BEYOND THE THIN IDEAL: WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF
AND EXPERIENCES WITH BEAUTY STANDARDS
AND BEAUTYISM

By
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Edward R. Murrow College of Communication

JULY 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to have enjoyed the support and expertise of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family throughout this project. In particular, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Stacey Hust, whose insights and feedback were invaluable and who has spent many hours discussing gender and beautyism with me. Drs. Jessica Willoughby, Kathleen Boyce Rodgers, and Elizabeth Hindman have provided important suggestions and feedback for this dissertation. I would also like to thank Jason Wheeler, Nicole Cameron, and Jaymie Vandagriff for their assistance verifying transcripts and for sharing their perspectives on my research topics with me. Anna Strahm, Davi Kallman, and Nicole Cameron were wonderful editors and cheerleaders. To the countless professors, students, friends, and family members who have provided their insights, support, and kindness to me as I worked on this project, I am truly appreciative.
A substantial body of research suggests that women may experience anxiety, disordered eating, self-objectification, and other problems in response to narrow or unrealistic beauty ideals that are communicated interpersonally and through media. Beauty standard research has tended to focus on the impacts of the thin ideal on college women. Less is known about how women experience and cope with beauty standards related to other features, such as facial structure, or about the impact of beauty standards on women in middle or late adulthood. The present study used schema theory and social cognitive theory to investigate how women aged 25-60 experience, interpret, adhere to, and resist beauty standards. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 women were collected and analyzed from a feminist perspective using thematic analysis. Participants identified two types of beauty standards: the culturally dominant standard, which focused on physical features, and an alternative standard, which focused on psychological features. Participants felt that media and interpersonal communication played an important role in disseminating both beauty standards. They also believed that attractive women were associated with both positive and negative stereotypes, and these stereotypes may have influenced their motivation to be attractive. Weight dissatisfaction was common across the
sample, but participants also criticized or praised other aspects of their appearance. In general, participants believed that society treats women differently based on their attractiveness. However, some were ambivalent about the impact of beauty-based discrimination, or beautyism, in their own lives. The findings have implications for intersectional feminist theory, objectification theory, and anti-beautyism.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Beauty is an important concept in Western culture, one that continues to fascinate and compel many people. In 2010, reality TV show star Heidi Montag received considerable media attention for undergoing 10 cosmetic procedures in one day (Sherwood, 2010 Nov 22). In 2013, model Cameron Russell’s discussion of the unfair privileges associated with being beautiful and society’s unhealthy fixation on unrealistic beauty imagery became one of the most popular TedTalks of all time (“The most popular talks,” n.d.). In 2015, the so-called Kylie Jenner Challenge, in which adolescent girls attempt to emulate Kylie Jenner’s famous pout by using suction to injure their lips and cause swelling, swept the internet (Moyer, 2015 Apr 21). As of March 2019, the Internet forum “Am I Ugly,” where individuals can post pictures of themselves and receive feedback, has 140,000 subscribers (“AMIUGLY,” n.d.). Some public discourse has challenged this appearance focus or attempted to subvert it. For example, in 1995, therapist Sara Halprin published a book in which she revised the folk tale Snow White to illustrate women could embrace their physical attractiveness without worrying about being seen as unattractive. Despite the intense public interest in matters of attractiveness and female beauty, comparatively little academic research has investigated how women make sense of attractiveness and unattractiveness, including how they conceptualize and assess attractiveness, how they are impacted by it, and how they cope with it.

Beauty and Sexism

Objectification theory suggests that society oftentimes reduces women to their appearance and sexual appeal and does not acknowledge their inner states or experiences
Objectification is conceptualized as a form of sexism, in which women as a group are subordinated to men as a group. For example, objectification promotes the idea that women exist for men’s sexual gratification, which in turn is associated with attitudes that support sexual violence (Wright & Tokunga, 2016) and interpersonal violence (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011). Objectification by others can also lead to self-objectification, in which women internalize the objectifying gaze and focus on their appearance (Calogero, 2012). Thus, through objectification, the relationship between women’s attractiveness and sexist subordination can be understood. Attractiveness can also be understood as a female gender role, such that women are expected to tend to their appearance and make themselves aesthetically pleasing (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011).

