the brand concept; creating strong, positive emotions amongst customers, such as pleasure and excitement; and enhancing customer satisfaction (see, for example, Kim et al., 2009; Magnini et al., 2013; Pounders et al., 2015; Quach et al., 2017; Soderlund & Julander, 2009; Tsaur et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2020). While these studies utilised a range of methodological approaches, including experimental research and qualitative interviews with customers, it is noteworthy that a number of

them sought to measure the views of customers, via survey instruments as a means to assess their views of aesthetic labour.

Within the psychological turn, the focus is now shifting to consider employees as well as customers. In this regard, these more psychological accounts of how employees experience aesthetic labour tend to focus on elements such as the job demands arising from aesthetic labouring and their potential to create burnout in employees. For example, Tsaur and Hsieh (2020) assess the extent to which aesthetic labour may lead to stress for employees and whether this creates a burden for them. Drawing on survey data from nearly 400 hotel workers in Taiwan (the majority, 64%, of whom were female and aged under 30, 67%), Tsaur and Hsieh found that, overall, the burdens and psychological cost to employees undertaking aesthetic labour reduced their work engagement and thereby, by implication, creating disbenefits to employers. That said, the research also recognised that if employees were physically attractive, this attractiveness served to moderate the effects of the aesthetic labour burden on work engagement. Interestingly in drawing the managerial implications, Tsaur and Hsieh suggest these results point to the need for organisations to hire people who embody their aesthetic labour requirements. Then, once employed, ensure that training is offered to enhance the attractiveness of employees through enhancing their resources for performing aesthetic labour. It is also suggested that organisations should make their aesthetic standards very clear as a means of potentially reducing stress. Finally, they advocate that organisations should reward their employees for their performance of aesthetic labour. In sum and reflecting the lesser burden on those deemed more attractive, it is argued that 'they should select the candidates who are more physically attractive, and they should evaluate the physical attractiveness of the candidates by appearance, body figures, dressing, and conversation' (p. 97).

Similarly, Katircioglu and Tekin (2021) seek to consider the relationship between employees' aesthetic labour performance and burnout, focusing on 257 female frontline employees from five-star hotels in Turkey. The authors

develop a six-factor scale to examine the relationship between aesthetic labour and burnout, with factors being: aesthetic labour when interacting with guests; striving to maintain aesthetic labour during breaks; aesthetic labour in the recruitment process; employee perceptions of physical beauty; aesthetic labour developed through training and manager desired aesthetic labour during working hours. Demographically, the majority of the respondents in the survey were young women with 62% under 30 and only 9% over 40. Contra to some of the findings in Tsaur and Hsieh, Katircioglu and Tekin found no significant relationship between their employees' aesthetic labour performance and their burnout levels. These differences are explained in the recognition that many potential employees are fully aware of the aesthetic requirements of the organisation, particularly in the context of upper market hotels. However, mirroring Tsaur and Hsieh's findings, it is suggested that the relatively young age of the survey respondents means they are confident in their appearance when interacting with guests. Finally, and also from a more managerialist standpoint, Genk and Kozak (2020) seek to measure the effect of managers' emotional and social competence on the aesthetic labour of service and kitchen employees in a Turkish restaurant chain. Drawing on a survey of 127 managers and over 500 employees, the research finds that managers' emotional and social competence, and the creation of a sense of mutual trust between managers and employees, can lead to a better aesthetic performance from employees.

The emergence of this more psychologically oriented research has led to the creation of a scale to investigate how employees can self-assess their aesthetic labour (Luoh & Tsaur, 2024; see also Dossinger et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2024). Developed from qualitative and quantitative research undertaken with over 700 airline and hotel employees in Taiwan, the majority of whom were again female and young (aged 26–35 years), the scale is a four-factor, 21 item scale. The four factors encompass appropriate voice and response, pleasant appearance, corporate aesthetic image and pleasant demeanour. The voice and response items include things such as 'I pay attention to whether my

speech is proper' and 'I speak elegantly'. Items under the heading of appearance include 'I only wear make up that conforms to the requirements of my organisation' and 'I pay attention to the neatness of my clothing and looks'. The corporate image encompasses elements such as 'I present an aesthetic style in line with the company's image' and 'I maintain an elegant image'. Finally, for demeanour, items include 'I make eye contact with customers and continue smiling' and 'I always maintain a friendly smile'. Taking as their starting point that aesthetic labour is a very marketable skill for frontline service workers, ultimately Luoh and Tsaur conclude that the aesthetic labour scale 'can provide employees or hospitality students with a reference for the preparation and execution of their aesthetic labour' (p. 1079). In focusing on employee experience, this turn to a psychological approach in research is helpful, though it is notable that, unlike the work we outline in the sub-section above, it is also accepting of aesthetic labour. Moreover, in seeking to best support employee and organisational fit to secure better employee performance there is also a second turn in this research—to managerialism, we suggest.

3 Conclusion

Even if research now finds aesthetic labour to be here, there and everywhere, there are patterns and nuances to this research. The state-of-the-art review presented in this chapter has identified the ideas and developments in research since the publication of *Aesthetic Labour*. Drawing on a bibliometric analysis by Mann and Raiwat (2023) and a systematic review by Jones et al. (2024), our review has identified the changes and continuities across the empirical foci, conceptualisation and disciplinary bases of this research.

Empirically, most research still focuses on the original industries which triggered our interest and development of aesthetic labour—the retail and hospitality industries and mainly affirming our initial observations laid out in *Aesthetic Labour*. However, a focus on other interactive services industries is evident in more research. Similarly, most research focuses on aesthetic labour in the

US and UK and other Western contexts. Again, however, the geographical focus has widened in more recent research to better envelop non-Western contexts. We would hope that both empirical extensions continue, not least because this newer research also adds conceptually to the understanding of aesthetic labour in adopting an intersectionality approach that better draws out the racialised nature of aesthetic labour. In addition, it has broadened understanding of the need for anti-lookism interventions that include but go beyond employment and might benefit society. In terms of disciplinary basis, whilst our original research and much that followed had a sociological bent, some of the newer research has taken a psychological turn and is also positioned to be of benefit to employers, or at least managers as employers in loco, through delivering enhanced employee and thereby organisational performance.

All of this research, firstly, underlines and extends aesthetic labour as initially conceived and, secondly, demonstrates that aesthetic labour is now multi-industry, multi-national and multi-disciplinary. Further research across industries, cultural contexts and from different disciplines would be welcome. As it diffuses, it is important that it maintains its conceptual coherence. Other concepts in the past have lost that coherence as they too became diffused, as the Quality of Working Life concept exemplifies (Guest, 2022). We are wary therefore of research that might undermine the conceptual coherence of aesthetic labour in the same way that some researchers subsequent to Hochschild (1983) used the term 'emotional labour' and created what Hochschild calls 'concept creep', using the term emotional labour in ways well beyond her original definition leaving her 'horrified' at its misuse (Beck, 2018). It then took Bolton (2000) to usefully untangle and re-affirm the conceptual boundaries of emotional labour by outlining four categories of emotion management. All four types can be found in organisations but have different underpinning logics. Emotional labour is just one of these four types and is distinct because it is based on 'commercial gain' (p. 156). Other, non-pecuniary forms of emotion management exist, she points out, but should not be conflated with

emotional labour because they do not involve this commercial gain.

A good example of this conflation danger with regard to aesthetic labour would be the work by Elias et al. (2017b). Titled *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, the book, written from a critical feminist perspective, undoubtedly offers timely, important and revealing insights around the deleterious outcomes from the manner in which societies are now obsessed by appearance, and the particular consequences for women. However, whilst the book acknowledges the idea of aesthetic labour as we first defined it in 2000, there is limited engagement in the subsequent chapters of the work and employment aspects of aesthetic labour. Indeed, in considering the ‘turn to labour’ in beauty studies, the introductory chapter notes that consideration of this point ‘at first glance might seem ... an odd addition’ (Elias et al., 2017a, p. 34). In fairness, the same authors subsequently note that ‘the new “turn” to labour has given rise to a proliferation of different terms for thinking about work and we believe this vocabulary is productive for engaging with appearance politics’ (p. 34), recognising, for example, elements such as posture, demeanour, body language and class. Later in the chapter though the same authors suggest that ‘the concept of aesthetic labour is too important to refer only to employment’, a point we would take issue with. In much the same way that Hochschild distinguishes between emotional labour, which is paid, and emotion work, which is unpaid, we would argue that much of what is discussed in Elias et al. (2017) is more redolent of aesthetic work rather than aesthetic labour as we originally defined it. Indeed, the book highlights the importance of ‘aesthetic entrepreneurship’ and the need for all of us to be ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’ and it is these notions, focussing on how individuals self-manage their own aesthetic, as opposed to our development of the concept of aesthetic labour. To be clear, identifying and researching aesthetic work is important but it is conceptually distinct from aesthetic labour if it is not a feature of the paid labour of employees.

Taking account of the above discussion, conceptual coherence can be maintained, we suggest, by adherence to the definition of aesthetic labour that we outlined at the start of this chapter. Such adherence does not disable conceptual spin-offs such as that developed by Huzell and Larsen (2012) and their concept of ‘athletic labour’. Indeed, our definition enables such developments by providing a conceptual benchmark and springboard. Even so, diffusion will still likely expose tensions within both the field of practice and the field of study of aesthetic labour. For example, in terms of field of practice, as we note above, employers will probably grapple with a perceived need to promote local context aesthetic ideals or adopt Western aesthetic ideals for their employees. Similarly, within the field of study, as we also flag above, there are researchers who wish to proscribe aesthetic labour through legislative intervention and those researchers who prescribe it and, in effect, want to help employers better manage it. Such tensions will no doubt be raised and explored as empirical, conceptual and disciplinary analysis of aesthetic labour further develops in future.

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Dennis Nickson works in the Department of Work, Employment and Organisation at the University of Strathclyde. His primary interests centre on work and employment issues in the hospitality and retail industries. His work has been published in journals such as *Work, Employment and Society*, *Human Resource Management (US)*, *the Human Resource Management Journal*, *the International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, *Gender, Work and Organisation* and *Journal of Business Ethics*. Sole and co-authored books include *Aesthetic Labour* (Sage, 2020) and *Human Resource Management for the Hospitality and Tourism Industries*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2013). He is also Editor in Chief of *Employee Relations*.

Chris Warhurst FRSA FAcSS is Director of the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick in the UK. He is an internationally recognised expert on aesthetic labour, job quality and skills. He has published 18 books including the Oxford Handbook of Job Quality (Oxford University Press, 2022) and *Aesthetic Labour* (Sage, 2020). He is motivated by wanting to improve the quality of working life through science. He is/has been an expert advisor to the UK, Australian and Scottish Governments and the OECD, co-Chairs the Renewing Work Advisory Group of Experts (ReWAGE) and leads a large National Institute for Health Research project to create healthy jobs.

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Sexual Fields and Women's Sexual Capital: Online Challenges and Insights

Sanne Pieters

1 Introduction: Sexual Capital and Fields, Arguing for a Meso-Level Approach

Whether it is through swingers' clubs, a personal add in the London Review of Books or with the help of online dating applications such as Tinder, Grindr or Feeld, more and more (virtual) sites pop up where we can conveniently look for romance and/or sexual pleasure. But the success rate of visiting these places does not just depend on our mere presence there. Rather, Bourdieu-inspired scholars of sexuality argue that it depends on our *sexual capital* (see also Kaplan, this volume). In the tradition of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, capital describes different types of resources that people can accumulate and convert. Sexual capital¹ entails the assets gained from sex that go way beyond sexual activity. It explains how people can use their sex appeal, beauty, sexual experiences, feelings and interactions to their advantage, for instance in the labour market, or relational

realm (Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). The ability to accumulate or convert capital is closely linked to societal hierarchies. Bourdieu (1984, 2010) developed the concept of capital in relation to *social fields*: segments of social space structured by the distribution of different types of capital (e.g. economic, cultural and social capital) that people struggle for. Importantly, despite their relative autonomy, the functioning of capital in social fields is related to broader systems of power. Since fields are situated in social contexts, the unequal distribution of capital and the ability to use one's capital is guided by what structural inequalities exist in society (Kukkonen, 2021). This is why, as social scientists, when we look at sexual capital, we should be able to see inequalities.

While many scholars study sexual capital, it has been developed in surprisingly diverse ways. With this chapter, I compare three different conceptualizations of sexual capital and their ability to convey gender inequalities. First, I will look at the "erotic capital" approach, best known from Hakim (2010), that is focused on agency, individual action and power; second, a field-specific approach by Green (2008), focused on local sexual fields and collective sexual life, is discussed; and finally, I consider a field-specific approach by Kaplan and Illouz (2022), focused on the socio-political field in which sexual capital conversion takes place. What is central in all conceptualizations is that they foreground sexuality and sexual behaviour as their driving force. However, they differ in their ability to address the structural

¹It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between *sexual capital* and *erotic capital*. For Hakim (2011), erotic capital is 'a mixture of physical and social attractiveness' (p. 12) of which sexuality is an important part. In this chapter, I will use the term sexual capital unless otherwise specified.

S. Pieters (✉)
Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality, Sociology
Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: sanne.pieters@kuleuven.be

gender inequalities that make up the concept of sexual capital. As I will argue throughout this chapter, for studying the gendered inequalities by which the valuation, accumulation and use of sexual capital are structured, each approach falls short if it doesn't consider the local sexual field in which the sexual capital is valued *and* the broader socio-political field by which the sexual field is shaped. I will show that this meso-level approach is especially useful for studying online sexual fields, since these are more difficult to link to macro-structures.

I illustrate the strengths and potential limitations of each approach by using a case study largely based on research conducted in a women-focused online manosphere group: the Red Pill Women-subreddit (Pieters & Trottier, 2024).² The Red Pill Women-subreddit, hereafter r/RPW to adhere to Reddit jargon, is part of the online *manosphere*. The manosphere is a loose collection of social media groups where men's rights and desires are discussed and celebrated (Love, 2020). These ideas are prevalent on mainstream social media like YouTube and Instagram, but the manosphere is more distinctly present on topic-based message boards such as Reddit. In the manosphere, "taking the Red Pill" means waking up to the truth that progressive, liberal and feminist narratives have deprived men and women from their "natural" state. This is believed to render heterosexual relationships doomed to fail. Scholars point out that women reside in the manosphere too (Love, 2020). One such place is the r/RPW, dedicated to women who adhere to Red Pill theory and ideology.

The r/RPW is an interesting site to study the workings of sexual capital because we can observe both how this capital can be increased and instrumentalized as well as examine its role in perpetuating gender inequalities. The r/RPW is an online *erotic site* (Green, 2008) for women where collective sexual meaning-making takes place within ideological manosphere boundaries,

a *sexual field*³ that is governed by men and warranted by mostly male moderators. Ironically, while women's social status and mobility have historically been primarily signified and mediated through their bodies and sexuality (Federici, 2014), the expression of their sexual desires and exhibition of sexuality is often moralized and penalized (Hakim, 2010, 2011; Holla, 2013). This touches the core of what studying sexual capital helps explain: sexuality *can* be a convertible social resource but not for everyone. Possessing the right type of capital and using it in the right way can bring benefits, while having the wrong one or using it incorrectly may incur penalties (Sarpila et al., 2020; Vonk, 2021). But who gets to decide what is valuable? By arguing for a meso-level approach to sexual capital, this chapter accounts for a critique sometimes aimed at conceptualizations of embodied capital: while some claim sexual capital to be capable of bridging gender inequalities, it may actually help to uphold them.

2 Three Approaches to Sexual Capital

2.1 Erotic Capital as 'Trump Card'

Catherine Hakim's concept of erotic capital tackles the subject of gender inequality head-on: Hakim wonders why women have been less successful in exploiting their beauty and sex appeal than men. For Hakim (2010), erotic capital consists of at least six distinct elements: (1) "Beauty" (p. 500), (2) "Sexual attractiveness" (p. 500), (3) A social element consisting of, but not limited to, charm, grace and social skills, (4) "Liveliness" (p. 500) which includes one's fitness, sense of humour and level of energy, (5) "Social presentation" like clothing style, way of speaking, hairstyle and other ways of adorning oneself (p. 500) and (6) "Sexuality itself" (p. 501).

² Posts have been slightly edited to prevent Redditors from being identified. Original references are available upon request.

³ Wacquant (2014) challenges Green's sexual field approach for presuming multiple sexual fields rather than seeing the sociological value of sex as something that penetrates multiple social domains. Since the comparison here includes Green, I work with his conceptualizations but see Wacquant (2014) and Ruppel (2022) for a critique.

There seems to be a crucial element that distinguishes erotic capital from most conceptualizations of sexual capital: strategic use. Erotic capital grants power to those who possess it, and Hakim believes that particularly women can both obtain and strategically use it because men deal with a shortage of sex that only increases over time. Hakim (2010) states that “men’s demand for sexual activity far outstrips women’s interest in sex” (p. 512), resulting in a “permanent male sex deficit” (for a critique see Green, 2013). This leaves them vulnerable to the power of women’s erotic capital. Indeed, Hakim assigns a lot of responsibility and agency to women for using their erotic capital for social mobility and alleviating their disadvantaged position in society. If women want to reduce or even close the gender gap, Hakim (2010) believes that they could use their erotic capital as a sort of “trump card” (p. 512).

The moderators of the r/RPW hold similar views to Hakim when it comes to the male sex deficit. A fundamental piece of Red Pill theory states that women are “the gatekeepers of sex”. As a moderator post explains: “men almost always want sex” while “women can have sex more or less whenever they want”. The male sex deficit also serves as the legitimization of men’s behaviour with one moderator explaining that “R[ed] P[ill] men are not “bad” for wanting sex, or for pursuing their goals in amoral ways” since they are just following the natural state of masculinity and manhood. At the same time, like Hakim, the Red Pill emphasizes the responsibility that women have in using these male deficits strategically.

The strategic use of erotic capital is most overtly found when female Redditors talk about using sex and their desirability to make or keep men committed. Moderators and Redditors encourage each other to use their erotic capital to obtain long-term commitment from men. This is often explained by stating that while women are the gatekeepers of sex, men are the gatekeepers of relationships: men want sex where women want relationships. Offering a man enough sexual pleasure leads to a committed man and happy long-term relationship. It is also widely held that male partners will be less tempted to cheat if they receive “regular sex with a hot girlfriend”. To

keep their partners from cheating, posters share tips on how to keep men sexually committed. This ranges from dressing up nicely and learning how to better perform oral sex to limiting sexual rejections. Some posters on the r/RPW present submissiveness, a central element of sexual interactions between Red Pill women and men, as a strategy to ensure enduring commitment: multiple posts celebrate marriage proposals right after having acted more submissive.

The strategic nature of women’s erotic capital is evident in the expectation that they engage in *hypergamy*. Hypergamy is a mating strategy where women actively seek the best available “alpha male” for reproduction and immediately switch to more high-status partners if they become available. This strategy is presented as increasing the likelihood of not only producing offspring with optimal DNA but also fostering a fulfilling relationship with a “high-value man” (see also McClintock, this volume). Again here, women are expected to strategically use their erotic capital to their benefit, using their trump card to better their chance of “quality offspring”.

To sum up: Hakim’s conceptualization of erotic capital attributes great power and agency to women. As such, her perspective presents a refreshing departure from the notion of women as passive participants in matters of sexuality. While the women at the r/RPW promote women’s submissiveness to men, reading their posts about how they strategically perform submissiveness or hypergamy to get from men what they want hardly reads as passive or docile. Isn’t someone who performs submissiveness for their personal benefit in fact demonstrating the antithesis of submissiveness? However, despite Hakim’s (2011) hopes that the strategic use of their erotic capital can help women mend and perhaps even overcome gender inequalities, the usage of this “trump card” on the r/RPW also seems to point towards something else. Throughout many posts, women’s sexual rejection is seen as a catalyst for men’s unhappiness, so much so that one Redditor warns women that “[their] lack of desire can make men **depressed**” (emphasis in original post). Another popular post about sexual rejection states that “if a woman gives her husband good sex, she will

easily lift him up and encourage him. Persistent rejection will quickly tear him down". On the r/RPW, overcoming the sex gap can mean that women should try harder to understand where male desire is stemming from and change their attitude and behaviour accordingly. If they fail to meet their partner's sexual expectations, they are held responsible for their sadness and depression. While this suggests a significant level of power held by women over men, it seems that this can also lead to women experiencing pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activities.

Kaplan and Illouz (2022) point out that Hakim's erotic capital encourages women to use their erotic capital to manage life under patriarchy. The authors (2022) argue that the concept of erotic capital fails to recognize that sexuality operates within a sexual field that maintains the dominance of women by men. By defining erotic capital as an asset for women to manage men's sexual desires, gender stereotypes are perpetuated, suggesting its value lies in conforming to men's desires thereby potentially reinforcing the objectification of women through their bodies. No matter how agentive the use of women's erotic capital may seem at first sight, once you consider the structural inequalities by which their capital is valued, women's own use of their sexuality is an integral aspect of patriarchal society, not an act of resistance against it (Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). Neglecting the societal context where embodied capital holds value overlooks the structural inequalities at play.

2.2 The Sexual Fields Approach

Taking a different approach to the workings of sexual capital, Adam I. Green (2011) perceives sexual capital as a sort of resource that is "generated through three dimensions of self-presentation: physical appearance, affect and sociocultural styles" (p. 248). Sexual capital is not just accrued by being attractive; its worth depends on how your physical appearance resonates with the reigning sociocultural styles. Besides being inspired by Bourdieu, Green's ideas on sexual

capital derive from Goffman's (1990) presentation of self and specifically to the concept of the *front stage*: the "performance" that individuals carry out when others are (potentially) watching. Green (2011) sees sexual capital as influenced by "both mutable and immutable traits of the front" (p. 248) which signifies that sexual capital, at least to a certain extent, is amendable. Studying a large all-male gay community in the US, Green (2011) finds that to increase their sexual capital, many men partake in front work to align with the structural desires of the queer community, for instance by going to the gym, using anabolic steroids or by wearing slim-fitted clothing. Importantly, in this approach sexual capital exists only in relation to other actors in a *collective sexual life*. Depending on the "structure of desire" (Green, 2008, p. 31), people can act differently to align with said structure. Thus, the success of one's sexual capital depends on an assessment of the structure of desire an actor moves in and a subsequent successful self-performance through front work. This is why to Green, both the formation and success of one's sexual capital are strongly dependent on the *sexual field* in which the individual moves.

A field is a social arena where people gather and struggle for various forms of capital. The positions of individuals within a field are determined by its specific forms of available capital (Schmitz et al., 2017). Importantly, fields are structured by specific conventions that Bourdieu referred to as the "rules of the game" (Lamaison & Bourdieu, 1986, p. 111). These "rules" govern the social interactions within fields but also determine what is valuable and what is not (Kukkonen, 2021). Bourdieu initially considered broad fields such as academia, religion and mass media (Schmitz et al., 2017) but some Bourdieu-inspired scholars have applied elements of his field analysis to more narrow and specific sites. For Green, a sexual field is a significantly smaller social domain, e.g. a North American gay community (2011) or fraternity party (2022), with its own set of conventions and rules that attach certain values to certain expressions of sexuality. These render specific physical and character traits (and the

people who hold them) as valuable while simultaneously demarcating which traits (and persons) hold little value. This implies that we can find out how sexuality functions as a form of capital within specific fields only by closely observing the social norms that apply there (Kukkonen, 2021).