Attractiveness is indeed a particularly salient issue for women. Women report body dissatisfaction at higher rates than men (Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014; Grogan, 2016) and experience significant pressure to be attractive (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Appearance investment, or one’s preoccupation with their appearance, is greater for women than for men (Cash & Labarge, 2011). Appearance investment is also associated with body dissatisfaction, internalization of societal beauty standards, and more frequent negative affect related to their appearance (Cash & Labarge, 2011). Societal standards for male beauty do exist (Law, & Labre, 2002) and do impact men’s lives (Schuster, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2013), but are beyond the scope of the present study.

The pressure to be attractive is associated with widespread body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2011), which is in turn associated with eating disorders (Brechan, & Kvalem, 2015), depression (Stevens, Herbozo, Morrell, Schaefer, & Thompson, 2017), suicidal ideation (Rufino, Viswanath, Wagner & Patriquin, 2018) and suicide attempts (Mars et al., 2019). To address these
negative outcomes and promote women’s mental and physical health, it is necessary to also address the sociocultural structures that pressure women to be attractive and disenfranchise women who do not meet cultural beauty standards. A clearer understanding of how people define physical beauty for women and how these definitions come to be disseminated and shared within a culture is an important step toward disrupting these patterns. Therefore, this study uses in-depth interviews to explore women’s perceptions of societal beauty standards, their personal understanding of beauty, and how they believe attractiveness impacts women’s lives.

**Beauty is Not Just Thinness**

Beauty and thinness are deeply intertwined concepts in the literature. Considerable research has focused on women’s dissatisfaction with or concern about their weight and the sources of these concerns (e.g., Brechan & Kvalem, 2015; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Samman, Fayet, & Petocz, 2012; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011). A large body of research has also examined the relationship between media consumption and negative feelings such as anxiety or depressed mood, disordered eating, attitudes about women, and attitudes about one’s own body (Andsager, 2014; Cahill & Mussap, 2007; Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2015; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010; Want, 2009). However, existing research tends to focus on the thin ideal, or societal expectation that women be thin, at the expense of other aspects of attractiveness, such as facial characteristics. Thinness and attractiveness are not synonymous and cannot be assumed to involve identical meaning experiences, emotions, or coping strategies.

Many aspects of one’s appearance other than weight contribute to attractiveness. For example, large eyes, small noses, small chins (Cunningham, 1986; Furnham & Reeves, 2006), and large lips (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999) are generally considered attractive in female faces. Research does indeed suggest that many women have appearance anxieties unrelated to weight,
including acne (Gupta & Gupta, 2013; Hanstock & O'Mahony, 2002), facial appearance (Jackson & Chen, 2007; Warren, 2014), and aging (Becker, Diedrichs, Jankowski, Werchan, 2013; Bolonga, 1993). The popularity of cosmetic procedures such as rhinoplasty (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018) also points to the importance of elements of attractiveness aside from weight. However, little is known about how women respond to area-specific body dissatisfactions such as these. For example, although an individual may be praised for losing weight (Ohsiek & Williams, 2011), they may be stigmatized as narcissistic or superficial if they undergo cosmetic surgery to get a “new nose” (Heggenstaller, Rau, Coetzee, Ryen, & Smith, 2018). The present study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing attractiveness and body image more broadly than just weight and weight concerns.