Studying the sidebar of the r/RPW offers a preview of the broad social positions and dispositions that apply to the manosphere. From the sidebar, it becomes clear that that Red Pill ideology stems “from a traditional, evolutionary psychology, or anti-feminist foundation” (Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume) and that posts should focus on “long-term relationships, marriage and family building”. Posters on the r/RPW know that partaking in more traditional feminine front work will lead to better chances in the Red Pill dating market. Many posts highlight the learning process women undergo when adopting this traditionally feminine front work. One poster tells how she changed the way she dressed to attract Red Pill men. Despite her previous preference for a grunge-inspired punk style, she realized she needed to dress more traditionally feminine to attract the “masculine, charitable protective men” she desired. Luckily for those new to the Red Pill, many posts by moderators list how to perform this feminine front work. This ranges from “fixing” your appearance before a husband comes back from work to learning how to cook multiple great dishes as well as keeping the house clean, dressing modestly, working on your caregiving abilities by volunteering at an animal shelter or homeless centre and keeping a slim and toned-looking body. Now that they comply with the rules of the field, many declare to have found their Red Pilled partner since changing their behaviour.

In summary, Green's work on sexual capital shows that the ability to convert sexual capital into different types of capital is site and field dependent. In other words, the value of our sexual capital depends on both the rules of the specific erotic site we find ourselves in, and the sexual field that establishes and legitimizes those rules. By determining the rules of the field, people can assess the structure of desire and adjust their front work accordingly. This indicates that sexual capital is

susceptible to external and internal changes that can occur during interactions in the field, such as Redditors performing feminine front work to attract Red Pill men and getting resocialized into this structure of desire. Sexual capital is not just something that is tied to individuals, it is also tied to the sexual field. As such, sexual fields function like social orders that reflect and potentially even produce social inequalities (Green, 2022). However, despite the sexual field approach's promise to connect fields “with the meso- and macro-level concerns of sociology” (Green, 2008, p. 47), it is less clear how overarching power structures influence the true value of sexual capital. For example, if the Black gay men that Green (2008) studies need to “play up” a stereotype (p. 37) or “undo” their Blackness (p. 38) to align with White sexual fantasies that ultimately may serve to uphold White supremacy, who profits from their sexual capital? And if Redditors “feminize” their behaviour to align with patriarchal structures of desires, have they converted their sexual capital successfully? As Ruppel (2022) notes, Green's empirical findings seem to indicate processes of domination and *misrecognition*, where people fail to recognize the underlying powers that influence their behaviour. Studying US-based VIP party circuits, Mears (2015) showed how the embodied “girl capital” (p. 23) of young and beautiful women is exploited by male club owners by similar tactics of domination. Despite the women being the ones embodying the capital, those who benefitted from their beauty the most were the ones in dominant positions of power. Indeed, as Mears (2015) points out: Green's more micro-social approach to sexual capital foregrounds individual capitalization strategies, which overlook the bigger power struggles at play. It is also worth noting that most of Green's empirical work focuses on gay men, taking the stigmatised nature of (queer) women's sexuality out of the equation (see also Ruppel, 2022). This makes it hard to examine under which conditions sexuality, like beauty, serves as subordinate and feminized capital as Craig (this volume) argues. So, while this sexual field approach addresses the structural social inequalities that are present in a sexual field, it does not fully explore how those inequalities

relate to broader power dynamics that influence valuation.

2.3 Neoliberal Sexual Capital

The final theoretical approach to sexual capital that I will discuss builds on a field-focused framework, viewed from a more economic perspective. Sociologists Dana Kaplan and Illouz (2022) argue that in contemporary societies, a new type of sexual capital has emerged that is heavily informed by the neoliberal ideas and ideologies that rose since the late twentieth century: *neoliberal sexual capital*. Neoliberalism is the philosophical view that governs a political and economic system in which free market capitalism is pursued and government interference is limited. Wendy Brown (2003) points out that neoliberal ideas are not limited to the political and economic sphere but have permeated people's ideas of self and self-worth by casting all dimensions of life "in terms of a market rationality" (p. 40). Like Green (2008), neoliberal sexual capital starts from the idea that sexual capital cannot be seen as separate from the field in which it exists. However, returning more to Bourdieu's original concept of field analysis, Kaplan and Illouz emphasize one overarching field that influences sexual capital: the socio-political field of neoliberalism. Like Hakim's erotic capital, neoliberal sexual capital emphasizes the economic value derived from desirability. However, Kaplan and Illouz (2022) foreground the interconnectedness of sexual capital with inequalities and focus mainly on class, stating that the motivation to accrue and use sexual capital is "habitation instilled by class dispositions" (p. 103) while also heavily gendered. To define the field in which sexual capital has value, the authors create a historical typology where four types of sexual capital are clarified: (1) "Sexual capital by default" (p. 43), (2) "Sexual capital as surplus value of the body" (p. 43), (3) "Embodied sexual capital" (p. 44) and (4) "Neoliberal sexual capital" (p. 44). Since the authors see the fourth category present in societies today, I will only focus on this type of capital here.

Neoliberal sexual capital emphasizes the capitalization of sexuality to enhance positive feelings about oneself and Kaplan and Illouz (2022) wonder how sexual capital can then be advantageous for marketability and employment. While Kaplan and Illouz focus on the labour market, I focus on another type of market: the sexual market. Within the manosphere, the so-called sexual marketplace is where participants believe "[t]he sexual economy of supply and demand for sex and relationships" takes place (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p. 98). The marketization of love and sex may be blatant in the manosphere but as Kaplan and Illouz (2022) point out: professional and sexual spheres are inextricably linked in other contexts too.

Scholars have pointed out the prevalence of neoliberal discourses in the manosphere (Ging, 2019; Pieters & Trottier, 2024; Van Valkenburgh, 2018, 2019). As mentioned in the previous sections, the romantic field of the r/RPW is presented as a sexual marketplace in which "transactions" take place. Moderators believe the r/RPW should be seen as a self-improvement tool for women to become "more attractive and desirable to a good man". This alludes to the responsibility that moderators believe women have in both accruing and converting their sexual capital into finding successful relationships. To find the relationship they are longing for, women must be desirable and if they are not: they should put in the work and acquire as much sexual capital as possible.

While reading through the posts of Redditors, it becomes clear how women partake in extensive beauty labour and beautifying bodywork practices to better their chances in the sexual marketplace. One of the top posts explains how a Redditor has avoided "hitting the wall". Hitting the wall in Red Pill jargon is the moment where women start to become less sexually attractive, usually around the age of 25. This is considered an important moment for heterosexual relationship forming since it limits women's ability to deploy hypergamy. However, this Redditor has realized that hitting the wall is a *choice*. By extensive use of anti-ageing methods, Redditors believe that they can mitigate signs of ageing and

avoid hitting the wall, allowing them for a better continuous position in the sexual market. Visible ageing is explained as something that reflects a lifestyle more than a biological fact (Ojala & Pietilä, this volume). While the Red Pill promotes a discourse of evolutionary psychology that can be used so ferociously to legitimize men's "natural" behaviour, women are expected to fight natural processes like ageing to be more desirable for men (see also Vallerga & Zurbruggen, 2022).

But as Kaplan and Illouz (2022) point out: increasing one's neoliberal sexual capital is not limited to physical appearance. Sexual experiences may foster positive feelings like self-determination that potentially lead to increased employability (p. 93). Indeed, the authors see "sexually agentic women" (p. 93) as figureheads for contemporary neoliberal society. Strikingly, the opposite seems true on the r/RPW. Redditors are often worried about their "N-count" (number of sexual partners) and fear it limits their romantic chances. Having too many sexual experiences leads to immediate devaluation: one Redditor explains her boyfriend's reluctance in proposing to her because he deems her "used-up" after having had three partners before him. So, while the image of the sexually agentic woman may be associated with success in some (parts of) societies, it does not mean success everywhere. Compared to what Kaplan (2011, as cited in Kaplan & Illouz, 2022) found elsewhere, the r/RPW shows that, even in neoliberal fields, the idea of what is valuable can differ.

In conclusion, considering the historical and current macrostructural context of a sexual field helps us understand present inequalities and how sexuality enhances certain subjects' value. Kaplan and Illouz (2022) argue that under neoliberalism, sexuality is incorporated in a way that helps elucidate who can convert their sexual capital. Due to its integration within neoliberal capitalism, societal inequalities influence the value of one's sexual capital everywhere. Neoliberal sexual capital places inequalities front and centre by highlighting both the sexual field and the overarching socio-political framework in which it resides. However, by emphasizing the importance of sexual experiences for optimizing the

self to then converting this into employability, the question remains if the concept can critically engage with neoliberalism or rather perpetuates the idea that people's success in life is dependent on their economic value. The concept is also unclear on how to determine neoliberal fields. This raises attention to a significant challenge in doing empirical research. Despite many scholars' great work on neoliberal discourses and sensibilities in society today (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2015; Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004), the concept of neoliberalism is not uncontested for its conceptual fuzziness. Even Kaplan and Illouz call it a "kind of throw-all notion" (2022, p. 19). This fuzziness is reinforced because the authors alternate between ambiguous terms like neoliberalism, (neoliberal) capitalism, late modernity and consumer culture to describe contemporary society without specifying which society they mean. This begs the question if we can use neoliberal sexual capital to empirically study every sexual field or erotic site everywhere or only explicitly neoliberal ones. But how do we decide which ones are? The r/RPW shows how conceptual clarity becomes increasingly difficult when studying sexual fields and erotic sites online since autonomous meso-level logics may operate partly separately from wider societal fields. The r/RPW forwards a discourse of neoliberal ideas on love, sex and self-improvement but this does not mean that Redditors all live in neoliberal societies with similar historical backgrounds. It is unclear how online neoliberal sexual capital translates to a Redditor's offline world in looking for sexual and romantic partners. The case study also demonstrates how local ideas of what is valuable may differ even between neoliberal contexts: while Kaplan and Illouz see sexual experience as value-enhancing, on the r/RPW, having sexual experience may lead to immediate devaluation.

3 Conclusion and Future Directions

By taking a meso-level approach, this chapter demonstrates that structural gender inequalities remain obscured when defining sexual capital and

fields on a micro-social level yet focusing too much on the macro-level may run the risk of universalising sexual life and meaning-making. Women's social status and mobility have historically been signified and mediated through their bodies and sexuality (Federici, 2014). Despite the equalizing promise of modernity and emancipation, some scholars see that today still, women may have to rely on their sex appeal to progress in life. Alongside the prevailing neoliberal rationality that amplifies individuals' responsibility in dealing with structural inequality, it is unsurprising that there is a call for women to use their sexuality to mitigate gender gaps. On an individual level, using erotic capital as a trump card may indeed offer women some wins. In the case of the r/RPW, Redditors ended up in a committed long-term relationship by enhancing and strategically using their erotic capital. This shows that using their capital to their advantage gives women a sense of power and agency.

But as a great body of (Black) feminist literature (e.g. Ahmed, 2017; Hill Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1998) argues, women's efforts toward equality can be amplified when they are rooted in collective action rather than individual practices. Sexual capital is a type of capital that does not just belong to the woman who is embodying the capital. It also belongs to the fields in which her sexuality is valued. By situating sexual fields as social orders that perpetuate or even produce social inequalities, it becomes clear that we cannot just look at the workings and usage of sexual capital without considering who gets to make value judgements and based on what. Given the socio-political environment in which women get to employ their sexual capital, usage could perpetuate a patriarchal structure in which women's worth is determined by how they are valued by men. This leaves women in a tricky sexual capital paradox: not using their sexual capital may keep them at a disadvantaged position yet using it to play the game on patriarchal terms may ultimately reinforce gender inequality.

This sexual capital paradox is something that should guide research on gender inequality, sexual capital and sexual fields. Even if we live in a time characterized by neoliberal stances towards

responsibility and autonomy, social scientists should be careful not to fall for a neoliberal lure and start from the premise that women, or others in subordinate positions, can use sexual or erotic capital to overcome structural problems on the labour or relational market and beyond. In this volume, Craig describes beauty as a "feminized form of capital" that enhances a woman's status but never allows her to reach the position of those who have the power to benefit from her beauty. The same goes for women's sexuality, and perhaps even more so, as it continues to be heavily moralized and scrutinized. Sexual capital helps to enhance the value of certain subjects, yet the question remains if women can ever truly reap its benefits. The examples from the r/RPW illustrate the strong link between sexual capital and beauty. If beauty is any indicator, it may just be that it is mostly men who eventually benefit from women's sexual capital (Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume; Mears, 2015). More empirical research is needed to examine this further. While I have focused on women here, similar inquiries should be made of class, race, sexual orientation, age and their intersections. Finally, as the pursuit of love and sexual pleasure is increasingly present online, so is sexual capital. The entanglement of online and offline sexual fields and erotic sites deserves our scholarly attention. The case study of the r/RPW showed how this potentially poses a challenge to previous conceptualizations of sexual capital. A meso-level approach that considers these new complexities may help researchers to better study the social inequalities that influence sexual capital today.

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Sanne Pieters is a PhD researcher at KU Leuven with a background in cultural sociology and media studies. Her current research deals with the social shaping of cultural standards by looking at evaluations of physical beauty. In particular, she focuses on the notions of “natural” beauty and “fit” bodies and explores how these moralised standards (re)produce social inequalities.

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Beauty and Teaching

Tobias Wolbring

1 Introduction

Folk wisdom often suggests that physical attractiveness¹ is not essential in life, assuming that beauty is a purely subjective assessment and lies in the eye of the beholder. However, as research reveals, there is substantial agreement among individuals on how physically attractive they perceive a person (e.g., Cunningham, 1986; Kowner & Ogawa, 1995). In addition to this *attractiveness consensus*, beauty plays a vital role in everyday life and affects social outcomes (Anderson et al., 2008; Langlois et al., 2000). As documented in this handbook, studies on beauty span a variety of different areas, such as its effects on subjective well-being (Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Requena, 2017), the labor market (e.g., Fletcher, 2009; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006), and political success (e.g., Berggren et al., 2017; Rosar et al., 2012). Beauty is a source of inequality and contributes to social stratification (Berry, 2016). Moreover,

¹In the following, we will use the concepts of beauty and physical attractiveness interchangeably. We are aware that evaluations of attractiveness and beauty also reflect non-physical aspects such as personality, social similarity, and behavior, but we mainly focus on subjective perceptions of *physical* attractiveness in this chapter.

T. Wolbring (✉)
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg,
Erlangen, Germany
e-mail: tobias.wolbring@fau.de

beauty advantages accumulate over the life course and reinforce social inequalities (e.g., Benzeval et al., 2013; Jæger, 2011).

Teaching is another area in which beauty plays an essential role (e.g., Feeley, 2002; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Rosar & Klein, 2009; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016). Assuming that most of the readers of this chapter have been students at some time or currently are, how often have we stopped to ponder what truly influences our reasons for liking or disliking certain teachers. In this context, the so-called Dr. Fox effect (Naftulin et al., 1973) impressively shows the importance of non-teaching-related factors and their role in *student's evaluation of teaching* (SET). The researchers created a meaningless lecture titled “Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education” and hired a professional actor and named him Dr. Myron L. Fox, an authority on applying mathematics to human behavior. They coached the actor to present and answer questions “with an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements” (Naftulin et al., 1973, p. 631). Evaluations of Dr. Fox after his meaningless lecture by attendants were overwhelmingly positive. The results reveal that the actor fooled different raters, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, and graduate students.

The example of Dr. Fox demonstrates how non-teaching-related factors can lead to positive evaluations of a meaningless lecture, documenting a potential cleavage between “actual”

teaching quality and its assessment and thus raising concerns about the validity of SET. This question is critical, as teaching evaluations are increasingly used not just as a feedback tool, but as a basis for the performance-related allocation of resources such as hiring, remuneration, and tenure (Avery et al., 2006; Dommeyer et al., 2004; Kherfi, 2011), or for the assortment of teaching prize nominees (see Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008, p. 16). Against this backdrop, it seems essential to identify teaching-related and non-teaching-related factors and separate them strictly. Thus, this article aims to give an overview of how and why beauty, as a potential non-teaching-related factor, is linked to SET as a well-established measure of individual teaching performance from students' perspective (Beran & Rokosh, 2009; Marsh & Dunkin, 2007; Spooren et al., 2013). Given that beauty might work differently for male and female instructors, we put a particular emphasis on gender differences.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of different mechanisms for why beauty might be related to actual teaching quality and its subjective assessment in SET. We focus on possible explanations, such as childhood support, attention boost, and personality traits. Afterward, we discuss extraneous influences on SET, focusing on stereotypes, the beauty glamor effect, and the beauty penalty. Section 3 summarizes the methods used and the results of existing studies on beauty and SET. The last section concludes and outlines avenues for future research.

2 Current State of Knowledge: Why Does Beauty Affect SET?

Different factors may explain how and why beauty is linked to actual teaching quality and individual teaching performance from students' perspective. Studying the effects of physical attractiveness on SET is an interesting case for at least two reasons. First, SET ratings are provided by, on average, younger and more educated people than the general population. While a young age

might make students more susceptible to superficial factors such as looks, education might work in the opposite direction. Second, body size, which is widely associated with low socioeconomic status (Vandebroeck, 2016; see also Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume), as well as cultural capital, as expressed in personal style, grooming, clothing, etc., might be particularly important for both assessments of attractiveness and competence in a context such as university teaching. In this section, we summarize key explanations of the effects of beauty in social life and show how they relate to the teaching context and student ratings.

2.1 Differential Treatment, Early Support, and Attention Boosts

For several reasons, a link between physical attractiveness and teaching evaluations might not be problematic because beauty might reflect teaching-related factors.

Although contested (e.g., Borland & Leigh, 2014; Denny, 2008; Fletcher, 2009; Gelman & Weakliem, 2009), some studies have found higher IQ values among physically attractive individuals (Jackson et al., 1995; Kanazawa, 2011; Lee et al., 2017). While this might also point to genetic-biological factors (e.g., Grammer et al., 2003), social forces working over time—including possible confounders, most notably class, and cultural capital, but also differences in educational background and health—likely shape these IQ differences. One of these social factors is parental early childhood support. Children perceived as physically attractive receive greater attention and experience better support through their social environment. Even in infancy, beauty is essential because it influences parental behavior (for an overview, see Franklin & Volk, 2018). For example, children's physical attractiveness strongly predicts adoptability (Chin et al., 2006), highlighting beauty's importance in early childhood. Besides, children's beauty has far-reaching consequences by affecting their development. Research suggests that mothers of more physically attractive infants are more affectionate and playful with their babies than mothers with

less physically attractive infants (Langlois et al., 1995). Likewise, parents with physically attractive children are more responsive and support their children's needs throughout childhood (Langlois et al., 2000).

However, children's physical attractiveness does affect not only parents and their behavior but also peers and teachers. For example, children perceived as beautiful are more popular and are perceived more positively by their peers (e.g., Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Kleck et al., 1974). Educators and teachers value physically attractive children's intellectual abilities higher than those of less physically attractive children (e.g., Jackson et al., 1995). This more positive assessment also translates into better school grades (e.g., Jackson et al., 1995; Lerner et al., 1990). Thus, fostering inequalities based on beauty during childhood and adolescence can influence adults' later life performance and can manifest in social stratification. Higher performance levels due to these effects of beauty in life could explain better teaching evaluations for physically attractive instructors.

Furthermore, individuals are more likely to give attention and interact with others they perceive as physically attractive (e.g., Maner et al., 2003, 2007; Mulford et al., 1998). This *attractiveness attention boost* describes an advantage that beautiful people often have in social interactions. This effect has even been documented for infants, who spend more time looking at physically attractive faces (Langlois et al., 1990; Samuels & Ewy, 1985). The attention boost might explain different SET ratings due to beauty. Due to the attractiveness attention boost, students may follow the instructor and their teaching more attentively, and are more likely to memorize the taught material (Rosar & Klein, 2009), leading to better grades. Thus, more attractive instructors might receive better ratings because students pay closer attention and learn more (Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

Finally, greater attention and support due to beauty during childhood and adolescence may also foster certain personality traits beneficial for teaching. Due to favorable treatment during childhood and greater attention, physically more attractive individuals might score higher in terms of extraversion and communication skills, which are

essential qualities for instructors (e.g., Patrick, 2011). This is another reason why physically attractive individuals might actually be better instructors.

2.2 Attractiveness Stereotypes, Glamor Effects, and the Beauty Penalty

In contrast to the previous arguments that associate beauty with teaching-related factors, there exist several reasons to expect that beauty causes biases in SET by affecting student ratings despite the absence of superior teaching quality.

A first mechanism points toward *attractiveness stereotypes* (for an overview, see Eagly et al., 1991). As a sort of halo effect, people tend to ascribe certain personality traits and other characteristics based on a person's physical appearance. For example, within milliseconds, individuals decide whether a person appears physically attractive, trustworthy, and competent (e.g., Locher et al., 1993; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Thus, folk psychology often infers certain personality traits and other individual characteristics from external appearance, especially the face, and often upon first impression.

Catchily named as "*what is beautiful is good*" in the seminal paper by Dion et al. (1972), attractiveness stereotypes involve the attribution of positive traits such as hard working, reliable, and empathic to physically attractive individuals. Furthermore, body size, an important determinant of perceived beauty in most Western societies, is widely associated with a lack of self-control and low socioeconomic status (see Kuipers & Vandebroek in this handbook). Research shows that many attractiveness stereotypes people deduce from appearance are widespread and tend to be widely shared across cultures but are mostly wrong (Todorov, 2017). Such stereotypes are likely also at work in teaching contexts, leading to the ascription of specific positive (negative) personality traits to physically attractive (unattractive) lecturers. These stereotypes and ascriptions could result in higher SET scores for good-looking instructors and lower SET scores for physically

unattractive instructors, even if their teaching performance is similar.

Thereby, the *attractiveness glamor effect* provides one way of how attractiveness stereotypes unfold their effect. The attractiveness glamor effect describes that attractive people might face fewer negative consequences for mistakes and misbehavior. In particular, their mistakes are more likely to be attributed to adverse external circumstances and are less likely to be perceived as individual failures. Therefore, physically attractive individuals have a lower chance of getting sanctioned by others (Bassili, 1981; Dion et al., 1972). In extreme cases, physically attractive lecturers receive the same or even a better evaluation for objectively worse courses than their physically less attractive colleagues (Klein & Rosar, 2006).

However, beauty can also negatively affect SET due to the *beauty penalty*. Studies show that the misbehavior of physically attractive individuals can be sanctioned more harshly than that of physically less attractive individuals (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Wilson & Eckel, 2006). Harsher reactions are observed, especially if physical attractiveness is relevant for achieving the task (e.g., Sigall & Ostrove, 1975). This phenomenon illustrates that beauty can have disadvantages under certain circumstances. While research in this area is still scarce and the underlying processes and conditions are poorly understood, one likely mechanism for the beauty penalty is that people have higher expectations of physically attractive individuals due to attractiveness stereotypes. Failing to meet those expectations could lead to disappointment and anger, translating into more harsh sanctions.