**Beauty Schemas and Communication**

Although some beauty standards likely arise from innate, biologically-driven preferences (Lippa, 2007), culture does play a role in the construction of attractiveness. For example, cultures (Furnham & Baguma, 1994; Swami, 2015) and socioeconomic groups (Swami, 2015) have been found to differ in their weight preferences. Similarly, sexist attitudes (Swami & Tovée, 2013), racism (Collins, 1999, p. 149), and classism (Jackson & Aiken, 2000) may also influence personal or societal beauty preferences. Individual differences in “taste” also exist, such that raters do not necessarily agree when rating a woman’s attractiveness (Hönekopp, 2006). However, there is evidence that individuals tend to agree on the attractiveness of faces in photographs (Peskin & Newell, 2004; Rule & Ambady, 2009).

Schema theory provides a mechanism for understanding how definitions of beauty are constructed, internalized, and disseminated throughout a society. A schema is a cognitive framework that an individual uses to make sense of new situations, objects, or other stimuli they
encounter (Mandler, 1984). The present study describes two types of schemas related to beauty—the culturally dominant beauty schema and alternative beauty schemas. The dominant beauty schema contains the beauty standards commonly promoted within a society, and alternative schemas represent ways of understanding beauty that are inconsistent with the dominant schema.

Much research has focused on the role of media in disseminating societal beauty standards, that is, the culturally—and increasingly, globally—dominant beauty schema (Sarkar, 2014; Yan & Bissell, 2014). Women may engage in social comparisons with media figures, in which they evaluate their own appearance by comparing themselves to media imagery (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social cognitive theory, which describes why individuals sometimes learn from and emulate behaviors they observe in media (Bandura, 2000) is also applicable. For example, a viewer could learn from a television show that wearing makeup is valued and rewarded in society, thus motivating her to wear makeup. Indeed, evidence suggests that media does convey messages about the importance of beauty for women (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). Unfortunately, the standard of beauty portrayed in media is not necessarily realistic or achievable (Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012; McGraw, 2013 Oct 8; Brändlin, 2015). However, comparatively little is known about the potential positive or protective impacts of media for body image. The present study fills this gap by asking participants to describe their experiences with media messages about beauty that they appreciated or considered to be positive, as well as their experiences with media messages that they viewed critically.

Like media, interpersonal communication plays a role in disseminating or reinforcing beauty standards, for example through “fat talk,” (making negative comments to others about one’s own weight, Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2017) or teasing (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Additionally, family members and peers can influence body image
(Jones, 2004; Annis, Cash, & Hrabosky, 2004; Snapp, Hensley-Choate, & Ryu, 2012). However, little is known about the contexts in which these conversations occur or about women’s use of interpersonal communication to perpetuate alternative beauty schemas. The present study examines women’s experiences with interpersonal communication of both the dominant and alternative beauty schemas, as well as their own experiences attempting to influence others’ body image or views.

**Beautyism**

Bias, stereotyping, and discrimination based on physical attractiveness has been conceptualized as “lookism” or “beautyism” by a growing body of research (Sims, 2017; Saiki, Adomaitis, & Gundlach, 2017). The present study uses the term “beautyism” because this term appears more intuitive than “lookism.” Beautyism is generally conceptualized as conferring privilege to more attractive people (Rhodes, 2010). However, there are some contexts where unattractive women may be privileged over attractive women. For example, attractive women may be less favored in masculine jobs that do not emphasize appearance (Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016; Lee, Pitesa, Pillutla, & Thau, 2015). Similarly, attractiveness stereotypes are usually positive, and people assume attractive individuals have prosocial attributes such as kindness and supportiveness (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010; Segal-Caspi, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). However, attractive women can also be stereotyped with anti-social traits, such as being cruel or manipulative (Kalof, 1999). Attractiveness stereotypes could conceivably influence individuals' interpersonal interactions with attractive and less-attractive women, as well as hiring decisions. However, little is known about how women understand attractiveness stereotypes or how these stereotypes might influence their self-concept or desire to be attractive.
Evidence for attractiveness biases and beautyism can be found in many contexts. Mothers’ affectionate and playful behaviors are correlated with the attractiveness of their infants (Langlois, Ritter, Casey, & Sawin, 1995), and adults respond to photos of less-attractive infants with physiological indicators of negative affect (Schein & Langlois, 2015). Physical attractiveness may facilitate children’s social popularity (Krantz, Friedberg, & Andrews, 2001) and protect against bullying (Rosen, Underwood, & Beron, 2011). For adults, attractiveness is positively correlated with income (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009; Scholz & Sicinski, 2015), and some evidence suggests that beautyism exists in workplace settings (Warhurst, Van den Broek, Hall, & Nickson, 2009; Waring, 2011). Taken together, these studies suggest that beautyism should be an important topic for research and social justice. Unfortunately, beautyism has received relatively little research attention.