Thus, the beauty premium may become a penalty if the misbehavior or mistake becomes too apparent to be covered by the attractiveness glamor effect and be attributed to external circumstances. In the teaching context, this could be unkind behavior such as excessive workload, asking tough exam questions, strict grading of the exam, or interacting with students disrespectfully. Under such circumstances, instructors' greater physical attractiveness likely leads to worse ratings as instructors clearly fail to meet

their students' expectations (Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

2.3 Beauty, Gender, and Teaching

From both a typical sociological and an evolutionary perspective,² it is possible that some of the mechanisms previously described work differently for men and women (see Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

From a sociological perspective, gender is a meta-category, the "initial, starting frame" (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 7) for categorizing people in social interactions, and it shapes the perception of other ascribed characteristics such as physical attractiveness. More specifically, theory suggests that physically more attractive men are attributed more masculine characteristics (agentic characteristics such as independence, rationality, and assertiveness), while physically more attractive women are attributed more feminine characteristics (communal characteristics, such as reliable, polite, and caring) (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979).³

How these gender-specific attributions of attractiveness stereotypes translate into student ratings is not straightforward. One may argue that the social role of an instructor involves both feminine communal characteristics and masculine agentic characteristics. Excellent instructors should be emphatic, should care about the well-being of their students, and should be able to

²Most sociological arguments mainly point toward the social processes involved in the effects of beauty, while often leaving out the evolutionary perspective. However, there is also a growing number of scholars who argue that it is essential to actually combine both—not mutually exclusive—perspectives for a better understanding of social outcomes (e.g., Conley & Fletcher, 2017; Freese & Shostak, 2009).

³Consistent with this, a review by Little et al. (2011) documents a robust link between feminine characteristics in women's faces and physical attractiveness. However, recent research suggests that the explanatory power of characteristics such as symmetry, averageness, and sexual dimorphism might be limited (see Jones & Jaeger, 2019). Likewise, the reviewed evidence by Little et al. (2011) for men is mixed, suggesting that attractive men are not per se perceived as more masculine.

create a joint learning experience. At the same time, excellent instructors should have analytical skills and should demonstrate leadership and assertiveness. Putting agentic skills higher on the priority list, one would predict a larger beauty premium and penalty for male instructors, while giving priority to communal skills would lead to the prediction of stronger attractiveness effects in both directions for female instructors. Moreover, these effects might play out differently in different fields of study. For example, agentic characteristics such as analytical skills might be valued more highly in male-dominated STEM majors. In contrast, communal skills might be valued more highly in female-dominated areas of the social sciences and humanities.

Likewise, from an evolutionary perspective, the argument of how the effects of gender and physical attractiveness on SET play out is not entirely straightforward either. At first, this theoretical approach might seem far-fetched in the context of teaching. However, the primary argument of evolutionary theorists is that human strategies have evolved over centuries to secure reproduction and survival and that these adaptations to environmental demands also work in non-reproductive contexts and contexts in which mating is not the primary goal.

Some traditional evolutionary theorists understand physical attractiveness as a signal for mate fitness in intersexual selection (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005) and assume that pregnant women bear most of the reproductive costs by carrying and nurturing the unborn child (Trivers, 1972). From this, they conclude that males would compete for the most attractive females, but females select partners based on their assumed evolutionary fitness. Therefore, while attractiveness should matter for the success of women, it should be more important for the success of men. More recent research on evolutionary processes, however, raises doubts about whether all those assumptions actually hold providing cases, for instance, where females compete for males or mate selection is not driven by choosing the fittest partner but by matching traits (for reviews, see Boothroyd & Vukovic, 2019; Rosenthal & Ryan, 2022; see also Lidborg &

Boothroyd, this volume). Furthermore, an evolutionary perspective suggests that physical attractiveness should be more important in intersexual encounters, that is, when men rate women or women rate men. However, taking intrasexual competition seriously, the evolutionary perspective does not rule out that looks affect SET when men and women rate other individuals of the same sex.

Taken together, from both a sociological and an evolutionary perspective, it is far from clear whether physical attractiveness is more important for male or female instructors. However, both perspectives provide guidance in the sense that empirical studies should take a closer look at the interplay of instructors' gender and physical attractiveness (two-way interaction, e.g., stronger attractiveness effects for men or women) as well as the interplay of these constructs with students' gender (three-way interaction; e.g., stronger attractiveness effects for women rated by men). In reality, it appears likely that evolutionary and social processes work simultaneously and are intertwined. As a result, it will be difficult to disentangle their relative influence on students' ratings and it is unlikely that empirical studies can definitely clarify which of the two groups of processes dominates. What empirical studies can achieve, though, is providing evidence of whether the gender of the rated instructor and its match with the gender of the rating student modifies attractiveness effects.

3 Empirical Findings

This section is divided into three parts. The first subsection summarizes studies using data from online rating sites platforms, the second subsection gives an overview of studies dealing with actual SET data, and the third subsection covers experimental studies. Most studies—except for the experimental ones—directly concern student ratings of university teaching and most studies—except for some on online rating sites—use average ratings of physical attractiveness by a group of raters assuming an attractiveness

consensus instead of individual ratings of single persons.

3.1 Studies Based on Online Rating Sites

With the internet's advent, teaching evaluations available at www.RateMyProfessors.com (henceforth, RMP) and similar websites have become increasingly popular. On those online rating sites, anyone can log in at any time—that is, before, during, or after a class or even without attending it—and provide a subjective assessment of an instructor and his or her class. This includes ratings of overall teaching quality and other dimensions of performance (such as clarity and helpfulness), as well as some constructs which might seem far-fetched in a teaching context such as the sexiness/hotness of an instructor (formerly measured on some sites with chili peppers). Thereby, it is worth noting that the fact that not only students who have actually attended the class can provide ratings opens plenty of room for self-selection, repeated participation, and manipulation. Thus, caution is warranted when interpreting results generated based on these data, although they are helpful for exploring associations between SET ratings and physical attractiveness.

Felton et al., (2004, 2008) examine how attractiveness—measured as the proportion of open comments that indicate the lecturer's *sexiness/hotness*—relates to RMP ratings of *clarity* and *helpfulness*. The central findings of these studies are strong correlations between physical attractiveness and SET rating ($r = 0.30$ and $r = 0.64$). Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2007) show that physical attractiveness is correlated with professors' overall ratings of quality, helpfulness, and clarity in the classroom. This finding is also supported by Freng and Webber (2009), who focus on the variance that physical attractiveness explains in SETs. Using data from 2,281 professors, the results show that physical attractiveness (in terms of "hotness" ratings) explains over eight percent of the variance in RMP ratings. Johnson and Crews (2013)

show that for criminal justice and criminology faculty members across the U.S. "hotness" (0/1) significantly correlates with ratings of helpfulness, clarity, and overall quality. Rosen (2018) uses RMP data from 190,006 U.S. professors. Overall, the results show a positive correlation between instruction quality and physical attractiveness.

Regarding a potential interaction between attractiveness and instructor gender, the evidence from online rating sites is more limited. With a focus on hotness, Riniolo et al. (2006) find a maximum effect of up to 0.8 points better ratings of overall teaching ratings (measured on a five-point Likert-scale) for attractive lecturers and no evidence for an interaction with gender. Rosar and Klein (2009) analyze data from an equivalent German website. Depending on the exact outcome variable, they report maximum attractiveness effects of 0.4 to 0.8 scale points on five-point scales. Attractiveness has positive effects for men, but not for women. Finally, Fisher et al. (2019) show that female professors in high-status departments receive worse ratings than in low-status departments. This higher gender bias in high-status departments is consistent with the so-called status-incongruity hypothesis: the incongruity of working in a prestigious department as a lower-status actor leads to backlash. According to Fisher et al. (2019), physically attractive female professors are somewhat shielded from this status-based backlash. Compared to physically less attractive professors, the backlash was reduced by more than 40 percent for highly attractive female professors.

Taken together, this set of studies offers evidence for a strong and robust link between physical attractiveness and various dimensions of teaching ratings. However, this evidence should be interpreted cautiously because these studies based on online rating platforms likely provide biased and inflated estimates of effect sizes for two reasons. First, almost all of the studies (for an exception, see Rosar & Klein, 2009) use potentially endogenous measures of physical attractiveness because the same persons who assessed the quality of teaching also provided an assessment of the physical attractiveness of the teaching staff

at the same point in time. If teaching performance also affects the perception of a person and evaluations of his or her physical attractiveness, one would overestimate the effect of physical attractiveness on SET. In extreme cases, the reported correlations might be a pure methodological artifact.

Second, all of these studies, which used data from online rating platforms, were based on a selective sample of students. Far from all students who have attended a class provided ratings on those online platforms, and very likely, the probability of providing a rating is related to students' perception of teaching quality. More specifically, as previously shown (Wolbring, 2010), students at the extremes—giving excellent or very low SET ratings—are overrepresented in such selective data from online rating platforms, while those in the middle of the distribution of SET ratings are underrepresented. Likewise, a student's perception of the instructor's physical attractiveness may affect the probability of providing a rating.

For these reasons and because most of these studies relied on bivariate analyses or multivariate models with a small number of controls, it is warranted to take a closer look at actual SET data and use exogenous measures of physical attractiveness to avoid sample selection bias and endogeneity problems.

3.2 Studies Using Actual SET Data

The problem of endogenous attractiveness measures should also be kept in mind when considering work that uses actual SET data. For example, Feeley (2002) combines data on routinely conducted SET with endogenous measures of physical attractiveness. Results show that physical attractiveness has a considerable maximum effect of 1.7 rating points on the teaching effectiveness rating (measured on a scale of 1 to 5) and can explain up to 16 percent of the variance in "teaching effectiveness" ratings.

A closer look at studies based on actual SET data with *exogenous* measures of physical attractiveness—that is assessed by raters who do not know the rated instructors—seems to confirm the

previously expressed concern of overestimating the correlation due to endogenous measures of physical attractiveness. The reported maximum effects in such studies (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Klein & Rosar, 2006; Süßmuth, 2006; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016) are clearly below the strong effects reported by Feeley (2002) or by studies relying on data from online rating platforms. Nonetheless, almost all of these studies combining actual SET data with exogenous attractiveness ratings find a statistically significant and substantially relevant link between physical attractiveness and SET (for an exception, see Campbell et al., 2005).

The pioneering study by Hamermesh and Parker (2005) found a maximum effect of physical attractiveness on overall teaching rates on a five-point scale of around one scale point. Follow-up studies in Germany by Klein and Rosar (2006) and Süßmuth (2006) found maximum effects of around 0.6 and 1.3 scale points. In line with this, Ponzo and Scoppa (2013) report in a replication for a university in Italy that an "increase in beauty of one standard deviation raises teaching evaluations by 5.58 points" (p. 12) on scale from 0 to 100.

All four studies rely on actual SET data aggregated at the course level, which limits the possibility of taking into account student characteristics in the statistical models. In contrast, Wolbring (2010) and Wolbring and Riordan (2016) leverage data for a large German university at the level of individual student ratings and control for variables mostly at the student level. While the proportion of variance explained by physical attractiveness and effect sizes decrease noticeably due to the different levels of analysis, both studies still find a sizeable and statistically significant beauty effect on SET with a maximum effect of around 0.3 scale points.

Finally, Babin et al. (2020) take an innovative approach by using various measures for physical attractiveness and distinguishing between face-to-face and online classes. While physical attractiveness does not seem to matter for SET ratings of online classes, the authors find a clear link for various measures of *subjective* attractiveness in face-to-face classes. This underscores the

importance of the subjective component in attractiveness perceptions and raises questions about proposed beautiful traits like facial symmetry as well as the interpersonal heterogeneity in tastes and beauty standards (see also Lidborg and Bothroyd in this handbook).

Most studies using actual SET data also looked at the interaction with instructor gender, though with mixed results. Klein and Rosar (2006) find no differences. Hamermesh and Parker (2005) report stronger effects for men but still sizeable effects for women, whereas Wolbring (2010) finds effects for men only. Finally, Ponzo and Scoppa (2013) found slightly stronger effects for women, and Babin et al. (2020) found “a substantial beauty premium in face-to-face classes for women but not for men” (p. 1). Furthermore, Wolbring (2010) and Wolbring and Riordan (2016) test the idea of a three-way interaction of beauty, instructor’s gender, and student’s gender but find no evidence for the idea that beauty matters more in intersexual encounters.

Taken together, observational studies based on actual SET data corroborate the conclusions from studies based on online rating platforms that physical attractiveness and teaching ratings are correlated. However, they show that this is likely the case to a much weaker degree than suggested by studies based on online rating platforms. More recent studies based on actual SET, which is a richer database, thereby show it is crucial to control for potential confounders at the instructor, course, and student level. Nonetheless, one should be cautious with causal interpretations of these cross-sectional observational studies due to potential biases due to unobserved heterogeneity (e.g., unobserved variables simultaneously affecting students’ perceptions of attractiveness and teaching quality) and selection into classes (e.g., classes of more attractive instructors are more popular; see Wolbring & Riordan, 2016). Moreover, it is difficult with this kind of observational studies to get a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanism of how beauty works. Experimental studies can be a helpful complement at this point to test causal claims rigorously and

to advance knowledge about underlying mechanisms by systematically manipulating or blocking specific potential pathways.

3.3 Experimental Studies on Teaching Ratings

Some studies on the effect of beauty on SET use experimental designs to vary beauty and gender systematically via photos (Buck & Tiene, 1989; Goebel & Cashen, 1979) or videos (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Subsequently, subjects are asked to rate physical attractiveness and teaching skills. Goebel and Cashen (1979) show a positive correlation between beauty ratings and competence assessment but find no gender differences. The follow-up study by Buck and Tiene (1989) reports, in contrast, no significant main effects of physical attractiveness but significant interactions between physical attractiveness, lecturer gender, and the teaching philosophy (authoritarian or humanistic) described to the subjects in a short text. According to this study, physically attractive women who represent an authoritarian teaching philosophy benefit from their physical appearance in SET. However, in contrast to Goebel and Cashen (1979), the study by Buck and Tiene (1989) relies on potentially endogenous attractiveness ratings. Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) conclude in their study that an instructor’s physical attractiveness did not strongly influence raters. The authors attribute this deviation from the results of Goebel and Cashen (1979) to the use of videos instead of photos and SET instead of hypothetical evaluations.

Wolbring and Riordan (2016) showed CVs with photos of hypothetical instructors and played an audio record to students in a lab experiment. They find markedly stronger effects of physical attractiveness for female instructors than for male instructors and find some suggestive, though not statistically significant, evidence for stronger effects in intersexual encounters. To some extent, the lecturer’s physical attractiveness is probably conducive to learning. However, after controlling

for the performance in a mock exam, a substantial part of the attractiveness effect remains. Furthermore, the study design involves the instructor's misbehavior in the form of a very difficult test as an experimental treatment. Empirical results show that, in contrast to the beauty premium, which mainly showed for women, misbehavior leads to a beauty penalty—the sanctioning of attractive instructors in the form of negative SET ratings—only for attractive male instructors.

Taken together, this experimental evidence increases the trust that physical attractiveness causally affects SET ratings. Thereby, one might question to what degree the effect estimates generated in a controlled and artificial lab setting can be transported to actual SET. However, the main goal of these studies is not so much to provide exact point estimates of absolute effects in the “real world” but to provide rigorous tests of causal claims and underlying mechanisms with a focus on relative effects. Against that background, it is noteworthy that—in contrast to studies based on other designs—none of the experimental studies finds evidence for a larger beauty premium for men. However, the number of studies is too small to draw firm conclusions at this point.

4 New Avenues for Research

Starting with some early experimental studies in the 1970s and 1980s, research on beauty and teaching has come a long way, including studies using data from online rating sites and actual SET. As shown in this chapter, studies find a robust link between physical attractiveness and teaching ratings. However, the effect is likely smaller than early studies and studies based on selective data have suggested. The beauty premium for good-looking instructors might be driven to a small extent by productivity differences and learning effects—in the sense that attractive instructors are better teachers or students learn more in their classes—and selection, but the largest part of the premium is mostly likely driven by beauty-based stereotypes and discrimination. With respect to gender, no clear picture emerges from existing evidence. This lack of consistency of gender

effects seems to be something of a constant in the research on beauty and inequality (see Sarpila, Brans & Kuipers, this volume).

Against this background, a promising avenue for future research is to follow up on the mixed evidence on the role of gender and to also go beyond the binary distinct between men and women, including LGBTQ perspectives as well as more nuanced dimensions of perceived masculinity and femininity. One reason for the ambiguous state of research might be that a more nuanced view of the social context, instructor characteristics, and their interaction is necessary. Existing studies often either focused on specific majors or pooled data for different disciplines. However, the interaction of gender and physical attractiveness might be context dependent and play out differently in male- and female-typed majors (see also Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). For example, attractive female instructors might have difficulties getting excellent teaching ratings in engineering classes. Furthermore, the study by Ponzo and Scoppa (2013) highlights that academic status and age seem to be important confounders that have not always been controlled in previous studies. Given that there are still substantial differences in the gender composition between junior and senior faculty members, this might be one reason for the mixed evidence on the interaction between gender and beauty and seems especially important when analyzing actual SET data.

Another promising avenue for future research would be to take a more nuanced view of physical appearance and stereotypes. First, beauty does not only involve positive stereotypes and might, thus, not be beneficial for instructors under all circumstances. For example, Preston et al. (2016) find that students expect “hot” professors to be more attractive but lower in clarity. Results like this call for a more nuanced theorizing of the link between beauty and teaching. Second, most studies so far have focused on a single dimension of physical attractiveness, but there is more to physical appearance than just a single dimension of attractiveness. In particular, individuals do not necessarily have the stereotypes and expectations toward individuals with similar levels of

perceived physical attractiveness. In the context of academic teaching, the ascription of competence as well as perceptions of physical attractiveness might depend on cultural capital, as expressed in personal style, grooming, and clothing. As such, cultural capital might be an important confounder but might also moderate the effects of perceived beauty on SET. Related to that, one should also have in mind the intersection of physical attractiveness with other ascribed characteristics such as race (Monk et al., 2021; see also Monk, this volume) or bodies deviating from the social norm (see Guest & Daniels, this volume) and how this intersection plays out in different cultural context.

Finally, the overview in this chapter illustrates that only a limited number of experimental studies exists although the advantages of experimental designs for testing causal claims and getting a better understanding of underlying mechanisms are widely acknowledged nowadays. Thereby, the availability of video material (e.g., from online teaching) in combination with techniques to manipulate video material (see Eberl et al., 2022) offers exciting new opportunities to advance this field of research. This appears particularly promising since the effects of physical attractiveness should unfold in social interactions that involve audio-visual impressions such as voice, mimics, and gestures.

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Tobias Wolbring, Prof. Dr., holds the Chair of Empirical Economic Sociology at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, where he conducts research at the crossroads of sociology, economics, and psychology. Prior to this role, he was an assistant professor of sociology, with a specialization in longitudinal data analysis at the University of Mannheim, a postdoc at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich, and a research assistant at the University of Munich, where he earned his doctorate in 2013. Using both experimental and longitudinal methods, his recent work delves into social inequalities, labor markets, and subjective well-being, earning him recognition in top-tier journals such as *Social Forces*, the *European Sociological Review*, and *Sociological Methods & Research*. He received the Best Dissertation Award from the German Sociological Association and the Robert K. Merton Prize from the International Network of Analytical Sociology, served as a visiting professor at Utrecht University, and the University of Hong Kong, and is editor-in-chief of the German SSCI-listed journal “Soziale Welt”.

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Beauty, Dating, and Desirability

MacKenzie A. Christensen and Katelyn Rose Malae

1 Introduction

The importance of beauty in romantic and sexual relationships has long been recognized across various disciplines. In evolutionary psychology, scholars posit that humans seek attractive partners because beautiful traits signal certain genetic conditions—such as being fertile or disease-resistant—that could be passed down to offspring (Hamilton & Zuk, 1982; see also, Lidborg & Boothroyd, this volume for a critique of this perspective). In social demography, on the other hand, beauty is seen as a central matching criterion, where couples tend to partner with individuals with similar levels of attractiveness (see McClintock, this volume). Among sociologists, beauty is a marker of social status, reflecting highly racialized, gendered, and class-based aesthetic ideals (Bourdieu, 1984; Kuipers, 2015). Though distinct, these perspectives are largely based on a shared understanding of beauty that emphasizes physical appearances, such as an ideal body type, height, or facial features. In this chapter, however, we move beyond this

perspective of beauty to explore how *desirability*—as an interactional and field-dependent process—shapes the dating practices of young adults.

Beauty has important implications for how people develop romantic and sexual relationships, including relationship quality and marital outcomes (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Egebark et al., 2021; McClintock, 2014); yet individuals do not rely on beauty alone to attract potential partners. Rather, studies suggest that what people find desirable in dating and marriage markets depends on the setting of the interaction and reflects more than just a pretty face or “good” physique (Green, 2013). To be desired, individuals must embody—physically, psychologically, and spiritually—what is deemed sexually valuable within a given setting, an erotic resource (or capital) that can change from place to place (Wade, 2022). Thus, examining the complex and dynamic relationship beauty and dating requires an understanding of desirability that encompasses more than just physical appearances, but also accounts for a broader array of social attributes, attitudes, and contexts shaping sexual and romantic interactions (Green, 2008).

This chapter draws on a sexual fields approach—which illuminates how contexts condition interactions—to delineate how collective understandings of desirability shape the contemporary dating practices of young adults. In doing so, we examine the role of sexual capital

M. A. Christensen (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, Eugene,
OR, USA
e-mail: macc@uoregon.edu

K. R. Malae
Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utah
Valley University, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
e-mail: kmalae@uvu.edu

in creating and maintaining hierarchies of desirability within dating markets. Here, sexual capital incorporates more than physical beauty. Instead, sexual capital is generated through a combination of “physical appearance, affect and sociocultural styles” (Green, 2011, p. 248; see also Pieters, this volume), and its value depends on how it is received within any given field (Green, 2011). Desirability, then, emerges as an outcome of sexual capital, reflecting an individual’s ability to effectively capitalize on this resource to attract potential partners. In other words, how one’s sexual capital is evaluated within any given sexual field determines one’s level of desirability.

To illuminate this process, we use the case of the hook-up culture (as a sexual field) to contextualize the dating practices of young adults and explain how desirability—as an outcome of sexual capital—shapes young people’s sexual and romantic experiences. We focus on young adults, in particular, because young people (between the ages 18 and 30) are more likely to be dating—or engaging in nonmarital romantic and/or sexual relationships—than older generations. These young adults are also commonly dating under the context of the hook-up culture, a distinct sexual field that privileges informal sexual encounters over committed relationships (Bogle, 2008; Tillman et al., 2019; Wade, 2017). We then draw on qualitative data from the U.S. Dating and Desirability Study to illustrate how sexual capital shapes the experiences of young adults using dating applications (apps) such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. Because dating and desirability cannot be understood in isolation from its context, this field offers a unique opportunity to examine how dating apps intersect with the hook-up culture to shape desirability online and offline. We focus on desirability, rather than beauty, because young adults are not only evaluating potential partners based on their physical looks, but also on their ability to reflect the sexual values specific to the field of the hook-up culture. We argue that, within this context, desirability is deeply shaped by the sexual expectations of a hook-up. As a result, desirability not only reflects societal beauty standards—that maintain existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender—but is also

tied to a person’s ability to effectively construct a casual front, a sexual value at odds with many young people’s romantic desires.

2 Sexual Fields Theory

A sexual fields perspective offers a theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between desirability and dating. This perspective highlights how sexual desires, desirability, and interactions manifest within contemporary sexual life (Green, 2015). Drawing from Bourdieu’s field theory (1977), which reveals how fields condition interactions, a sexual fields approach highlights the specific fields, or terrains, of interactions in which actors negotiate sexual and/or romantic relationships (Green, 2013). Accordingly, a sexual field “emerges when a subset of actors with potential romantic or sexual interest in one another congregate in physical or virtual space and orient themselves toward one another according to a logic of desirability” (Green, 2013, p. 27). Two aspects of sexual fields theory are particularly relevant to the study of beauty and dating.

First, a sexual fields approach posits that each field is characterized by a specific structure of desire (Martin & George, 2006; Wade, 2022). Structures of desire reflect “hegemonic systems of judgment” (Martin & George, 2006) that comprise the aggregate of individual desires and attitudes. In this way, the structure of desire moves beyond the individual level to reflect a collective understanding of desirability (Green, 2015). For instance, within a given sexual field, a structure of desire may be signified by physical or virtual characteristics, including decor, web design, and the actors’ bodies, clothing choices, and demeanor. These characteristics communicate who “fits in” and who is considered desirable within a specific sexual field. In turn, structures of desire pattern social interactions, as actors evaluate their desirability and the desirability of others according to the standards of a specific field.

Second, and relatedly, sexual capital emerges as a key organizing feature of a sexual field (Green, 2008). Sexual capital refers to a specific dimension of capital (i.e., cultural, economic, social)

associated with the resources of beauty and attractiveness (Green, 2013). More than attractiveness, however, sexual capital encompasses a broader combination of “physical appearance, affect and sociocultural style” (Green, 2011, p. 248) that confers specific advantages to those within a sexual field (Green, 2008; Martin & George, 2006). In other words, sexual capital is contextual, such that what is considered high sexual capital in one setting may differ from in another setting. Actors, then, may construct desirable “fronts” (Goffman, 1959; Wade, 2021) to increase their sexual capital, including altering their fashion, attitudes, speech, posture, and/or body type to meet the ideals reflected by the specific field. In this way, sexual capital becomes a “currency” that individuals can capitalize on to attract desirable sexual and/or romantic partners.

Importantly, sexual capital is not just a characteristic of the individual. Rather, it is an interactional process that is historically contingent and field dependent (Green, 2013). Different fields differently shape what is considered desirable. For instance, in many Western fields, white men and women are thought to carry similar racialized advantages; however, in Shanghai, white men are considered to have more valued sexual capital than white women (Farrer, 2010). This differentiation creates field-specific “tiers of desirability” (Green, 2013), whereby individuals with valued sexual capital are more desirable than those with sexual capital at odds with the values of the field. Sexual capital also varies in its degree of saliency within any given field. For instance, some research suggests that within heterosexual marriage markets, men place greater value on the sexual capital of women, whereas women tend to put greater emphasis on men’s economic and cultural capital (Green, 2013). Others, however, find that heterosexual couples tend to match on physical attractiveness (McClintock, 2014). Today, in an era of online dating—where physical appearances are prioritized through digital photos and profiles—it’s possible that sexual capital (as opposed to other forms of capital) may be particularly salient, as users rely on physical appearances to make decisions about potential partners.

Taken together, a sexual fields perspective illuminates the complex processes through which desirability is constructed, evaluated, and internalized within a given romantic/sexual context. At the aggregate level, sexual fields are represented by a specific structure of desire, which reflects the wants, attitudes, and desires of the collective, as well as dictates who and what is deemed desirable. Within a field, success (such as being seen as highly desirable) depends on an individual’s sexual capital. High-status actors are privileged in their ability to trade on their sexual capital, whereas (supposedly) low-status actors may struggle to secure the same intimate returns. Ultimately, sexual fields theory argues that desirability and dating cannot be understood in isolation from its context. Thus, research has shifted to examine the cultural and historical contexts shaping the dating practices of today’s young adults.

3 Linking a Sexual Fields Approach to Young Adult Dating

The field of young adult dating varies considerably across cultural contexts. This is attributed, at least in part, to societal norms that shape when it becomes acceptable to begin dating or enter marriage, what sexual activities are appropriate, and what dating behaviors are acceptable (Connolly & McDonald, 2020). For instance, in the US context, young adults from Asian backgrounds tend to hold more conservative views on dating; they are less accepting of one-night stands or casual sex and enter romantic relationships later than their Western peers (Li et al., 2010; Moore & Leung, 2001; Regan et al., 2004). Similarly, in countries such as Turkey and Nepal—where religious affiliations deeply shape norms around sex and marriage—young adults enter into marriage at younger ages and hold more conservative views on sex and dating than young adults in the U.S. (Boratav & Çavdar, 2012; Regmi et al., 2011). Yet, within these cultures, young adult dating cultures continue to prevail, despite acknowledging that older adults generally discourage

such romantic involvement (Regmi et al., 2011). In countries such as the U.S., however, young adults are increasingly delaying marriage in favor of their own economic and personal development (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). These shifts in attitudes and expectations around marriage, coupled with widespread changes in women's education and labor market participation, have given rise to a sexual culture that emphasizes informal romantic and/or sexual encounters over more committed, and potentially distracting, relationships (Bogle, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009).

Indeed, within the U.S., young adult dating most commonly occurs in the context of hook-up culture (Wade, 2017). Unlike traditional dating practices, hooking-up implies a lack of formality, whereby sex proceeds a romantic relationship, if a romantic relationship occurs at all (Bogle, 2008; Christensen, 2021; England et al., 2007; Wade, 2017). Though it has been assumed that hooking-up has replaced traditional dating, studies suggest that hook-ups have instead become the primary pathway for young adults to establish romantic relationships (Christensen, 2021; Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015). Therefore, analyzing hook-up culture from a sexual field's perspective offers a novel understanding of how desirability shapes the sexual and/or romantic relationships of young adults.

The hook-up culture is characterized by a distinct structure of desire (Wade, 2021). In her analysis of U.S. college campuses, Wade (2017, 2021) finds that the hook-up culture has a distinct "look," often taking place at sexual fraternity parties (controlled by men) and accompanied by sexual dancing, drinking, and loud music. Here, the structure of desire communicates the expectation that sexual interactions should be fun, careless, and—perhaps most importantly—casual (Allison & Risman, 2014; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Wade, 2017). Likewise, in a study of Ugandan university students, Choudhry and colleagues (2022) found that situationships—or ambiguous, casual relationships—emerged as the primary relationship category on campus. Today, many young people believe that casual and "emotionless" relationships are not only common

but ideal (Wade, 2017). This collective sense of casualness reflects a structure of desire in which desirability is contingent upon an individual's ability to successfully distance themselves from a committed relationship.

Importantly, this structure of desire—and, more specifically, the sexual value of casualness—most commonly reflects the values of individual choice and self-development that are especially embraced among young adults from predominantly white and/or affluent backgrounds (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). This means that for students of color and those from lower and working-class families, the hook-up culture, and its corresponding structure of desire, may be explicitly exclusionary. Further, because heterosexual hook-ups commonly take place at fraternity parties or men's dorm rooms (Wade, 2017), men are often in control of the terms of the interaction, privileging heterosexual men within the field of the college hook-up scene (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009).

Beyond college campuses, dating apps such as Tinder and Hinge have alleviated the boundaries of the on-campus hook-up culture (Christensen, 2021). Through design, these technologies afford their own structures of desire. Tinder, for instance, offers users a "game-like" platform where they can swipe through potential partners like a deck of cards, communicating the norm of fast and informal relationships. Likewise, Grindr—an app that caters to gay men—localizes opportunities for intimacies by using geographic proximity to identify nearby potential partners. Grindr also communicates its structure of desire through its name, which alludes to a sexual act, and its masked logo symbolizes anonymity (Regan, 2023). Though the fields of dating apps vary, many reflect a similar structure of desire that privileges causal sexual encounters over more committed relationships.

Within these sexual fields—whether actual or virtual—young adults learn how to develop relevant "fronts." According to Wade (2021), portraying the correct front within a hook-up culture not only requires that actors have idealized physical traits, such as fit bodies and trendy clothing, but that they can also effectively embody

the casualness communicated by the fields' structure of desire. In other words, sexual capital is not only obtained through physical appearance but is simultaneously dictated by an individual's ability to successfully reflect the structure of desire. Because constructions of casualness express stereotypically masculine, affluent, and white approaches to sex, these fronts create tiers of desirability that rearticulate existing social hierarchies. As a result, the hook-up culture emerges as a distinct sexual field that has important implications for young adults' unequal dating experiences.

4 Existing Research on Young Adult Dating and Desirability

Constructing desirable fronts within a hook-up culture is a gendered process (Allison, 2019; Dalessandro, 2019; Wade, 2021). Because the hook-up culture is premised on forming casual sexual relationships, young adults must present themselves as indifferent and disinterested in forming romantic relationships. Failing to act casually about a hook-up puts young adults at risk of appearing too serious or "thirsty," potentially lowering their sexual capital (Wade, 2021). Yet, gendered beliefs about young adult intimacies—where men are perceived as sexually driven and women as relationship oriented—create unequal opportunities for men and women to construct desirable fronts (Dalessandro, 2019; Eaton & Rose, 2011).

Gendered beliefs about masculinity, emotions, and intimacy enable men to construct casual, desirable fronts within hook-up cultures more easily than women. For instance, Wade (2021) finds that assumptions about masculinity, which position young men as primarily sexually driven and relationship avoidant, allows men to construct casualness in a seemingly effortless manner. Similarly, Dalessandro's (2019) work on college students' pathways to forming romantic relationships illustrates how gendered beliefs about emotions and intimacy privileged men's constructions of desirability. She finds that women assume that most men on campus are indifferent toward

forming committed relationships. Thus, because gendered beliefs about masculinity and intimacy suggest that men "naturally" approach sex casually, it is easier for men to access the resources needed to construct a desirable casual front in the hook-up culture.

In contrast, cultural conceptions of femininity pose challenges to women's ability to construct desirable fronts (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Wade, 2021). To successfully construct casualness, women must act emotionally detached and indifferent toward sexual partners, including refraining from tenderness during the hook-up, limiting contact after a hook-up, and avoiding personal conversations with their sexual partner (Wade, 2021). Yet, because women are assumed to be relationship oriented and emotionally driven, they must take extra precautions to maintain a casual front. For example, Wade (2021) documents how women struggle to maintain the gendered expectation of being kind while performing aloofness post hook-ups. Because femininity is linked to women performing kindness toward others, women struggled to act emotionally distant after a hook-up. Additionally, women face greater scrutiny for breaking the rules of acting casually toward sex than men (Allison, 2019; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Wade, 2021). Both Allison (2019) and Wade (2021) document how college women are labeled as "desperate," "thirsty," or "obsessed" when failing to act aloof toward their former hook-up partners. Therefore, women face double-binds while trying to construct desirability within the hook-up scene—having to balance successfully acting casual toward intimacy while avoiding being stigmatized for their casual sexual behaviors.

Class also intersects with gender to shape young women's ability to construct desirability in the field of the hook-up culture (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Wade, 2017). Creating a desirable front requires women to have access to the economic resources necessary to maintain privileged bodies (physically fit bodies) and trendy clothing and makeup routines. In their study of how socioeconomic status shapes the intimacies of young women, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) found that

affluent women could maintain physical attractiveness by purchasing the trendiest clothing, paying to highlight their hair, and having the time and money to attend the gym regularly. As a result, these women were able to position themselves as sexually desirable within the campus' erotic market. Additionally, women from privileged class backgrounds are socialized to delay time-consuming romantic relationships and prioritize their self-development (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Lamont, 2020). For instance, in her study of gendered courtship practices among affluent, heterosexual young adults, Lamont (2020) finds that parents of young women advise their daughters to delay dating until after college, once they have established their careers and are financially stable. In response, affluent women often enter college with the economic resources and cultural knowledge to construct credible casual fronts (Allison, 2016; Allison & Risman, 2014; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Wade, 2017).

On the other hand, working-class and poor women often lack the financial resources to construct casualness in the same way. For instance, in their study of how class and residence (living on or off campus) shape students' enactment of the hook-up script, Allison and Risman (2014) find that women from working-class backgrounds find the pressure to act casually about sex and intimacy as foreign, lacking the cultural knowledge of how to act aloof and indifferent toward sexual relationships/hook-ups successfully (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Though working-class and poor women are also encouraged by family members to delay romantic relationships during college, working-class women are often co-residing with their parents (Allison, 2016), limiting their opportunity to readily attend campus parties and engage in hook-ups (Allison & Risman, 2014). As a result, they have limited access to adopting behaviors that are essential for constructing a desirable front within the hook-up culture (Wade, 2017). Even when working-class women successfully perform casual fronts, they are at greater risk of being stigmatized as "sluts" or "easy" than affluent women (Armstrong et al., 2014; Williams, 2021). Thus, class background

remains a salient force that maintains inequality within the sexual field of the hook-up culture.

Race simultaneously shapes young women's abilities to construct desirability within the hook-up culture (Pham, 2024; Spell, 2017). For instance, white women with physically fit bodies are often perceived as having an ideal front (Hamilton, 2007; Wade, 2017). Yet, even when women of color construct physically fit bodies, they are faced with racist controlling images (Collins, 2016; Pham, 2024) that prevent them from constructing idealized desirable fronts. Black and Latina women are stereotyped as sexually aggressive while Asian women are portrayed as sexually passive (Baker, 2023; Chow, 2000). For example, Spell (2017) finds that the intersection of race and gender shapes young adults' abilities to freely participate in their college's hook-up culture. Women of color, primarily Black and Latina women, face racist sexual stereotypes that constrain their ability to enact casual sexual fronts. Furthermore, standards of beauty associated with desirable fronts support a racial hierarchy, as preferences are given to "white" phenotypes, including light skin, straight hair, and double eyelids (Chow, 2000; Spell, 2017).

College campuses in the U.S. are often predominantly white spaces (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017), shaping the racial hierarchy of desirability in the hook-up culture (Pham, 2017; Spell, 2017). Because white women are at the top of the racial hierarchy of desirability, women of color usually experience fewer opportunities to participate in hook-ups and have fewer men to pool from as potential dating/sexual partners (Bogle, 2008; Spell, 2017). Even when women of color engage in hook-ups, they are at greater risk of being stigmatized as a slut for their behaviors than their white counterparts (Spell, 2017; Wade, 2021). In response, many women of color "opt-out" of the dominant hook-up culture (Spell, 2017; Wade, 2017). Rather than being subjected to racist interactions, Baker (2023) finds that racial minority students create their own "community-based party culture" that allows them to explore their sexualities in less racist contexts. Thus, while the hierarchy of desirability often privileges white women, studies suggest that creating

alternative pathways, whether through alternative sexual fields (Baker, 2023) or dating technologies (Lundquist & Curington, 2019), may alleviate some of the racial inequalities within the sexual field of the hook-up culture.

Despite the potential of dating technologies (i.e., social media, dating apps) to transform the sexual culture of young adulthood, studies reveal clear tiers of desirability across digital dating platforms (Christensen, 2021; Lundquist & Curington, 2019; Regan, 2023). Indeed, dating apps have been shown to exacerbate erotic hierarchies, given that they rely on user profiles and photos, allowing users to filter out others based on race/ethnicity, body type, or attractiveness (Robinson, 2015). Dating apps simultaneously communicate the assumption of casual sex (Christensen, 2021). For instance, in a study of young women on Tinder, Christensen (2021) found that these sexual expectations associated with the “hook-up” app shaped how women constructed and presented themselves online and offline, as women described efforts to develop profiles that appeared casual and not too “thirsty.”

Online, the structure of desire continues to reflect the predominantly white and heterosexual norms of the on-campus hook-up culture (Hanson, 2021). In fact, for those with (supposedly) less sexual capital, dating apps leave some users vulnerable to exclusion, discrimination, and sexual violence (Buggs, 2017; Christensen, 2021; Feliciano et al., 2009; Lundquist & Curington, 2019). In their study of online dating, Lin and Lundquist (2013) find that heterosexual white men and women are least likely to respond to messages from Black men and women, while heterosexual white men are more receptive to messages from Asian women and Latinas. Likewise, Robinson’s (2015) study of Grindr demonstrates how users filter out potential partners based on race/ethnicity, revealing how “personal preferences” emerge as a new form of racism. Ultimately, these studies demonstrate how digital technologies not only reify existing tiers of desirability but also how the structures of these websites facilitate dating inequalities.

5 Lessons from the U.S. Dating and Desirability Study

5.1 Study Overview

To illustrate how sexual capital operates to maintain unequal dating outcomes among (hetero)sexual young adults, we draw on data from the U.S. Dating and Desirability Study—a qualitative study of 134 young adults (ages 18–30) using digital dating apps such as Tinder, Hinge, or Bumble. Here, we draw on two empirical cases to examine young women’s constructions of desirability on dating apps. First, we describe the experiences of Blaire, a working-class, biracial woman, to demonstrate how sexual capital constrains her ability to construct a desirable, casual front. For Blaire, who struggled to construct casualness, her dating app experiences were limited to a series of dissatisfying sexual encounters. Next, we introduce Cassandra—a white, upper-class woman—to illustrate how sexual capital enabled her greater access to construct casualness, resulting in positive and empowering experiences on dating apps. These findings illuminate that, within the sexual field of dating apps, desirability encompasses more than just physical appearance. Rather, desirability reflects raced and classed statuses, where more privileged young adults have greater access to the resources necessary to construct a casual front, illuminating how beauty alone may not be enough to guarantee success in the sexual field of dating apps.

5.2 Case 1: Blaire

On dating apps, women marginalized by race and class describe feeling constrained in their ability to construct desirability in ways that align with the hook-up cultures structure of desire. For instance, Blaire, a 22-year-old biracial (Filipina and white) woman, living with her family, struggled to perform a casual front on dating apps. Consistent with prior research on young adult dating (Allison, 2016; Hamilton & Armstrong,

2009), Blaire found the hook-up culture unfamiliar and unappealing, instead “[she] wanted to find love [on dating apps], someone to motivate [her] and to make [her] life better.” Her desire to develop romantic relationships was at odds with the sexual expectations of dating apps. Thus, rather than creating a profile signifying a casual approach to dating and sex, Blaire emphasized her preference for a committed relationship. On her profiles, she added her romantic desires and personal details and suggested ideas for potential first dates (like hiking or playing mini golf). She recalled, “I always try to find pictures that embody me. I like to hike, so I have a picture of myself on a hike. I also have [a photo] of me and my dog.” Blaire hoped that by showing off her personality in her profiles men would be interested in taking her out on dates. Unlike class-privileged women living on campus, Blaire lived with her parents and struggled to meet potential partners outside the context of dating apps. “I don’t meet guys that I am into if I don’t use apps...I don’t know how people do it without them,” she explained. In response, Blaire put a great deal of effort into crafting a personal narrative through her profiles, violating the expectations of casualness.

Within the field of dating apps, Blaire’s constructed front (via her dating app profile) lowered her sexual capital. Though her physical appearance did not preclude her from matching with potential partners, she struggled to connect with men interested in going on dates. Blaire described the men that she encountered as uninterested in developing committed relationships. Instead, men were unwilling to take her on dates and focused primarily on hook-ups. Blaire preferred to “go out and do new things together,” but the men often wanted to drive to a semi-private, public location or to a motel to have casual sex. For example, Blaire recalled meeting with a guy from Bumble who she initially thought wanted to drive to a viewpoint to smoke marijuana while they got to know one another. However, after meeting up, he suggested they go to a motel to hook-up. “I didn’t meet up with him expecting to rent a room, but he was very persistent,” she recalled. Blaire described going with him to the motel to have casual sex. The next day, she checked her Bumble

account and saw that he blocked her. He was not the only guy from a dating app who stopped talking to her after hooking-up: “Most guys ghost and stop responding after hooking-up...I never had a [connection] that got close to turning into a relationship [from an app].” Like other women in the sample, Blaire’s sexual capital was linked to her race and class status in ways that constrained her ability to construct a desirable, casual front. Instead of constructing casualness, Blaire violated the sexual values of dating apps and the hook-up culture more broadly. Thus, rather than her physical appearance being the ultimate determinant of her dating app success, Blaire described her biggest challenge as her desire to seek a committed relationship in the context of hook-up culture.

5.3 Case 2: Cassandra

In the field of dating apps, women privileged by their race and class status describe constructing a casual front with ease. For these women, casualness was a culturally legible front. For example, Cassandra—a white, upper-class woman living on campus—constructed a seemingly effortless casual front using Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. Before beginning college, Cassandra planned to remain single during her first year. Growing up, her parents emphasized that college is a time to focus on herself and her professional goals (see Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Lamont, 2020). Wanting to avoid being “tied down,” Cassandra decided to approach intimacy “like a man”—hooking-up frequently and avoiding emotional connections (Wade, 2021). Her decision to download dating apps was motivated by boredom. “[My roommate] and I were super bored one night, so we downloaded Tinder for fun.” She was already meeting potential hook-ups at campus parties. But after using the apps for a while, Cassandra realized she enjoyed the casual interactions found online, explaining: “I like meeting guys on the apps because it puts me in the power position.” Knowing that she did not want to find a romantic relationship, Cassandra kept her profile sparse, focusing on adding provocative photos and limited personal information. For instance, her

most recent Tinder bio briefly stated: “Looking for someone to teach me how to surf,” reflecting her casual approach to dating.

Cassandra’s construction of casualness increased her sexual capital within the field of dating apps. As a result, Cassandra described her experiences as positive, emphasizing how men treated her with “respect.” She recounted men who offered to take her out to dinner, wanted to get to know more about her, and cared about how she felt during sexual encounters. In one instance, Cassandra described meeting a man on Tinder who was “awesome and really kind.” She recalled: “He took me to dinner...he would come over to my place and act respectfully. He would buy me food, pick me up, and drive me everywhere.” Although she did not want to form a committed relationship, she decided to keep hooking-up with him. Cassandra referred to their relationship as “friends-with-benefits,” but it ended quickly after he confessed to developing romantic feelings for her: “I just haven’t been in the place where I wanted a relationship.” Like other women in the study privileged by their race and class status, Cassandra had access to the sexual capital needed to construct a desirable front that was culturally legible within the sexual field of dating apps. In turn, Cassandra relied on more than just her looks to attract potential hook-up partners; rather, her ability to construct casualness effectively reflected the sexual values of the hook-up culture. This front enabled Cassandra to position herself as an ideal match, translating to her success on dating apps.

6 Conclusion and New Avenues for Research

As these cases illustrate, approaching young adult dating and desirability from a sexual fields perspective enables us to bridge the gap between perspectives that understand beauty as a measure of physical appearance and those that view desirability as an interactional and field-dependent process. In this chapter, we show how the hook-up culture emerges as a distinct sexual field among young adults and, in doing so, we unveil how

sexual capital—shaped by systems of race, class, and gender—constrains or enables one’s ability to construct a desirable front. In particular, we demonstrate how—within the field of the hook-up culture—desirability transcends physical standards of beauty to include an individual’s ability to effectively construct fronts that align with the hook-up cultures’ casual approach to sex. Despite these contributions, several avenues of future research merit closer attention.

First, beyond dating apps, more research is needed that captures the implications of emerging technologies. This is especially relevant today when artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have become increasingly integrated into social platforms, including dating apps, social media, and messaging platforms. For instance, new developments in dating apps have integrated features such as “AttractionDNA,” which uses AI technologies to determine who users find attractive and then uses that information to filter direct messages. In this case, tiers of desirability are determined not only by the user but by the dating technologies themselves. This may be particularly consequential considering that AI technologies have been shown to replicate racist and sexual logics due to a lack of diversity in their programmers (Buggs, 2017; Nobel, 2018).

Second, despite a wealth of empirical evidence examining young adult dating, we know considerably less about beauty and dating across the life course. This may be due, at least in part, to high marriage rates among older adults. However, a wave of gray divorce—or separation or divorce among individuals aged 50 or older—means that more and more older adults are potentially entering back into dating markets (Brown & Lin, 2012). Indeed, recent evidence suggests that women in midlife engage in casual relationships, or “situationships,” that enable them to avoid a one-night stand, or a hook-up, while maintaining their sexual autonomy and singlehood (Armstrong et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the sexual field of dating in midlife converges with that of young adults in new and dynamic ways, revealing important theoretical and empirical gaps in our understanding of dating and desirability in later life.

Additionally, future research must continue to examine the relationship between dating and desirability across social and cultural contexts. For instance, most research on the hook-up culture draws largely from populations of U.S. college students, often from elite college campuses. However, the proliferation of social media and dating apps has mobilized the hook-up culture beyond the boundaries of the U.S. college campus, undoubtedly shaping the dating practices of individuals across social and cultural contexts. For instance, research would benefit from greater attention to how young adults are using dating apps in societies where young adults are navigating sex and dating within more conservative contexts and cultures (Li et al., 2010; Moore & Leung, 2001; Regan et al., 2004).

Finally, future research should incorporate more inclusive and intersectional perspectives. For instance, much of the existing literature captures gender differences between men and women (e.g., Allison, 2019; Dalessandro, 2019; Wade, 2021) or examines variations among Black, Latinx, white—and to some extent Asian—daters (e.g., Baker, 2023; Pham, 2017; Spell, 2017). Despite the contributions of this work, we know less about how desirability operates among nonbinary and transgender daters and/or other racially marginalized young adults. For instance, given that beauty is deeply gendered, research that transcends the gender binary would yield critical insight into how desirability is socially constructed and evaluated among gender-expansive daters. Likewise, disability remains critically understudied in the literature on dating and desirability. This is a particularly important oversight considering that we live in a world where disabled people experience a culture of undesirability (Erickson, 2016; Santinele Martino & Moumos, 2022). Thus, by increasing the diversity of perspectives represented in the literature on beauty and dating, we may be better equipped to identify and attend to the hierarchies of desirability that structure contemporary dating and marriage markets.

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MacKenzie Christensen is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon. Her research examines the role of digital technologies—both within the United States and cross-nationally—in shaping gender and family inequalities across the life course.

Katelyn Rose Malae is an Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Utah Valley University. Her research examines how the landscape of digital dating apps shapes gendered intimacies among young adults.

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Beautyvism: Beauty as a Political Tool

Luuc Brans and Sanne Pieters

1 Introduction

To achieve their goal of ‘complete victory over patriarchy’, the Ukrainian feminist activist group Femen employs a method that is guaranteed to attract media attention. With bare breasts covered in activist slogans and heads adorned with flower crowns, Femen feminists turn their body into tools for political expression to protest sexualization in fashion, femicide in Berlin, and non-consensual upskirt filming in South Korea. In early manifestos and interviews, Femen explicitly sought to limit their pool of activists to a ‘slim, trim troupe of 20’ women as this bolstered their marketability (Zychowicz, 2011, p. 219). This has led some to wonder if instead of conquering patriarchy, Femen activists are actually perpetuating patriarchal ideas of ‘sexy’ women’s bodies (O’Keeffe, 2014).

As this Femen example illustrates, beauty has been the subject and object of contemporary political struggle. This is not surprising: we know that beauty plays an increasingly important role in social inequalities (Havlin & Báez, 2018; Widdows, 2018). In addition, beauty ties moral values to physical appearance, leading

to the development of what sociologists call a regime: a social system that ties self-control with social control, standards for moral and aesthetic evaluation, and standards for social worth and moral worth (Elias, 1939; Kuipers, 2022, p. 210). Kuipers (2022) sees the emergence of this self-reinforcing beauty regime as beauty is becoming more important for all sorts of people throughout all phases of their lives. Under this beauty regime, new standards for social control and moral evaluations have been introduced that influence people’s perception of social and individual worth.

As Kuipers noted earlier (2022, p. 216), this expansion of the beauty regime made beauty of interest to social movements which deal with beauty with various tactics and political aims in mind. Social movements like Femen or the Black is Beautiful campaign have often instrumentalized beauty as a tactic in a broader social justice struggle. Contemporary social movements like the Fat Acceptance movement treat changing beauty ideals as an important goal in itself, while Traditional Wives (Tradwives) influencers use beauty to nebulously spread misogynistic and extreme-right ideology that help to mobilize like-minded people (Leidig, 2023). This shows the variety of roles beauty may play in social movements, being both a by-product of broader social movement action and a targets in itself (Craig, 2002).

How to think in sociological terms about these political struggles over beauty? Are these struggles always emancipatory in nature, or can they also serve reactionary political agendas? Since

L. Brans (✉) · S. Pieters
KU Leuven, Centre for Culture, Conflict, and Inequality,
Sociology department, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: luuc.brans@kuleuven.be

S. Pieters
e-mail: sanne.pieters@kuleuven.be

women have been traditionally more associated with beauty than men, how do these political struggles over beauty relate to broader feminist currents? To answer these questions, this chapter takes a closer look at two contemporary and one historic social movement with beauty at their heart, a type of beauty politics which we call *beautyvism*, a portmanteau of beauty and activism. We define beautyvism as the employment of physical beauty for political activist purposes in social movements, either as method, tool, or goal in itself. We see social movements as ‘collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority’ (Snow et al., 2018, p. 10). These movements engage in politics through activism, in which mobilization, recruitment, and visibility are key—all activities in which beauty can play a key role.

We propose to use the tools of social movement theory to gain a stronger understanding of beautyvism. This leads us to develop a typology of beautyvism, based on characteristics drawn from the social movement literature: context, methods and tactics, ideological position in this case in relation to feminism, relation to authority, and how beauty is used (Baumann, 2007; Della Porta & Diani, 2020; Snow et al., 2018). To build this typology, we compare the anti-Miss America protests (1968, USA), the Fat Acceptance movements (1970s onwards in USA and Western Europe), and finally the Tradwives movements (2010s onward, social media in the West). Ultimately, the typology demonstrates that the three beautyvist movements are not always as progressive as one would perhaps expect but rather can be qualified as reactionary, emancipatory, and revolutionary.

The chapter is outlined as follows: first, we will elaborate on beauty politics and feminism by addressing some key work and directions in this field (Craig, 2002, 2021; Elias et al., 2017; Jha, 2016; Lakoff & Scherr, 2022). We then briefly discuss how we employ social movement theory to develop the novel concept of beautyvism. After, we develop our typology of beautyvism through

the comparison of the three beautyvist movements. We conclude with some suggestions for future research.

2 The (Feminist) Politics of Beauty

As the growing collection of edited books and articles dedicated to the topic demonstrates, scholars see an enduring relation between beauty and politics (Craig, 2002, 2021; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006; Elias et al., 2017; Jha, 2016; Lakoff & Scherr, 2022; Wolf, 2015). This suggests that beauty is strongly intertwined with power and potentially even holds power of its own. As Lakoff and Scherr (2022) point out: *politics*, or *the political*, is an unreliable word on its own that can mean different things to different people throughout different disciplines. Indeed, when writing about the relation between beauty and politics, scholars situate the importance of beauty in a diverse range of political and ideological contexts. For instance, Mangan (1999) argues that the beautiful naked male body became a powerful symbol for National Socialist ideology in 1930s Europe, Craig (2002) demonstrates the interrelatedness of beauty and the civil rights movement countering racial segregation and discrimination in the USA, and Elias et al. (2017) situate beauty in a neoliberal subjectivity to foreground the contemporary relation between beauty and politics.

One of the most important ideological contexts in which beauty politics play out is feminism. In feminism, discussions surrounding beauty have held significant importance. The significance of appearance in feminist discourse and activism can be traced back to the emergence of Western feminisms in the 1910s and onward. Beauty, in this context, stands as a fundamental issue alongside other crucial feminist concerns such as reproductive rights, combating violence against women, striving for workplace equality and fair pay, and advocating for sexual freedom. Indeed, when it comes to women, ‘their beauty is not theirs, it is the result of the judgments of others’ (Lakoff &

Scherr, 2022, p. 19). Therefore, in the words of Elias and colleagues, ‘beauty is a feminist issue’ (2017, p. 6). Indeed, some scholars position the struggle about women’s appearance as foundational to second-wave feminism (Craig, 2002; Elias et al., 2017). Yet the role of beauty is contested in more recent feminist currents, such as post-feminism (Gill, 2007), or post-post-feminism (Gill, 2019) in multicultural European societies (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006) or the more recent resurgence of reactionary anti-feminist women’s movements that argue for a return to conservative gender norms. Our typology of beautyvist movements in this chapter will therefore relate these movements to dominant feminist paradigms.

Conceptualizing beauty as a political issue allows scholars to bring beauty from something that is mostly seen as passive to something that is potentially active. Indeed as Lakoff and Scherr (2022) point out: while beauty is stereotypically perceived as something that *is* and not something that *does*, bringing beauty to the fore of political debate shows how appearance has often been central to movements such as fascism (Rupp, 1977; Sontag, 1975) second-wave feminism (Elias et al., 2017), the civil rights movement and other anti-racist movements (Craig, 2002; Jha, 2016), and more recent movements that mainly manifest online including the body positivity movements (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) and online alt-right and conservative movements. Here, beauty is presented as a key issue alongside topics like reproductive rights, racial equality, colorism, equal pay, visibility, and conservative ideology. In these movements, beauty may function as a tool to bring about desired social change while at other times beauty standards are targeted as an end itself. This reflects how political actors are increasingly aware of the political power of beauty. To gain a more fine-grained understanding of this form of beauty politics, which we propose to call beautyvism, we need to take an excursion into social movement literature before we turn to our typology of different forms of beautyvism.

3 The Politics of Beauty Meets Social Movement Theory

To understand beauty’s role in social movements, we first should determine what we mean by social movements as such. The recent scholarship on social movements has recognized the diversity among social movements in terms of their structure, institutionalization, capacity, targets, alliances, and context (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 2018). Yet this does not mean that everything that looks or sounds ‘activist’ or political should be counted as a social movement, and by extension that any political activity that includes beauty should be called beautyvism. Based on the common notion in the literature that social movements always include joint or collective action, seek social change, are organized, and function outside formal political institutions, Snow et al. (2018) offer the following definition of social movements:

collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part. (p. 19)

Let’s unpick this conceptualization so that we can derive characteristics that will constitute our typology of beautyvist movements. Firstly, the start and the end of this conceptualization point to type of organization and context, respectively. Organization is important to recognize the capacities of movements and includes the methods and resources from which they draw their political power. The context, sometimes referred to as political or cultural opportunity structures (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004), help us explain the origin and potential consequences of the movements. Together, they explain the potential success of social movements. In our typology, we include context and organization by looking at the political-historical context, and the methods and tactics of beautyvist movements.

A second conceptual element drawn from the above conceptualization for our typology is the

recognition that movements may both challenge and defend authority. By implication, social movements, including beautyvist movements, are not by definition progressive. Indeed, as we will see later, they may be used for conservative means such as strengthening the beauty regime. The challenged or defended authority may be institutionally or culturally based. This means that movements do not necessarily have to target political authority but may also challenge cultural ideas, outside of the realm of formal politics, such as the beauty regime itself. We include this in our typology by typifying movements as either challenging or defending the beauty regime.

Political-historical context, methods and tactics, and the challenge or defense of the beauty regime are good starting points for a typology of beautyvist movements. However, a typology based on these factors would miss something quite essential and run the risk of studying movements in an overtly institutional fashion—an institutionalist bias that has been challenged from the 1980s onward by the social movement theory's cultural turn (H. Johnston, 2023; van Dijk, 2023). We would overlook the ideas underlying the beautyvist movements, in other words the actual ideological content of the movements. Ideology, as a meaning system combining a description of social life and a prescription of what ought to change, is the fuel for social movements and importantly determines their success (Baumann, 2007; Oliver & Johnston, 2000). In our typology, we look at ideology specifically through a feminist lens. As pointed out above, feminism and beauty politics are closely intertwined, and we think that looking at the ideological purchase of movements through a feminist lens is therefore a decent way to structure our understanding of beautyvists' ideology.

Finally, because we are interested in beautyvist movements, we also look specifically at the role of beauty in the movements. Does it serve an ideological argument, is beauty a key ideological target in itself, or is it an activist method to recruit new followers and attract attention for a broader cause (cf. Craig, 2021)?

Based on this discussion, we propose a typology constituting of five elements resulting in three types of beautyvism. The elements of beautyvist movements that constitute our typology (columns of Table 1) are political-historical context, feminists ideological current; methods and tactics of the movement, the role of beauty in the movement; and whether the movement challenges or sustains the beauty regime. Taken together, this leads to three types of beautyvism: revolutionary, emancipatory, and reactionary beautyvism, function of beauty itself and the movements' outcomes (final column of the table). We now turn to three beautyvist movements to exemplify our typology: the anti-Miss America protests, the Fat Acceptance Movement, and the Tradwives movement. We chose these movements because they exemplify different underlying feminist ideologies and each relate differently to the beauty regime. Let us now turn to the typology.

4 A Diversity of Beautyvist Movements

In this section, we discuss three of beautyvist movements to demonstrate the analytical leverage of our typology: the anti-Miss America protests, the Fat Acceptance Movements, and the Tradwives Movement (see Table 1). These movements are all heterogeneous movements that blend various methods, goals, strategies, and types of actors, meaning our typology will necessarily be somewhat reductionist. Ultimately, however, this will provide a fair overview of the different forms beautyvism can take. For each movement, we will look at the political-historical context, the movements' relation to feminism, its methods and resources, the role of beauty in the movement, and whether the movement challenges or defends the beauty regime. Taken together, this will lead to a characterization of the movement as reactionary, revolutionary, or emancipatory.

Table 1 Typology of beautyvist movements

Beautyvist movement	Political-historical context	Methods & tactics	Feminist ideological current	Role of beauty in the movement	Challenge or defense of beauty regime authority	Type of beautyvism
Anti-Miss America protests	1968 civil rights & counter cultural era	Organized protests	Second wave feminism	Instrumental for broader social movement goals	Challenge of beauty regime and wider social order	Revolutionary
Fat Acceptance Movements	Civil rights era, renewed popularity from neoliberal 2000s onward	Social media posts & brand campaigns	In the tension between post-feminism and third/ fourth-wave feminisms	Goal in itself	Legitimization of beauty regime and wider social order	Emancipatory
Tradwives Movement	2010s era of right-wing populism	Social media posts	Extreme-right racist anti-feminism	Attention and recruitment method	Defense of beauty regime and reactionary challenge of wider structural orders	Reactionary

4.1 Anti-Miss America Protests

The Miss America beauty pageantry served as a central event to establish gendered beauty norms in twentieth-century American culture. In the political-historical context of the countercultural year of 1968, the pageantry became the focus point of feminist protests that sought to change the prevailing beauty norms. Indeed, Elias et al. (2017) have noted that the protests could be seen as the birth of the American Women's Liberation Movement.

The participants made use of classic social movement methods and resources of organized protest. In front of the Atlantic City's Convention Center, where the annual beauty pageant was set to be held, members of the Women's Liberation movement ritually threw stereotypical feminine products like bras, make-up, and mops in so-called Freedom Trash Cans (Lloyd, 2023, p. 20). Protesters carried signs saying 'Can Make-Up Cover the Wounds of Our Oppression'. They later infiltrated the venue to disturb the televised farewell speech and hang banners. These activists

believed beauty pageants legitimized and encouraged the objectification of women and the reduction of women's value to their physical appearance (Elias et al., 2017). The protest drew a lot of media attention and was quickly labeled the beginning of a new feminist movement.

To understand how the movement relates to feminist ideology and what the role of beauty is in the movement, we need to look at another protest happening that day, not far away from the Atlantic City's Convention Center. In protest against the exclusion of Black women from the Miss America title, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had organized the first Miss Black America pageant. Craig (2002, p. 4) writes that the allyship of the predominantly White feminists of the Women's Liberation Movement with the NAACP protest was a bit 'awkward'. While a lot of members of the Women's Liberation Movement had been participants in the Civil Rights Movement and their protest served to address both the sexism and racism in the Miss America pageant, some members seemed to struggle with the Miss Black

America pageant since it still seemed to legitimize the idea of women's worth through their beauty. But it is crucial to understand the very different positions that White and Black women had in relation to beauty standards in 1968's North America (Craig, 2002), a difference that persists to this day (Banet-Weiser, 2021, see also Monk, this volume). While White women were objectified in pageantries, movies, and advertisements, African-American women were excluded from the hegemonic beauty norms. As such, Black women challenged the pervasive categorization of them as non-beautiful, leading to a political struggle that had some overlap with the Women's Liberation Movement but was coming from a very different foundation (Craig, 2002).

These two protests signal the importance of beauty in the emergence of a new women's movement that aimed to liberate women from patriarchal and racist society that dictated how women should look and behave. For the sake of our typology, we therefore place them firmly within the second-wave feminist ideological current. It is clear that the protests sought to challenge the contemporary beauty regime as such as well as the wider structural order it upheld. Protesting beauty in that sense served as an instrumental tactic to problematize the broader social order of patriarchy in Western societies. Taken together, we qualify this as revolutionary beautyvist movements as it sought to uproot widespread oppressive gender and race structures.

4.2 Fat Acceptance Movements

The Fat Acceptance Movement's political-historical antecedents can be traced back to the countercultural year of 1968, when Bill Fabrey founded the National Association to Advance of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) in protest at the treatment of his wife, and the founding of the more radical Fat Underground groups in early 1970s California. Yet we can best characterize the political-historical context of the movement as the neoliberal period of the early 2000s onward. In this time, the movement developed across borders,

issues, and strategies and gained renewed popularity. Since the late 2000s, Fat Studies scholar activists have taken dominant assumptions about fat activism, as being solely about body positivity, and organizations like the NAAFA to task (Cooper, 2010). These scholar activists seek to expand the discourse on body size beyond a purely medicalized discourse (Rothblum, 2012). Therefore, some argue the movement is so diverse that it is impossible to speak about one singular movement as self-styled fat activists often disagree about goals and strategies of the movement (Cooper, 2016; Darwin & Miller, 2021).

As we will discuss below, this division within the movement is reflected in its relation to feminist ideology. For now, it is worth to point out that fat activists share a common goal of resisting the stigmas of fat people as morally abject and medically unhealthy (Pfeffer, 2021). They thereby resist the dominant framing of fat as a moral and medical problem and a public health crisis (Saguy, 2013). As Saguy (2013) has shown, the dominance of these frames, strongly pushed by the medical profession, media industries, and government policies (Kwan, 2009), makes fatness a medical and moral problem and a taken-for-granted truth among the public. The framing of fat bodies as less beautiful than thin bodies is an inherent part of this general discourse and demonstrates again the intertwinement of morality and the beauty regime, naturalizing anti-fat attitudes among the general public.

The methods and tactics of fat acceptance activists focus on changing the discourse surrounding fatness. They do so by tabling counter frames such as 'health-at-every-size', which resists the medical notion of weight as a correlation of health, or 'fat is beautiful' to resists the idea that only thin people should be considered beautiful. These frames are generally launched and reproduced from the 'fatosphere', an ecosystem of online media, such as blogs and social media accounts (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Meleo-Erwin, 2011) and offline media such magazines (LeBesco, 2004). This media ecosystem seeks to center the fat experience and counter fat discrimination and stigmatization.

The relation to feminism, the role of beauty in fat activism, and its relation to the beauty regime are ambiguous (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Fat activists often protest the beauty standards put forward by the fashion and beauty industries that marginalize fat people. Doing so, however, activists implicitly emphasize that beauty should be an important conveyor of worth in itself. For example, fat activists stage ‘coming out’ practices in which they post pictures of themselves in which they flaunt their fat bodies in order to normalize them in visual culture. But this only reinforces the beauty regime by conveying that beauty matters. This dynamic also makes brands’ size-inclusive campaigns controversial among fat activists, most prominently the Dove Real Beauty Campaign. They have been criticized for coopting fat activism for commercial gain without truly challenging the oppression of the beauty regime (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Recent scholarship on the adjacent body positivity movement has further demonstrated and criticized the privileging of white middle-class voices in the online tactics of these movements (Darwin & Miller, 2021). But some fat activists are aware that extending beauty standards to include fat people just underlines the importance of beauty. Therefore, some activists and scholars have sought to embrace ‘ugliness’ in a wholesale rejection of the pervasive nature of beauty and thus the beauty regime (Rodrigues & Przybylo, 2018). This reflects a more fundamental challenge to the beauty regime.

Fat activism’s ambiguous relation to the beauty regime reflects its ideological position as sitting in between the tension between post-feminism and more radical forms of feminism. Post-feminism has been described as a ‘sensitivity’ that holds that:

femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill, 2007, p. 149)

Some fat acceptance beautyvism reflects this post-feminism, most dominantly those that focus

on individual and market-led strategies such as the Dove Real Beauty campaign. Other tactics, such as the embrace of ugliness, contrast with this sensibility and may reflect other feminisms. Indeed, they more structurally oppose gender norms and are sensible to the intersection of gender norms with other structures of oppression. This contrast within the movement itself is reflective of tensions in contemporary feminism. Within our typology, we therefore characterize fat acceptance as sitting within this ideological tension.

Because this movement predominantly reproduces the notion that beauty is important and is mostly focused on expanding the beauty regime beyond the thin ideal, we classify this movement as an emancipatory, not a revolutionary beautyvist movement. We now turn to the final beautyvist movement in our typology, the Tradwives movement.

4.3 Tradwives Movement

The Tradwives Movement (a portmanteau of Traditional Wives) sprung up in the late 2010s on social media as part of the larger current of radical and alt-right social media content that brought Donald Trump to power in 2016 (Love, 2020). Less explicitly partisan or political than the two previously discussed beautyvist movements, the Tradwives campaign nevertheless serves a particular political agenda and uses beauty as a central tool to do so (Ebner & Davey, 2019; Love, 2020). Scholarly attention for the this recent movement and its methods and resources has been scant (see Leidig, 2023; Love, 2020 for exceptions), but the movement has garnered a fair amount of attention from legacy media outlets, including *the New York Times* (Kelly, 2018), *the Guardian* (Freeman, 2020; Norris, 2023), *der Spiegel* (Konate, 2024), *die Zeit* (Newmark, 2020), and *Le Monde* (Chirol, 2024). From these reports and our own reconnaissance of the movement, it becomes clear that the Tradwives movement consists of various female social media personalities that promulgate a ‘traditional’ life in which women stay at home to take care of the

house, care for their children, and provide other domestic labor.

The methods and tactics of Tradwives revolve around social media accounts in which Tradwives employ traditional beauty norms from the beauty regime to generate social media followers and likes. These accounts on Instagram and TikTok are often run by white, blonde women who conform to traditional beauty norms. Their dress sense also reflects early twentieth-century and nineteenth-century aesthetics, with much focus on traditional dressing and norms of feminized sexuality. The use of make-up, clothing, and other aesthetic labor practices are often exemplified in brief videos. The content on these accounts thus varies from these make-up videos to explainers about the Tradwives life and why it is important to stick to traditional gender norms. They also lament the contemporary calls for more gender equality and the promotion of progressive gender norms.

The relation to feminism, the role of beauty, and the relation to beauty regime are quite clear: Tradwives use the social media popularity of conventional beauty norms to reject contemporary feminism, reflect an anti-feminist ideology, and implicitly defend the beauty regime. Tradwife accounts place special emphasis on supporting husbands, being a good mother (see also Keyser-Verreault, this volume) and upholding traditional gender norms in a traditional heterosexual marriage. This includes the notion that women should take great care to uphold their aesthetic appeal to their husbands to ensure their romantic and sexual interests. The Tradwife life is explicitly presented as an antidote to the perceived chaos of contemporary, postmodern society that unsettles these traditional gender notions. Tradwife accounts reinforce traditional beauty norms that put White women atop a supposed racial hierarchy and doing so offer support for extreme right racist politics (Ebner & Davey, 2019; Kelly, 2018).

One particularly insightful example that demonstrates how Tradwives package usual social media beauty content with anti-feminist and racist messages is Estee C Williams, a self-declared Tradwife with over 162,000 followers on Instagram and over 170,000 followers on TikTok as

of writing. She started documenting her Tradwife life since July 2022 and a range of subjects, from baking and cooking to beauty products and taking care of the household. In one video, called 'The Tradwives movement', she explains that she lives this lifestyle and shares this on her social media accounts because she thinks the Tradwife life can offer women refuge from the 'chaotic world' out there. Just like in the wider movement, beauty plays an important role in Williams' work. Sticking to the conventional beauty norms, Williams and other Tradwives use their aesthetic capital on social media to generate attention and appeal while meanwhile selling not only beauty products, but also extreme worldviews. Because Tradwives use beauty to re-establish older gender norms, we call this movement reactionary beautyism.

5 New Avenues for Research

In conclusion, our analysis demonstrates that beautyvist movements may be reactionary, emancipatory, and revolutionary and serve a variety of ideological projects. While some political struggles over beauty may be emancipatory and contribute to social justice by extending 'recognition' (cf. Lamont, 2023), beautyism can also fuel exclusionary and reactionary radical right ideological projects that work against social justice. Meanwhile, some activists target beauty as a by-product of broader social movements, while other movements consciously target beauty as a political problem in its own right reflecting a similar observation of Craig (2021). Beautyism thus encompasses a diverse set of social movement activism with different aims, ideologies, methods and resources, and relation to the beauty regime. As the beauty regime expands and beauty becomes increasingly consequential for the (re)production of social inequalities, we expect that beautyism will become a key political action in contemporary political battles over those inequalities.

This chapter offered a first stab at using the tools of social movement theory to study political activism around beauty. Because space constraints only allowed for a superficial empirical treatment

of the beautyvist movements, this chapter explicitly serves as an open invitation for colleagues to undertake studies of beautyvism of their own and enrich our understanding of the way beauty can be employed for political projects. An important avenue for future research is the way beautyvism intersects with struggles over racial and class equality (see also the chapters by Monk, and Vandebroek and Kuipers in this volume). Two directions to study this come to mind. The first direction of study could research how the unholy alliance between the beauty regime and social media influences the success and failures for contemporary beautyvism over racial and class equality. Especially in an era in which social media platforms become private toys of the ultrawealthy with extremist political opinions, it is important to investigate whether these platforms leave space for not just reactionary, but also emancipatory or revolutionary beautyvist movements that also integrate the fight for racial and class equality. This would require interdisciplinary research that connects recent advancements in media studies on platforms (Duffy et al., 2019; Helberger et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2019) with cultural sociological studies on contemporary inequalities (Lamont et al., 2014). The other direction for future studies on the intersection of class, race, and beautyvism could investigate the organization of beautyvist movements and how organizations like Femen include or exclude participants based on their class and racial background. This would require more qualitative methods such as ethnographic approaches that document these organizations from within.

As the Tradwives example shows, the stakes are high: beauty increasingly functions as a battleground in the larger political conflicts between liberal democracy and the forces of illiberalism. Indeed, our chapter shows that beautyvism can also serve sinister political projects in times in which democracy around the globe is under pressure. Studying beautyvism, in particular in relation to the way it serves these antidemocratic agendas, thus offers beauty scholars a novel cultural sociological role in our understanding and tackling of antidemocratic movements.

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Luuc Brans is a Postdoctoral Researcher at KU Leuven with a background in Political Science and Cultural Sociology. In his PhD (KU Leuven, 2024), he investigated the ideologization of fashion, in particular how powerful players in the European cultural field of fashion navigate the climate crisis and sustainability. His research interests are at the intersection of culture, politics, and sustainability.

Sanne Pieters is a PhD Researcher at KU Leuven with a background in Cultural Sociology and Media Studies. Her current research deals with the social shaping of cultural standards by looking at evaluations of physical beauty. In particular, she focuses on the notions of 'natural' beauty and 'fit' bodies and explores how these moralized standards (re)produce social inequalities.

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Beauty and Fashion

Aurélie Van de Peer

1 Introduction

Beauty and fashion both play a significant role in dressed appearances, inequalities, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. Currently, there is wide agreement on the importance of looking good (Kuipers, 2022), and clothes assist in this process of beautifying one's body. At the same time, everyday and scholarly views of fashion highlight the importance of understanding and embodying current clothing trends when dressing. When you fail to translate this expectation for fashionable dressing, you risk ostracization from peer groups (von Busch 2020). This applies to people working in the fashion industry (Entwistle & Rocamora 2006; Mensitieri, 2019) and to consumers who wear what the industry promotes as the next fashion trends (Downing Peters, 2022; Rafferty, 2011).

The interdisciplinary research field of fashion studies, which bridges humanities and social sciences approaches to the study of clothing practices and dressed appearances, has strong roots in dress and fashion history (Breward & Evans, 2005) and in studies of modernity and capitalism (Simmel, 1957 [1904]; Wilson, 2003). This explains why fashion scholars often regard fashion and clothes as inextricably linked. However, sociologists have understood that fashion extends

beyond the domain of clothes. Various societal domains, including science, the arts, and education, are influenced by fashion (Blumer, 1969; Kaiser & Green, 2021, p. 8). When it comes to clothes, the omnipresence of fashion is evident in the idea that no clothing falls outside fashion. This viewpoint, originating from German sociologist Georg Simmel (1957 [1904]), is supported by sociologists Aspers and Godart (2013, p. 186), who state that regardless of one's attitude toward fashion as bodily adornment—whether embracing changing dress styles, attempting to be anti-fashion, or believing one is indifferent to fashion—one “reaffirms its centrality.” Thus, fashion is crucial in thinking about clothing.

Beauty is intricately connected to fashion and clothing. Classic fashion scholarship noted that beauty was a governing principle for fashion, designed to make wearers as physically attractive as possible (Laver, 2020 [1945]). It also expressed concern that the power of fashion could undermine beauty, causing people to dress in “the most ugly and repugnant things” (Simmel, 1957 [1904], p. 544). Despite this intuitive connection, I argue that beauty is not necessarily tied to fashion as a concept nor as fashion applies to change in dressed appearances. The first section, “Fashion, Beauty, and Time,” develops this argument philosophically: the concepts of beauty and fashion diverge due to their distinct relationships with time. Beauty aligns with endurance and timelessness, while fashion aligns with the ephemeral.

A. Van de Peer (✉)
KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: aurelie.vandeppeer@kuleuven.be

The popularity of striving for beauty in dressed appearances can fluctuate. For instance, in the current fashion industry, fashionable clothes are not necessarily considered beautiful; ugly garments can also be in vogue. Moreover, the use of beauty as an evaluation criterion for clothing within the fashion industry has changed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Van de Peer, 2014; 2022). The second section, “‘We’re not really fashion’: Evaluating fashion and beauty,” explores this key message.

The chapter combines insights from classical philosophical literature on beauty and temporality with sociological fashion and clothing literature. In contrast to Irmak Karademir’s chapter that focuses on taste in everyday dressing practices, this chapter explores the fashionable in relation to beauty and dressed inequalities and it analyzes a case study that sits in the luxury fashion segment. A long-standing symbolic boundary within the fashion industry is the hierarchical categorization of luxury or restricted production versus mass-market-oriented products (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1975). Today this clear-cut delineation seems long gone in a twenty-first-century fashion landscape where luxury fashion houses collaborate with mass-market retailers for affordable capsule collections (Rocamora, 2002). Despite this boundary blurring, timelessness and durability remain crucial to the myth of the distinction luxury fashion products afford the consumer (Von Wachenfeldt, 2018, p. 315).

The chapter demonstrates that the temporalities of beauty and fashion are used in a process of symbolic boundary drawing as “tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). It does so, through the use of time as an instrument in a “politics of time,” defined as “a politics which takes the temporal structures of social practices as the specific objects of its transformative (or preservative) intent” (Osborne, 1995, p. xi). Here, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1996, pp. 154–161) notion of “faire date,” or making a cultural object or practice seem dated or belonging to the past, plays a central role in the symbolic boundaries constructed and maintained in the shaping of the meanings of segments of the

fashion industry and of the class-based dressed appearances and identities circulating within. The third section, “Fashion, Social Class, and Exclusion,” zooms in on class-based dressed inequalities and their affective consequences in the experiences of both consumers and fashion industry professionals.

Through a small-scale thematic analysis on the fashion media discourse surrounding quiet luxury dressing, “one of the biggest trends in 2023” (Serdari in Hartmans, 2023), the fourth section, “Quiet Luxury: Dressing more like King Charles,” concretizes the argument on the politics of time invested in the relationship between timelessness and beauty in the contemporary fashion industry. During the summer of 2023, “quiet luxury” was more popular as a search term on Google than “Barbie: The Movie,” the Hollywood blockbuster of the period (Swartenbroux, 2023). Quiet luxury clothes are expensive, with a dress from the popular quiet luxury brand The Row starting at 3000 dollars. The style is defined as “clothing of the highest quality, but also clothing that has timelessness, is sophisticated, and understated” (Serdari in Hartmans, 2023). The creative director of luxury fashion brand Max Mara highlights the importance of beauty in quiet luxury: “clothes [that] frame the wearer’s style and beauty” (Griffiths in Hodgson, 2023). Finally, the chapter explores how the connection between beauty and timelessness in the media discourse on quiet luxury allows its proponents to align themselves with sustainability, because the sustainable fashion literature proposes extended use of clothing as an important consumption intervention (Fletcher, 2016).

2 Fashion, Beauty, and Time

Fashion is said to revolve around change (Wilson, 2003). Seen as an intricately modern social form (Beward & Evans, 2005), fashion is often contrasted with premodern and non-Western ‘costume,’ which is believed to remain aesthetically frozen in time (Taylor, 2004, p. 311).

In comparison with fashion, beauty is less susceptible to change. This viewpoint, rooted in

classical philosophy and lasting well into the eighteenth century (Sartwell, 2022), posits that beauty endures due to its association with the realm of Forms, as articulated by Plato in the *Symposium*. Classical philosophers, from Plato to Aristotle, concur that beauty is not merely in the eye of the beholder. They would thus disagree with other views on beauty proposed in this handbook, such as its cultural specificity and its situationality. Instead, classical philosophers assert that beauty resides in an ideal relation among parts, such as the Golden Section, enabling artists to replicate this model for harmonious proportions. This replication, in turn, allows for the achievement of an enduring quality of beauty in otherwise transient objects. In this context, fashionable clothes may serve as vehicles for conveying elements of beauty. However, the history of philosophy has often considered fashion to do the opposite.

Philosopher Ana Gonzalez (2010) argues that philosophers have scorned fashion for metaphysical and political reasons. Fashion hinders people in developing a cultural incentive toward morality (Kant, 1998). Imitation is what bothers the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant in fashion as “there is still a compulsion to subject oneself slavishly to the mere example which many in society project to us” (ibidem: 7, p. 245). Kant’s expression of fashion as “antisocial human sociability” (1983 Idea 8: pp. 20–21) later inspired Simmel (1957[1904]) to explain fashion as a tension between imitation and differentiation, or dressing to belong to a group or distinctively to stand out. With Kant’s critique, fashion’s so-called lack of individuation contributed to the long-standing philosophical disapproval of fashion, leading to the hierarchical evaluation and moralization of beauty over fashion.

Fashion scholar Carol Tulloch (2010) offers a useful conceptualization with the notion of “style-fashion-dress” to unpack the relationships between these concepts and beauty. Style is considered to be an individual “durable, recognizable pattern of aesthetic choices” (Godart, 2018) through which people construct the self “through the assemblage of garments, accessories and beauty regimes that may, or may not, be ‘in fashion’ at the time of use” (Tulloch, 2010,

p. 276). These dressed stories that people narrate about themselves and the groups with which they identify may or may not be in fashion, or “in flux with time” (Riello & McNeil, 2010, p. 1). Hence, style as embodied individualized beauty bridges what is presented in this chapter as fashion (the changeable elements in the aesthetics of clothes) and elements of beauty in clothes (in the classic philosophical understanding of durable aesthetic patterns that follow a model of harmonious proportions or idealized relations among parts of the human body and its adornment).

In the nineteenth century, philosophers saw fashion as an obstacle to subjectivity or individuation. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche regarded style as the phenomenon through which the individual could retain control of one’s subjectivity in the modern world. Yet style-as-control involved a strong will and was therefore only accessible to people with great self-discipline (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 76). As discussed in the case study, this long-standing philosophical tradition to favor beauty/style over fashion translates in moralizing accounts of fashion consumption where groups who engage in fashion-minded mass consumption are not considered to be part of this tempered and disciplined group of super humans (Hill, 2004).

3 “We’re not really fashion”: Evaluating Fashion and Beauty

In its relation to time, fashion is connected to ephemeral and changing clothing aesthetics. Reading fashion through a temporal lens, being ‘in fashion’ is now recognized as defining “itself in a relational manner to whatever style came before” (Van de Peer, 2014b, p. 334). In other words, the fashionable is dependent on past styles to be recognized by others as ‘on trend.’ Therefore, the old-fashioned does not fall outside the time of fashion but is simultaneous with it. Sociologically, this prompts the question who has the legitimacy to decide what and who is fashion-forward and what and who is backward in time.

In his work on the field of art production, Pierre Bourdieu (1996, pp. 54–161) presented the

notion of “faire date” as a governing principles of fields. Through a gendered inequalities lens, Ilya Parkins (2012) offers a historical example of the operations of ‘faire date’ in the field of fashion production. In their autobiographical accounts, male couturiers (that is, fashion designers) relied on this practice of referring someone/something to the past to claim their own modernity and advancedness in setting trends. For instance, Paul Poiret did so by portraying his female costumers and models as stuck in the past, merely able to follow trends by wearing what couturiers put forth as the new fashions. From an institutional perspective, my research (2014b) described how fashion media performed an important role as the time keepers for the “temporal architecture” of the fashion industry, or the set rhythm of orderly change for fashion trends in fashion seasons and fashion weeks. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the development of the field of fashion production in France relied on the discourse of ‘faire date’ in fashion media to promote the new fashion trends among consumers. The emerging fashion press achieved this by creating uncomfortable emotional consequences for its readers, such as evoking the possibility of shame from being rejected by one’s peer group for not keeping up with fashion trends (Jones, 2004). Consequently, industry professionals engage in a politics of time through the practice of “faire date,” asserting their authority to determine which clothes are “in” and which styles are “out.”

In addition, the question arises about the criteria industry professionals use to explain why certain clothing styles are now reflecting the zeitgeist. Beauty is one of the (e)valuative criteria in the fashion industry used for determining the worth of fashion objects. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its appraisal by industry professionals has significantly changed. Empirical research on the luxury fashion world indicated that fashion professionals, such as couturiers (Parkins, 2012) and fashion journalists working for high-quality media publications like *The New York Times* (Van de Peer, 2022), tapped into a wider fashion discourse that appreciated style as embodied individualized beauty and regarded fashion, or at least too much change in clothes, as

the enemy of style (Laver, 1945, p. 15; Simmel, 1957[1904], p. 544). Until the 1960s, fashion journalists favored beauty in clothes. They connected beauty to a focus on craftsmanship, production process, materiality of garments, and the body of the wearer (Van de Peer, 2014a).

A specific view on temporality was connected to the journalistic praise for beauty in luxury clothes: the linear model of fashion change with its approval of timeless clothes. Designers were expected to gradually build their aesthetic territory, only slowly introducing major changes in silhouette, and always with the aim to beautify the women wearing their clothes (Van de Peer, 2022). In 1979, *The New York Times* reviewed the Missoni collection in Milan favorably because “the clothes had a classic, timeless quality, which is what Rosita Missoni was referring when she said, ‘We’re not really fashion.’ What she meant was the clothes have a style of their own and do not develop a new character every six months” (Morris, 1979, March 26).

In the late twentieth century, beauty became less important for establishing value for high-end clothes (Van de Peer, 2022). In keeping with the fashion industry’s move toward “image-production” (Kawamura, 2004, p. 85), journalists engaged in a process of intellectualization (Van de Peer, 2014a). Beauty in luxury clothes was of importance more as an element for reflection than as a prime evaluative criterion.

Interestingly, in the late twentieth century the fashion world echoed an early twentieth-century cultural narrative of the visual arts. The modernist art aesthetics of the early 1900s turned striving for beauty, especially in its connection to the female body, into a taboo (Steiner, 2002). With their deranged faces and bodies, women were not supposed to look nice in modernist art. In the fashion landscape of the late twentieth century, a similar outlook on beauty shone through. The fashion industry became overtly focused on accelerating the cyclical repetition of historical fashion styles and on brand image over material quality (Crane, 2000; Kawamura, 2004). Moreover, in this climate the luxury fashion world sensed how its former position of authority as trend maker was being challenged, among other

things by innovations in digital media platforms (Rocamora, 2013). Fashion journalists and avant-garde fashion designers reacted by a turn toward an early twentieth-century “culturally modernist discourse” by which they sought to establish luxury fashion as a serious, intellectual, and dematerialized endeavor in search for a return to the former legitimacy of luxury fashion (Van de Peer, 2022). Beauty as a way of assessing the worth of luxury clothes was not in sync with the intellectualization of luxury fashion. Of course, as will become clear in the case study on the 2023 quiet luxury trend, if beauty can fall out of fashion to establish value, it might make a comeback.

4 Fashion, Social Class, and Exclusion

Fashion is closely related to the body, because dress “as an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1) has always been an embodied practice. This entails that social status mechanisms and inequalities are enacted in and through the fashioned body, with one mechanism being the material and/or symbolic exclusion from fully taking part in fashionable and stylish dressing. Fashion studies have a long tradition of mapping these exclusions for different consumer groups and along different and intersecting sociological axes, such as, among others, age, gender, ethnicity, and ableness.

In the realm of representation, the fashion industry engages in exclusionary mechanisms by supporting discourses that either turn a blind eye toward specific groups, such as elderly people (Church Gibson, 2000; Twigg, 2013), or engage in the construction of othering discourses, like historical media discourse on ‘stout wear’ or the more contemporary reportage on ‘plus-size fashion’ (Downing Peterson, 2022). Materially, variables such as among others age, body type, and ableness impact on the access to fashion and stylish clothes (Barry, 2019). This chapter zooms in on the emotional consequences of class-based inequalities in the experiences of female-identifying consumers and fashion professionals

because the literature has so far tended to describe their experiences and because fashion has stereotypically been associated with femininity. Yet, for the sake of clarity of argumentation, this focus does not seek to diminish the importance of an intersectional and more gender diverse analysis of inequalities in dressed appearances (see also Karademir, this volume). The chapter devotes most attention to affective experiences of consumers because empirical studies of class-based inequalities in industry professionals’ experiences are limited so far.

Through the notions of fashion capital (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006) and stylistic capital (Godart, 2023), scholars have sought to understand how resources for following fashion trends or expressing individual dress style are unevenly distributed among groups. Fashion sociologists Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) discuss how fashion professionals embody ‘fashion capital’ to varying degrees, as a combination of social (who do you know in the fashion industry?), symbolic (to what extent do others recognize your social status?), and economic resources (dressing fashionably requires financial assets). Fashion professionals with high fashion capital navigate the industry more easily, such as being invited to exclusive after parties. Due to its embodied state, fashion capital has unequal affective consequences. Those who lack it experience more discomfort, “feel massive pressure” (ibidem, 746) to dress fashionably, and are acutely aware of the significance of appearance for career trajectories (ibidem, p. 748; see also Mensitieri, 2019). If fashion capital is a field-specific iteration of cultural capital, “stylistic capital is ‘taste in action’,” as “cultural capital shapes stylistic capital through [individual] taste” (Godart 2023, p. 102).

How fashion and stylistic capital relate to each other needs further research. For now, we can conclude that field specificity is more akin to fashion capital, while stylistic capital extends beyond clothing into all societal spheres with an aesthetic component. Moreover, the embodied state of these forms of capital impacts producers and wearers of clothes both objectively and subjectively.

Fashion history teaches that maintaining a pattern of fashionable consumption has long been the privilege of economically resourceful classes. Until well into the twentieth century, fashionable dressing was a daily practice for elites, while working-class and lower-middle-class people kept their clothes in use as long as possible and often wore second-hand items (Lemire, 1997). The later twentieth century witnessed the democratization of fashionable goods (Crane, 2000). With the rise of cheap fast fashion in the twenty-first century, economic capital no longer seems to be an obstacle to dressing fashionably for many consumers (Von Busch, 2020; Godart, 2023).

Another change in the twenty-first-century fashion landscape was growing aesthetic fragmentation, suggesting a “grab bag of ideas” (Crane, 2000, p. 161) and the assumption that stylistically ‘anything goes.’ However, this has not ended distinction through appearance but has led to more subtle patterns of exclusion based on cultural styles (Currid-Halkett, 2019). Traditional conspicuous luxury consumption was easily read as class-based markers (Veblen, 1994). This easy-to-imitate form of luxury consumption may have driven a shift toward more inconspicuous consumption as the twentieth century progressed (Currid-Halkett, 2019).

To maintain class boundaries, inconspicuousness is harder to translate into one’s fashion or stylistic habitus due to the subtlety in status signaling, making it appealing for preserving the status quo. Inconspicuousness is only one dimension of contemporary “alternative signals of status” recently unified by consumption researcher Silvia Bellezza (2023) into a framework based on distance from traditional status symbols along axes such as quantity (many possessions/few possessions), time (new/old), pace of life (slow/fast), and aesthetics (beautiful/ugly). We return to Bellezza’s framework in the discussion of the media discourse on quiet luxury dressing in 2023.

Despite the historical increase in access to fashionable dressing (today you can purchase a newly-produced fashionable outfit in a cheap fast fashion store), the subjective sense of unequal distribution of fashion and stylistic capital among consumer

groups points scholars toward ongoing affective inequalities in dressed appearances. Avoiding the stigma of not dressing the right way requires an abundance of fashion and stylistic capital (Godart, 2023). In late modernity, people embrace the idea of individual responsibility for portraying qualities like dressing stylishly or fashionably. Consequently, the late modern fashion experience underscores the affectivity of identification: it is not only “your outfit [that is] out of joint, but it feels like you as a human being belong to the past” (Van de Peer & Lefevere, 2021).

From an early age, a time and space-appropriate fashion and style habitus enables people to feel they belong to a peer group. Conversely, lacking the knowledge or resources to embody it can lead to feelings of ostracization and humiliation (von Busch 2020, p. 21). Such psycho-social mechanisms of exclusion can occur through aggressions, such as school bullying (von Busch & Bjereld, 2016), or through cultural (often classist) discourses like makeover TV shows that signal to specific groups that their dressed bodies fall outside societal stylistic standards (McRobbie, 2004). In these shows, working-class and lower middle-class women are often selected for incorrect dressing and transformed by upper-middle-class stylists who draw on the fashion and stylistic capital of women from upper societal strata.

Working-class women realize that their ‘taste in action’ is regarded as vulgar (Skeggs, 1997). In her research on the intersections of social class and fashion consumption practices, Rafferty (2011) indicated that concerns about ‘not being dressed fashionably’ affected lower-middle-class and working-class women more than their upper-class peers, who exhibited the class-based self-confidence that their style set a benchmark for others to follow. Social class impacts both women’s belief that they should be ‘keeping up with fashion trends’ to be someone and their self-efficacy belief in properly expressing their styled selves through clothes.

Social class is at the forefront of the emotional toll incurred by “micropolitical acts of status

claiming” (Holt, 1998, p. 4) through cultural consumption. Groups rich in economic resources may rely on luxury fashion products’ imagined connection to beauty and durability in this process. Fashion scholar Paula von Wachenfeldt (2019, p. 116) describes “the very foundation of luxury as something distinctive and refined,” allowing elite consumers to build a connection to a historical register, facilitating “a suppression of time” (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 79). For instance, Hermès’ Kelly handbag, named after Princess Grace Kelly, imparts to its wearer the act of “carrying a bag loaded with symbols of power, beauty, elegance, and manners” (von Wachenfeldt, 2018, p. 316). Given that seasonal change is part of the temporal experience of fashion (Van de Peer, 2014b), the image of the unseasonal in luxury fashion (von Wachenfeldt, 2018, p. 316) provides its wearers a sense of distancing themselves from the always accelerating temporality of fashion (see also Bellezza 2023 on slow fashion).

This is the case for one type of luxury fashion consumer: the one moralized in current scholarly debates as the ‘good’ luxury consumer. This group is pitted against luxury consumers who purchase visibly branded luxury fashion goods or “luxury for others” (Kapferer & Bastien 2012, pp. 18–19). Kang and Park (2016) report that this group has no reluctance to acquire counterfeit luxury goods and prefers on-trend branded luxury. Unlike the ‘discreet’ luxury consumer, this group has no interest in socially responsible or environmentally friendly items. The overall moralizing tone less favorable to nouveaux riches consumption practices (von Wachenfeldt, 2018) is striking in luxury fashion consumption research. Much like the working-class and lower middle-class women in Rafferty’s research (2011) who frequently purchase new clothes out of concern for not being fashionably dressed, these trend-oriented luxury consumers face negative judgments for their consumption patterns.

5 Dressing more like King Charles

I analyze how quiet luxury consumption is positioned within Bellezza’s (2023) framework of moving away from traditional status symbols, based on a thematic analysis of 60 fashion media articles on the quiet luxury trend published in 2023 in top-tier media outlets across Europe, the UK, and the US. The corpus reveals three main themes: quiet luxury appeals to ‘intelligent consumers’ who prioritize ‘individualized style over trends’ and ‘sustainability through longevity and timeless appearance.’ These themes delineate the symbolic boundary between exclusive and mass production, through engaging in a preservative politics of time that relies on the temporalities of beauty, style, and fashion to carve out a renewed sense of legitimacy for this type of discrete luxury, aligning oneself with the topic of sustainability.

The television series *Succession* (2020–2024), which follows the billionaire Roy family, whose quiet luxury style sparked interest in this particular fashion trend, emphasized that the subtle, logo-free aesthetic of quiet luxury clothing demands a significant amount of embodied fashion capital. This is tied to an ‘inner circle, semi-secret code [...] a sense of “if you know, you know”’ (Thorp, 2023) in order to be done correctly. At the birthday party of founding father Logan Roy a cousin brings his new date to the party. The young woman has accessorized her outfit with a large Burberry-square handbag, which appears to be a gigantic fashion faux pas according to the elite Roy family, who makes fun of her assumed middle class, social climber lifestyle: “She’s brought a ludicrously capacious bag. What’s even in there, huh? Flat shoes for the subway? Her lunch pail? [...] It’s monstrous, it’s gargantuan. You could take it camping.”

When executed effectively, the quiet luxury aesthetic can be seen as a nod to the lifestyle of the post-French Revolution old money class, who adopted a discreet aesthetic of inherited luxury in response to the ostentatious luxury of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (Steele, 1998), famously articulated by Thorstein Veblen in his

theory of conspicuous consumption. Contemporary consumer research views conspicuousness as a hallmark of traditional luxury goods (Shao et al. 2019). Therefore, with its inconspicuous, logo-free approach quiet luxury dressing by high-status consumers can be understood along the axis of conspicuous/inconspicuous as an alternative status signal (Bellezza, 2023), contrasting with dominant forms of status consumption (Eckardt et al., 2015).

The extensive fashion knowledge required to stay informed is highlighted by the emphasis on high-quality materials. As fashion journalist Vanessa Friedman (2023) writes in *The New York Times*, quiet luxury clothes rely on “plushness of fabric and rigour of line [...] to suggest value.” This admiration for garments valuing “material integrity rather than spectacle” (Hodgson, 2023) is a recurring theme in media reports of quiet luxury consumers as discerning and disciplined in their fashion choices. Wealthy consumers of quiet luxury are portrayed as thoughtful purchasers who buy fewer clothes intended for longer-term wear. For example, one designer offering \$1250 black pants stated that her clientele “seeks pieces that transcend seasons and withstand multiple wears. They desire investment pieces crafted from timeless, high-quality materials” (Fraser, 2023). Restrained consumption in terms of garment quantity serves as an alternative status signal (Bellezza, 2023, pp. 328–330) and aligns with a commitment to sustainability (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Indeed, the fashion press depicts quiet luxury as aligned with the pursuit of a sustainable wardrobe (Swartenbroux, 2023).

Fashion journalists often linked sustainability to extended wear, emphasizing the longevity and durability of clothes enhanced by a timeless aesthetic. Fashion consultant Sean Monahan highlighted this ethos, stating, “spending your money on pieces that will last – even if that means buying less but paying more – that’s something we can all get behind.” He further exemplified this with King Charles, describing him as a fashion icon who still wears overcoats from the 50 s or 60 s. So, “[i]f you actually want to do sustainability, you probably should be dressing more like King Charles” (Thorp, 2023). King Charles

serves as a metaphor for quiet luxury dressing, signaling an alternative status orientation on the slow/fast continuum (Bellezza, 2023, pp. 335–336), distancing consumers from the rapid pace of fashion change. Media reports align proponents of quiet luxury with slow fashion, emphasizing their indifference to trends. However, sustainability in this media discourse primarily focuses on the ecological aspect of extended wear, overlooking ethical issues in production. For instance, Loro Piana, a brand owned by LVMH and featured prominently in the television show *Succession*, has been criticized for exploiting unpaid labor from the indigenous Lucanas community in Peru to produce its \$9000 sweaters (Fox & Holder, 2024), raising concerns about ethical practices in quiet luxury production labeled by Diet Prada as “quiet slavery.”

A third theme centers on quiet luxury enhancing the beauty of dressed appearances and enabling consumers to embody “a timeless look reflective of personal style” (Fraser 2023). Quiet luxury aficionados prioritize classic beauty ideals that for instance refer to harmonious proportions, opting for “streamlined silhouettes, luxurious materials and a colour palette featuring every shade of sombre” (Friedman 2023). Rooted in classical philosophical perspectives on the temporality of beauty and fashion, the emphasis on timeless beauty contrasts sharply with the ephemeral nature of trends, as quiet luxury consumers are believed to eschew trend-focused consumption (Fraser, 2023). Thus, in terms of status signaling, quiet luxury aligns with traditional luxury goods renowned for their enduring beauty.

6 Avenues for Further Research and Conclusion

This chapter explored how the temporalities of beauty and fashion are used in the process of symbolic boundary drawing around the meanings of segments of the fashion industry and the class-based dressed appearances invested within. The case study highlighted that the appreciation of timelessness and beauty in the reportage on the

quiet luxury trend is linked to class-based inequalities and reflects how traditional discourses on luxury fashion that favored beauty are being redefined with alternative signals of status, such as the appreciation of slowness, buying less, and inconspicuousness. By valuing style as individualized beauty and critiquing fast fashion and conspicuous trends, the fashion media discourse seeks to support a symbolic boundary or moral categorization of 'good' and 'bad' (luxury) makers and wearers. Interestingly, this distinction between beauty and fashion aligns with an important pillar of sustainability: durability and extended wear (Fletcher, 2016). Despite the occasional critical remark by the press that buying less does not follow from longevity, such as "does anyone know a person with a €3000 coat who only wears that same coat season after season?" (Garcia, 2023), the media discourse pictures the quiet luxury clothes of the wealthy as enhancing a sustainable consumption pattern. In an increasingly ideologized fashion landscape where sustainability concerns, such as overconsumption, have become more prominent (Brans & Kuipers, 2023), the early twenty-first century appears to be experiencing a process of remoralization of mass consumption. This shift contrasts with the post-World War II era, when the nineteenth-century negative moral connotations of mass consumption had diminished (Hill, 2004).

The case study indicated that beauty as an evaluation criterion within the fashion industry can fall in and out of favor. In the late twentieth century, beauty only to a lesser extent determined the worth of a fashion collection according to the fashion press (Van de Peer, 2022). However, in 2023, when evaluating quiet luxury, beauty appears to be making a comeback due to its alignment with a timeless aesthetic seen as more suitable for sustainability purposes. Future research could further investigate the current evaluative use of beauty in fashion by examining larger-scale corpuses of media texts or practices of fashion and clothing production and consumption. Special attention should be given to how beauty is incorporated into a politics of time that aligns it with timelessness, durability, and sustainability. This focus could highlight an orchestration of evaluative

practices within the broader ongoing ideologization of fashion where political-ideological considerations inform cultural legitimation (Brans & Kuipers, 2023).

Fashion studies established fashion as inherently conflict-based (von Busch, 2020), or as "a competitive psycho-social mechanism that causes styles of dressing to be revised frequently" (Rafferty, 2011, p. 242). Beauty too, as Gabrielle Chanel once said, 'is a weapon.' In its current usage in the politics of time invested in media reportage on quiet luxury dressing, beauty indeed seems to serve the purpose of portraying mass-market fashion consumers through the lens of a nineteenth-century theory of cultural deficit, lacking individuality, beauty, temperance, and timelessness in their consumption patterns (Hill, 2004). Moreover, by repeatedly emphasizing how the timeless beauty of these expensive clothes enhances sustainable fashion practices, the media discourse subtly employs "faire date." This practice relies on alternative status signals, such as slowness and alleged decreased quantity, to inscribe this inconspicuous luxury consumption into the zeitgeist while relegating those consumer groups who do not (sufficiently) engage in sustainability to the past. 'Good' luxury consumers are pitted against other fashion consumers in a process of moralizing them as better type of "consumer who truly places importance on products that last a lifetime" (Hodgson, 2023).

At the same time, this practice of faire date weaponizes beauty by redressing an old elitist discourse with a sustainable image. Future research could explore further how this serves to maintain a long-standing yet crumbling symbolic boundary between luxury and mass-market fashion. It is also worthwhile that scholars consider who benefits from these discourses when viewed through the lens of social inequalities. They can investigate whether the ambitious sustainability goals necessary to address the environmental and humanitarian impacts of all segments of the fashion industry are aided by the use of beauty as an instrument in a politics of time that likely serves preservative intents: again benefitting producers and consumers who have traditionally enjoyed various forms of capital by

offering these groups a moral veneer of being more disciplined, discerning, and sustainable.

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Aurélië Van de Peer is a philosopher and cultural sociologist whose research focuses on the intersections of fashion, time, and sustainability. She is particularly interested in education as a platform for promoting sustainable transformations in our late modern relationship with fashion and clothes. Aurélië is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow supported by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) at the Centre for Sociological Research at KU Leuven (Belgium), where she also lectures on Fashion Sociology. Her work has been published in journals such as *Fashion Theory* and *Cultural Sociology*. Previously, she worked as a fashion journalist and educator in artistic fashion schools.

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Lookism: The Morality of Appearance Discrimination

Andrew Mason and Søren Flinch Midtgaard

1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of when appearance discrimination is morally wrong, and what makes it so. It is an exercise in moral and political philosophy rather than empirical social science. By a person's appearance we shall understand 'the way (or ways) in which the attributes of his or her body, and how it is adorned or modified, are (or would be) perceived visually under standard conditions by those who possess normal visual capacities together with any relevant cultural knowledge' (Mason, 2023, p. 6).

We do not assume or argue that appearance discrimination is always wrong. But certain forms of discrimination are widely, and in our view, rightly, condemned, in part because they involve differential treatment of a systematic sort which often harms and sometimes demeans individuals that share certain traits. Paradigmatic examples include discrimination based on sex and race (or racialized traits). We argue that when differential treatment harms and/or demeans its victims, then there are grounds for maintaining that it is morally wrong, but when it doesn't do so, then it is generally morally unobjectionable.

A. Mason
University of Warwick, England, UK
e-mail: a.mason@warwick.ac.uk

S. F. Midtgaard (✉)
Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark
e-mail: midtgaard@ps.au.dk

In the last twenty years or so moral and political philosophers have thrown important light on the wrongness of discrimination, including lookism. Differential treatment based on people's looks or attractiveness plays an important role in a number of spheres, including education, politics, the criminal justice system, employment, and personal relationships; and it comes with morally regrettable features of the kind that are associated with the more familiar forms of morally objectionable discrimination.

In this chapter, we focus on two contexts in which appearance discrimination occurs, namely employment and personal relationships, and consider when (and why) appearance discrimination in them is morally objectionable. Since we approach the topic from within the field of moral and political philosophy, we focus on the issue of what makes appearance discrimination wrong when it is.¹ Practitioners in our discipline seek to develop principles that may underlie our concrete moral judgements. Both real-life (e.g. legal) cases and hypothetical cases are used. In some of them, we as a society are confident in our considered judgement that this is a case of morally problematic discrimination, e.g. when a selector takes an applicant's skin colour to count against hiring them. In other cases—for example when a selector for a fashion brand selects candidates in part based

¹ The qualification 'when it is' is meant to signify the point mentioned above that we do not assume that discrimination is always wrong.

on their body types or other aspects of their appearance—we are less certain. And precisely in such cases we stand in need of principles that may guide us, that is, assist us in making correct assessments, identifying instances of wrongful discrimination, and thus aiding our struggles to combat morally problematic forms of it.

We begin by presenting a general theoretical background. Next, we consider appearance discrimination and when it is wrong, beginning with appearance discrimination in employment, followed by discrimination in personal relationships. Finally, we conclude and point to new directions for research on appearance discrimination.

2 Theories of What Discrimination Is and What Makes It Wrong

2.1 Disrespect and Demeaningness (Alexander, Hellman and Eidelson)

When is discrimination wrongful and what makes it so? One view is that it is wrongful when the person who discriminates does so because she has a disrespectful belief, namely the belief that her victims are of lesser moral worth. Consider the following statement from Larry Alexander: '[w]hen a person is judged incorrectly to be of lesser moral worth and is treated accordingly, that treatment is morally wrong regardless of the gravity of its effects' (Alexander, 1992, p. 159). So Alexander's view is that discrimination is wrong, when it is wrong, because of the beliefs of the person engaged in it; in particular, the person's belief that those she is discriminating against are morally inferior. But is it plausible to suppose that the wrongness of discrimination has its basis in the discriminator's beliefs?

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen has a counter-example that casts doubt on this, which we are going to adapt (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2006, pp. 182–184). Imagine a racist society in which

there's a drug testing programme that's unregulated. One scientist, A, tests the drugs he is developing on the members of a racial minority, without them being provided with adequate knowledge of the risks involved, because he believes they are inferior so it is morally permissible to test drugs on them without their proper consent. Another scientist, B, believes that members of this racial minority are of equal moral worth, their lives count for the same, but nevertheless tests drugs on them without adequate consent because he is prepared to act in accordance with the racist norms of his society. If what matters for the wrongness of discrimination is people's beliefs about moral worth, and in particular moral inferiority, it would seem that what scientist A does is worse than what scientist B does. But actually it seems the other way round. It doesn't seem that there's any way in which what A does is worse than what B does.

Does that mean that this kind of approach, which focuses on the way in which discrimination may involve attributing less moral worth to its victims, is misconceived? Not necessarily. This approach has been developed in plausible ways by other thinkers. For example, Deborah Hellman's account of what makes discrimination wrong (when it is wrong) is similar in some respects to Alexander's. But for Hellman the problem arises not when discrimination occurs because of beliefs in moral inferiority, or indeed as a result of any intention to treat victims as morally inferior; instead, her concern is with the meaning of discriminatory behaviour, that is, what it expresses. She thinks that discrimination can sometimes express the idea that the victims have lesser moral worth, even if the person doing the discriminating doesn't hold that belief and doesn't intend to treat them as having lesser moral worth. Consider again the case of the two scientists, one of whom believes that the members of the racial minority are of lesser moral worth, whereas the other doesn't, but both test their drugs on them. Hellman would say that both are behaving wrongly, because the behaviour of each sends the message, or expresses the view, that members of this racial minority are of lesser moral worth.

Hellman's view is grounded in a commitment to the fundamental equal moral worth of all persons. This is really a combination of two ideas. First, the idea that persons have *moral worth*, that is, their lives matter morally. Second, the idea that they have *equal* moral worth, that is, their lives matter equally from a moral point of view. The thought is then that people are demeaned whenever they are treated as if they have lesser moral worth, that is, as if their lives matter less than the lives of others. She writes: 'To demean is to treat another as not fully human or not of equal moral worth. To demean therefore is partly an expressive act. One's action expresses that the other is less worthy of concern or respect' (Hellman, 2008, p. 35). So how and when do one's actions, such as an act of discrimination, treat another as morally inferior?

Hellman thinks that two factors are crucial. First, a history of mistreatment that has resulted in the victims suffering from disadvantage or possessing a lower social status. Without an inequality of this kind, a discriminator will not have the power to demean a person or put them down (Hellman, 2008, p. 35ff). Second, the discriminatory behaviour must have a conventional meaning such that it expresses the idea that the victims of it are of lesser moral worth. Sometimes the bare meanings of the words may be enough, whereas at other times the context may be crucial in determining what is expressed by a person's behaviour. Identifying its message may involve complex interpretive judgements (Hellman, 2008, p. 41).

There are other theories that also focus on the character of the act of discrimination rather than its consequences. (These theories in effect all hold that discrimination may be *non-contingently* wrong, that is, wrong independently of its consequences, in contrast to theories that maintain that when discrimination is wrong, it is wrong only because of its consequences, i.e. that it is *contingently* wrong.) Benjamin Eidelson's account of what makes discrimination wrong starts from much the same point as Hellman's, namely the idea that there is a value we have in virtue of being persons and that we necessarily have equally

(Eidelson, 2015, esp. chs. 3–4). In Eidelson's view, this value is rooted in our nature as autonomous beings, that is, our possession of a capacity for self-determination through which we can make our lives, in significant part, our own. In his view, to treat persons with respect, that is, to give them the recognition to which they are entitled, we must treat them as autonomous beings that are of equal value. So, for example, if we treat a person's interests as less important because she is a woman or a member of a racial minority, we are failing to treat her with respect. For Eidelson, unlike Hellman, the wrongness of discrimination is not fundamentally about social meanings. It's about a failure to give due or appropriate weight to a person's moral status in our deliberations.

Let us return to the cases that created a problem for Alexander's account and consider how Eidelson's account deals with them. Recall that there are two scientists, A and B. A believes that members of a racial minority are morally inferior and tests a drug on them as a result, whereas B believes that members of that group are moral equals, but nevertheless tests a drug on them because he acts from racist social norms. What would Eidelson say about them? He would say that in both cases, the scientist is acting disrespectfully, because he is failing to give due weight to the moral status of the members of the racial group on whom he is testing the drug. A doesn't realize that he is failing to do so. And even if B does realize he is doing so, he is nevertheless not giving the weight he should to their actual moral status. Which is worse? That depends. Is A's ignorance culpable? Is B culpable for slavishly following social norms? Is he suffering from some sort of weakness of the will that means he doesn't have the courage of his conviction that members of the racial group are equals? Eidelson wants to say that some elaborations of the example will involve regarding B as showing contempt for the members of the racial minority, rather than mere disrespect. Contempt involves not just disrespect but also wilful defiance, a wilful refusal to give respect (Eidelson, 2015, p. 105), which makes the disrespect worse.

2.2 Harm (Lippert-Rasmussen)

In contrast to the accounts canvassed above, Lippert-Rasmussen's account focuses on consequences: 'an instance of discrimination is wrong, when it is, because it makes people worse off, i.e., they are worse off given the presence of discrimination than they would have been in some suitable alternative situation in which the relevant instance of discrimination had not taken place' (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, pp. 154–155). The harm-based view, one may say, denies that instances of *harmless discrimination*—i.e. discrimination that does not in a relevant sense involve setting back the interests of the discriminatee—are wrong (Feinberg, 1990; Slavny & Parr, 2015). That discrimination involves harm is, on this view, a necessary condition for it to be wrong (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 156). Yet features other than harm (e.g. disrespect) may amplify the wrongfulness of discrimination (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 156).

As indicated by the initial formulation of the harm-based account, ascertaining that a given act is harmful is reliant upon a certain base-line. That is, we need to specify relative to what a person is made worse off following the discriminatory act in question (i.e. we need to fill out the blank in 'worse off than —') (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 157–160). There are various proposals. Yet for our purposes here we adopt the so-called straightforward account according to which we should simply compare the state of affairs in which an agent is subjected to discrimination with the state of affairs in which the agent is not and everything else remains equal. We are interested in, so to say, the difference (if any) that discrimination makes.

The harm-based account needs specification in at least one further respect: we need to be able to weigh harms and benefits to different individuals against one another to say when an act is harmful in a way that bears on its wrongfulness. Whether it is depends in part on its tendency to contribute to producing an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens. Lippert-Rasmussen adopts a version of prioritarianism due to Richard Arneson (1999), according to which:

An act is morally right if, and only if, it maximizes moral value. The moral value involved in an action depends on three factors: (i) the greater the well-being for individuals affected by the act, the greater the moral value, (ii) the lower the level of well-being of those to whom additional units of well-being accrues, the greater the moral value, and (iii) the more deserving those to whom additional units of well-being accrues, the greater the moral value. (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 166)

This is described as a 'desert-prioritarian' account because it is rooted in a form of 'desert-prioritarianism'. The 'prioritarian' bit is represented by (ii). It proposes that in contrast to seeking equality we should be concerned with the plight of the worst off and give priority to them by according more weight to benefits to them. The 'desert' bit is represented by (iii). It indicates that how (un)deserving people are affects the importance of benefiting them. (i) reflects the plausible view that other things equal, how an act affects the well-being of an individual is an important consideration regarding its rightness or permissibility.

The desert-prioritarian view has several virtues as an account of the wrongness of discrimination. First, it is capable of accounting for the fact that 'we tend to consider discrimination worse the more harm it imposes on discriminatees and the worse off they are' (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 168). Second, it justifies our focus on discrimination revolving around certain protected categories (e.g. racialized categories and sex). Such forms of discrimination are typically associated with grievous stigmatic harm (ibid. Cf. Nagel, 1979, p. 102); further, and related, individual acts of discrimination of this sort are the source of cumulative or 'organized' harm (Kolodny, 2023, pp. 141–142; pp. 183–190; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 169).

2.3 Deliberative Freedom, Subordination, and Basic Goods (Moreau)

Sophia Moreau presents a pluralist conception of the wrongness of discrimination (Moreau, 2020; cf. Mason, 2023, pp. 63–69). She focuses on three

features in virtue of which discrimination may be wrong, to wit, discrimination as (i) infringement of certain deliberative freedoms; (ii) subordination; and (iii) denials of basic goods. We present each of these factors briefly below in the stated order.

Deliberative freedom ‘is the freedom to deliberate about one’s life, and to decide what to do in light of these considerations, without having to treat certain personal traits, or other people’s assumptions about them, as costs, and without having to live one’s life with these traits always before one’s eyes’ (2020, p. 77). Freedom of this kind is arguably an important aspect of autonomy (cf. Moreau, 2010). It is aptly illustrated by Moreau’s lead case, that is, *Craig v. Masterpiece Cakeshop* (Moreau, 2020, p. 82). In this case, Jack, the owner of a cake shop in Lake-wood, Colorado, refused for religious reasons to create a cake for a homosexual couple, Craig and Mullins, for their wedding reception. By virtue of this refusal Craig and Mullins were arguably forced to see their sexuality, or others’ (in this case Jack’s) assumptions about their sexuality, as a cost. These assumptions made Jack unwilling to provide them with a cake; something he would not have declined to do had Craig and Mullins been straight. Denials of deliberative freedom of the kind Craig and Mullin faced here are, according to Moreau, what is at issue in many cases of discrimination, serving in part to account for their wrongfulness.

Let’s turn now to ‘subordination’. According to Moreau, ‘[w]hen we disadvantage some people relative to others on the basis of certain traits, either through practices that explicitly single them out or through practices that indirectly disadvantage them, we often seem to be failing to treat them as the equals of others in the sense that we are *unfairly subordinating* them to others, putting them beneath others’ (Moreau, 2020, p. 39. Emphasis in original). As Moreau convincingly brings out, subordination of this kind captures a paradigmatic and disconcerting sort of wrongful discrimination (ibid. Cf. Beeghly, 2018; Kolodny, 2023, pp. 141–142; pp. 183–190). Moreau connects patterns of subordination

to what she refers to as ‘structural accommodations’ where these should be understood as ‘policies, practices, and physical structures that tacitly accommodate a more privileged group’s needs at the expense of the subordinate group or groups’ (Moreau, 2020, p. 42). Sexist and racist structures are cases in point.

The third source of wrongful discrimination is as mentioned the denial of access to goods that are appropriately considered basic (Moreau, 2020, ch. 4). The goods in question are basic in the sense that they are necessary for people’s ability to participate fully and equally in society and to be seen as full and equal participants in it. Moreau’s leading example is indigenous populations in Canada that are in various ways denied access to safe drinking water or such access is not facilitated for them while it is for other groups in society.

Although Moreau’s view is pluralist in the sense that it emphasizes the three sources of wrongful discrimination mentioned, the sources in question should, according to Moreau, be seen as various ways in which people’s (equal) moral worth is not recognized. Moreau’s theory shares this feature with the non-contingent wrongness-accounts of Alexander, Hellman, and Eidelson.

3 Appearance Discrimination in Employment

There are many contexts in which appearance discrimination takes place. We are going to focus on two such contexts, namely employment and personal relationships. This section will examine employment, in particular the process of selecting people for jobs, and will explore what role appearance features may legitimately play in the decisions that are made during this process.

Selection processes generally affect people in the following situations: (i) prospective candidates for jobs deciding whether to apply; (ii) potential future work colleagues with whom the successful candidates will interact; (iii) employers, i.e. those who enter into an employment contract with the successful applicant; (iv)

selectors, i.e. those charged with the responsibility of deciding who should be employed; and (v) customers or clients who purchase the goods or services that are produced or provided by the company who employs the successful candidates. The same person may be in more than one of these situations at the same time: for example, one and the same person may be the employer, the selector, a prospective work colleague, and a customer or client. But we can ask how selecting on the basis of appearance features affects people in each of these situations, and whether their interests are promoted or adversely affected by such a practice.

In order to draw out the complexities involved, we shall focus on a set of difficult cases, namely when employers are seeking to express certain values by selecting on the basis of particular appearance features. These values might be aesthetic, or they might be moral or political, or they might be religious (or they might fall into more than one of these categories). Employers might embrace such values on their own merit. Alternatively, they might be committed to these values simply on economic grounds, because they want to maximize their profits and believe that they have identified a group of customers or clients who are wedded to these values and would be likely to purchase goods or services that are marketed in a way that promotes these values.

These are the four cases that we shall consider:

1. *The Unmodified Body*. A company markets clothes to women who as a matter of moral and political principle are opposed to body modifications, including cosmetic surgery, minor cosmetic interventions (such as Botox injections), and even the wearing of make-up. As a result, they do not employ women who have had breast enhancements, buttock lifts, face lifts, or lip fillers, nor women who are unwilling to come to work without make-up.
2. *Sexual Objectification*. A café targets heterosexual men who like seeing women in tight shorts and low-cut blouses. As a result, women in customer-facing roles are required to wear such clothes, and will not be selected for such

roles unless they are willing to do so and are likely to be judged to look good in them.

3. *The Beauty Ideal*. A company markets clothes to young people who are slim and have toned bodies with unblemished skin. As a result, they want their sales assistants to have these appearance characteristics as well.
4. *Tidy Hair*. A business wants its employees to be well presented with tidy hair. They regard afro hairstyles as messy and unkempt. They think that afro-textured hair should be straightened or cut short and replaced with straight hair extensions. They will not select those with such hair unless they are willing to style it in these ways.

What should we say about these cases? To many readers, it might seem that (1) involves permissible appearance discrimination. It is hard to see how it could justifiably be regarded as demeaning or disrespectful. And it doesn't seem to involve reinforcing or promoting an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens: for example, it is consistent with promoting a distribution of benefits and burdens that conforms with desert-prioritarianism. Nor does it seem to involve reinforcing structural injustices (that is, structures that facilitate an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens) or unfairly subordinating a group.

But we should be wary of simply endorsing appearance discrimination rooted in values that we happen to endorse (or to which we are sympathetic even if we don't share them). Would we say the same about *The Unmodified Body* if the company involved was a conservative religious enterprise, run by a group similar to the Old Order Amish but with trading links to the wider world? We think that intuitions even about this case are likely to be similar: appearance discrimination that is grounded in conservative religious values doesn't seem morally problematic so long as these values don't involve denying the fundamental moral equality of women. (This is, of course, an important proviso and we might worry about the extent to which it is met when a commitment to the unmodified body is rooted in a conservative religion that attributes less power and social status

to women.) Generalizing, there seems nothing objectionable about appearance discrimination in selection decisions when it is underwritten by a company's reasonable values, or their customers' or clients' reasonable conceptions of how to live, where 'reasonable' plays the minimal role of picking out normative commitments that do not deny the fundamental moral equality of any group of persons.

What about (2)? *Sexual Objectification* does seem to involve morally objectionable appearance discrimination. It involves condoning the disrespectful attitudes and demeaning behaviour displayed by customers who objectify the waiters who serve them. The employer may not share these attitudes. They may too regard them as abhorrent but simply be trying to earn a profit from a business where the competition from other cafés makes it hard to do so. But by giving weight to the disrespectful attitudes and demeaning behaviour of their customers in deciding who to employ as waiters, they are condoning these attitudes and behaviour.

Not only are the attitudes and behaviour of the customers who frequent the café demeaning and disrespectful, they also contribute to the production of an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens between men and women, or reinforce the structures that facilitate the creation of such a distribution and thereby subordinate women. That gives us a further reason to condemn selecting waiters on the basis of these appearance features.

The customers' disrespectful attitudes and demeaning behaviour turn the possession of bodies that look good in tight shorts and low-cut blouses, along with a willingness to wear such clothes, into what is called a reaction qualification. A reaction qualification is a genuine qualification. It equips a person to do a job, or to do it well or more efficiently. But it does so in virtue of the attitudes and behaviour of those who will come into contact with her while she is performing the activities that are part of the job (Wertheimer, 1983). The feature that is the basis of a reaction qualification makes a candidate more suitable for the job in question because it is regarded favourably by those the candidate will interact with, or, at least, they will have a positive response to it.

Although reaction qualifications are genuine qualifications, some are illegitimate, in the sense that there is a strong moral reason not to count them when making hiring decisions (cf. Mason, 2017; Mason, 2023, ch. 5). That is, there are relevant moral constraints on when employers, or selectors on their behalf, may take into consideration qualifications of this sort in their hiring decisions. For example, in a racist society whose members would prefer not to be served by Black sales assistants, there would be a strong moral reason for not counting this preference when making appointments to that position, that is, a reaction qualification rooted in these preferences would be illegitimate.

So it seems clear that the appearance discrimination that takes place in *Sexual Objectification* is morally problematic for multiple reasons. Now consider (3), *The Beauty Ideal*. The appearance norms that are reflected in the company's ethos are highly demanding. Their widespread adoption has arguably had extremely harmful consequences, contributing to creating what Heather Widdows has described as an epidemic of body anxiety (Widdows, 2018). Of course, it is not merely the presence of the ideal that generates body dissatisfaction but its role in various practices, such as body shaming, and more generally the phenomenon that has come to be known as everyday lookism (cf. Mason, 2021).

Recall that on a harm-based account of what makes discrimination wrong merely causing harm is insufficient for injustice. What matters is the contribution that a harm makes to the overall distribution of benefits and burden. And in the case of the appearance norms that are constitutive of the company's ethos, it is plausible to argue that the harms to which the company contributes by reinforcing these norms are sufficiently great for the appearance discrimination in which they are engaged to be justifiably considered morally objectionable.

We might also think that the appearance discrimination involved is morally objectionable because it contributes to an oppressive practice. The costs of complying with these appearance norms combine with the costs of non-compliance with them to create an oppressive structure from

which it is hard to escape, and which impairs the autonomy of those governed by these norms—that is, the vast majority of people, though especially women and young people of both genders.

What about (4)? *Tidy Hair* draws attention to the fact that many widely shared appearance norms are biased against disadvantaged groups. Norms governing the shape and size of women's breasts impose additional burdens on women. Norms governing ideal faces place additional burdens on people with certain physical disabilities that affect the symmetry of their faces. Norms that prize wrinkle free unblemished skin are much harder for older people to comply with. Norms governing what clothes are fashionable may place additional burdens on those who are poor or on people who are committed to religious doctrines that involve a conception of modesty that forbids exposing arms and legs. *Tidy Hair* invokes norms governing what counts as presentable hair in a professional context, and concerning what makes hair messy or unkempt, that place additional burdens on members of racial minorities with afro-textured hair.

In many cases, the explanation for why these norms have been adopted and widely endorsed may involve reference to forms of prejudice such as those that animate ableism, sexism and racism. But that need not be the case. It may be that some of these norms reflect or express dispositions that are hard-wired, for example, dispositions that involve preferring symmetrical to asymmetrical faces may be explicable by reference to the evolutionary advantages these dispositions have bestowed (Etcoff, 2011). And it may be that even though some of these norms were originally adopted and widely endorsed because of prejudice of one kind or another, they now float free of those original causes and have been internalized in a way that transcends these origins.

Nevertheless, to the extent that specific dress or appearance codes reinforce or exacerbate disadvantages experienced by groups who are already unjustly disadvantaged in various ways, we might think that appearance discrimination rooted in them is morally problematic because it subordinates these groups. And to the extent that the

adoption of these dress or appearance codes is a result of the preferences of customers or clients who are themselves prejudiced against the groups disadvantaged by these codes, then we might think that the reaction qualifications involved are illegitimate, that is, that there is a strong moral reason not to count them.

So applying the theories of what makes discrimination wrong (when it is wrong) that we considered in Sect. 2 shows that in a range of cases appearance discrimination in the context of selecting for jobs is morally problematic, perhaps because it is demeaning or disrespectful, or involves condoning demeaning or disrespectful attitudes or behaviour, or perhaps because it is harmful in a way that contributes to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens or subordinates a group. But there are cases in which it is potentially morally permissible, for example, when it is rooted in a company's reasonable values or its customers' or clients' reasonable conceptions of how to live.

4 Appearance Discrimination in Personal Relationships

We turn now to consider what role appearance features may legitimately play in personal relationships. By personal relationships we shall mean, for example, 'sexual, romantic, or marital' relationships (Emens, 2009, p. 1312). Discrimination in such relationships—the so-called private sphere—is traditionally regarded as being *less* problematic than it is in other spheres, including in employment (Alexander, 2008; Blake, 2006; Eidelson, 2015; Khaitan, 2015; Lazenby & Butterfield, 2018; White, 1997).

Yet scholars of discrimination have recently argued that appearance discrimination in the private sphere may also be wrong. For example, a preference for attractive partners may be associated with a range of significant *harms*: 'research in social psychology consistently finds that less attractive people have reduced access to satisfying romantic and sexual experiences, and they are consequently more lonely and less happy with these aspects of their lives' (D'Alessandro, 2022,

p. 339; cf. Minerva, 2017). In addition, the reduction of welfare you face by virtue of the feature in question is in the standard case undeserved: the degree to which you can affect your own attractiveness is limited, and it is not as if you yourself have engaged in discriminatory behaviour that reduced your deservingness.

Further, it seems clear that being the victim of appearance discrimination could appropriately be seen as one important way in which a person may be treated as an inferior or be *subordinated* to others in a wrongfully discriminatory manner. That is, it is arguably also problematic from the perspective of Moreau's pluralist account.

Despite sharing apparently problematic features with other forms of discrimination, many scholars persist in thinking that private discrimination is comparatively unproblematic. A case in point is Eidelson. While holding that principles of anti-discrimination apply to the intimate sphere, he emphasizes that they are appropriately abrogated more often here than they are in other spheres (Eidelson, 2015, p. 123). Specifically, the requirement that we should give due (i.e. equal) weight to the interests of members of various groups is, Eidelson suggests, effectively sidelined with regard to an important set of intimate cases, including friendship and romantic, sexual, and marital relations (*ibid.*). He focusses on cases where (a) people's differential treatment is not based on stereotypes or generalizations regarding the discriminatees, and (b) where the differential treatment is not based on animus or outright contempt. His lead case is Michelle who prefers seeing a female gynaecologist 'simply because of her own discomfort or self-consciousness when being examined by a man' (Eidelson, 2015, p. 121). With respect to Michelle, Eidelson claims the following:

what is at issue here is not the weight Michelle gives to the interest of other people, but how she "spends" the weight properly given to her own interests; and within that sphere she does not fail to recognize the equal value of others by giving effect to her genuine preferences, whatever their consequences for their objects, unless the preferences are themselves somehow rooted in a denial of the value of the others. Put another way, no part of being a person

is being desirable as a gynaecologist, so Michelle does not reveal a failure to recognize a male doctor's standing as a person *simply* by failing to desire him as a gynaecologist, even if that is because of his sex. (Eidelson, 2015, pp. 121–122. Emphasis in original)

Eidelson submits that his considerations regarding Michelle generalize to, for example, the question of 'whom to date or marry' where people may act on their preferences such that they differentiate among partners based on, for example, 'body-type' and 'race' (Eidelson, 2015, p. 123). Should we agree with Eidelson here? We make three points that put into question Eidelson's rationale.

The first point pertains to Eidelson's own favoured disrespect-based account of the wrongness of discrimination. Eidelson might be right that a male gynaecologist's standing as a person is not being misrecognized by Michelle when she does not find him desirable as a gynaecologist. Yet it is much less clear that someone who faces a pattern of rejection related to features of their appearance does not in a relevant way face misrecognition as a person. If one is consistently written off as a viable candidate for sexual or romantic relationships because of a certain trait one has, there is a genuine sense in which one does not enjoy equal recognition as a person. One is *stigmatized* in an important respect. Consider Goffman's case of the girl Domenica, which illustrates this point:

I think the first realization of my situation [being blind], and the first intense grief resulting from this realization, came one day, very casually, when a group of us in our early teens had gone to the beach for the day. I was lying on the sand, and I guess the fellows and girls thought I was asleep. One of the fellows said, 'I like Domenica very much, but I would never go out with a blind girl.' I cannot think of any prejudice which so completely rejects *you*. (Goffman, 1990, p. 47. Emphasis added)

To be sure, it would be implausible to suppose that we owe others recognition in the form of dating them; yet one may reasonably think that it is incumbent upon us not to write off others as potential dates on the basis of an appearance feature or a disability (where 'write off' here means taking an appearance feature or disability to *silence* reasons that speak in favour of dating the person) (Midtgaard, 2023; Degn, 2023).

Second, we may focus on reasons pertaining to consequences or harm. Note that Eidelson does not reject the relevance of such reasons, his claim is merely that discrimination is ‘not only contingently...condemnable’ (Eidelson, 2015, p. 72). Now, even if we, as Eidelson does, limit our focus to discrimination that is not based on stereotypes and is not contemptuous, it is striking that the harms to which D’Alessandro gestures persist. The harms are tied to the goods or valuable relations to which unattractive people are denied access as a result of being rejected. Thus on a harm-based account it is difficult not to see the discrimination in question as harmful (and hence potentially wrong). To be fair Eidelson is not insensitive to such consequences. For example, he says that: ‘Writ large, private discrimination has tremendous consequences for social stratification and economic equality’ (Eidelson, 2015, p. 125). Yet Eidelson is keen to stress that while there are morally worrisome consequences of private discrimination of this kind, and that they should in various ways be addressed, there’s nothing even contingently wrong about the private discrimination at issue here.

This brings us to our third point. If the adverse consequences Eidelson focuses on were attributable to structural forms of discrimination relevantly unconnected to individual acts (cf. Glasgow, 2009, pp. 71–77; Young, 2006), the view that there is nothing even contingently wrong about the latter may appear reasonable. Yet his focus is different. He is clear that the structures he is concerned with supervene on a multitude of acts of private discrimination. Once this is our focus, the plausibility of regarding the acts in question as morally innocuous is unclear (cf. Cohen, 1997). They are constitutively and causally related to harmful patterns of the kind Eidelson mentions—harms that may plausibly be associated with discrimination and its wrongness²; accordingly, the acts themselves seem wrongfully discriminatory. This leaves open, though, the extent to which

people can be *blamed* for engaging in them (cf. Cohen, 1997).

The upshot is that there are apparently compelling arguments for regarding at least some appearance discrimination in the context of personal relationships as morally wrong. Yet, there are two important caveats regarding exactly what we are arguing for. First, our key question in this section and throughout is ‘when and why is discrimination wrong?’ This is a different question from, for example, ‘what should the state do?’ The answer to the latter question hinges upon a number of practicalities that we do not consider here. Second, we do not suggest that people have a moral duty to date those regarded as unattractive or that certain groups that feel slighted in the dating world can demand that others date them. This would obviously be intolerably intrusive, and moreover it is hard to see what good it would promote. What we are saying is that there are grounds upon which one may reject others in the dating sphere that are relevantly similar to grounds for rejection that we would elsewhere have reasons to find morally problematic. Accordingly, those grounds are (also in the dating sphere) at least *prima facie*³ morally problematic.

5 Conclusion and New Directions

We have explored how appearance discrimination especially in the contexts of employment and personal relationships can be wrong. It can be so, *inter alia*, because it is demeaning (Hellman); disrespectful (Alexander and Eidelson); because it involves denial of basic goods or deliberative freedom or because it subordinates (Moreau); and, finally, because it is harmful in a way that contributes to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens (Lippert-Rasmussen).

³ This is a term of art suggesting that at first sight or initially something (e.g. a certain act) seems wrong. Yet it is an open question whether it on reflection (or all things considered) is so. Somewhat stronger one may speak about something being *pro tanto* wrong. This implies that there is at least *one* valid reason for finding it so, leaving it open that other reasons may pull in the other direction (making the act not wrong, all things considered).

² Some, including Eidelson, may, we should say, prefer to associate the consequences in question with injustice or oppression, not with discrimination strictly speaking. See, e.g., Altman (2020: sec. 3).

In employment, appearance discrimination is morally objectionable when it, for example, involves sexual objectification, revolves around demanding beauty ideals, and relies on prejudices. Yet it need not be problematic when, for example, it responds to the reasonable conceptions of how to live that are endorsed by customers or clients, including those that value the unmodified body. In personal relationships, some believe that discrimination is comparatively less problematic. We have given reasons to doubt that this is the case.

The questions that the tradition of moral and political philosophy can most fruitfully provide answers to are conceptual and normative (i.e. not empirical). Yet the increasing interest in appearance and appearance discrimination both in philosophy and in empirical disciplines provides an apt opportunity for cross-fertilization. For example, in relation to reaction qualifications one relevant factor in assessing the legitimacy of them concerns the degree to which recipients can control their reactions (Mason, 2017). In that regard, insights from empirical studies relating to the psychological sources of our reactions to how people appear are obviously important.

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Andrew Mason is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Warwick. He has also held posts at the Universities of St Andrews, Oxford, Hull, Reading, and Southampton. He is the author of a number of books including *What's Wrong with Lookism?* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and *Living Together as Equals* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and co-author with Matthew Clayton, Adam Swift, and Ruth Wareham of *How to Think about Religious Schools* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Søren Flinch Midtgaard is an Associate Professor and Fellow at the Centre for the Experimental-Philosophical Study of Discrimination. He works on paternalism and discrimination. His work has been published in journals such as *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, *Theoria*, and *Utilitas*. His work on the chapter was supported by the Danish National Research Foundation under Grant DNRF144.

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