**Contributions of the Present Study**

It is unknown what readiness exists for anti-beautyist activism among the public. To establish anti-beautyism as a social justice concern, it is necessary to investigate people’s awareness of beautyism in society and in their own lives. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the ways beautyism intersects with other forms of oppression. For example, cognitive, social, and evolutionary psychology are well-represented in the literature on attractiveness biases (Rhodes, 2010; Little, Jones, & DeBruine, 2011), but rarely from an explicitly feminist frame. Although this research is valuable, the lack of a feminist perspective on these issues may represent a missed opportunity for addressing beautyism. I argue that there is a need to explore and develop anti-beautyist research at a level more comparable to body positivity and anti-objectification work, as beautyism is intricately related to both.

Anti-beautyism does not suggest that it is necessarily problematic to appreciate women’s
physical attractiveness or to engage in beauty practices. Instead, anti-beautyism argues that
individuals face unfounded stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination in a variety of
contexts based on their physical appearance. Additionally, anti-beautyism assumes that these
problems are not inevitable and can be changed as cultural attitudes about the importance of
physical attractiveness change. In an anti-beautyist society, physical attractiveness would not
affect individuals’ employment opportunities in fields where attractiveness is not logically
relevant; individuals would not experience bullying, harassment, or abuse based on their
attractiveness; and individuals would not feel that they have to be attractive in order to be valued
in society. However, people’s physical beauty could still be appreciated in its own right.

Qualitative and exploratory research can help to build intersectional feminist theory by
highlighting women’s experiences and perceptions related to beautyism. For example, the role of
objectification in the context of beautyism, where beauty is associated with positive biases, is not
well-understood. The intersections between beautyism and race, disability, class, or other axes of
discrimination are also not well-understood. Additionally, little research has been published
contextualizing challenges to the dominant beauty schema within beautyism. For example, it is
not clear if individuals who embrace a wider standard of beauty also reject the importance of
beauty for women, or simply redefine it. The present study’s qualitative, intersectional feminist
approach to investigating these issues will help to answer these questions and shed light on how
women approach the topic of beautyism.

Research related to women’s experiences of attractiveness and body satisfaction or
dissatisfaction tends to use collegiate samples, which restricts the age range and other
demographic characteristics of participants (Karazsia, Murnen, & Tylka, 2016). The present
study is qualitative and is not intended to be generalizable. However, the study’s inclusion of
participants aged 25-60 provides the opportunity to examine beauty, body dissatisfaction, and attitudes about attractiveness from an underrepresented perspective. The study sample included women who had experienced marriage, divorce, pregnancy, menopause, and the establishment of their careers, among other important life events. Thus, the present study was well-positioned to investigate how physical attractiveness relates to these experiences.

**Overview of the Present Study**

The current study used in-depth interviews to investigate women’s perceptions of beauty standards through in-depth interviews. Broadly, I asked women what beauty standards they perceive to exist, how they came to recognize these standards, how they evaluated their own attractiveness, and what meanings or outcomes they believed women’s attractiveness to have. Chapter one of this dissertation describes how women believe most people define attractiveness for women, and how this societal definition compares to their own. I then describe participants’ perceptions of how the culturally dominant beauty schema is disseminated. Next, I address how participants resisted messages promoting the dominant beauty schema, and how media and interpersonal communication may disseminate alternative beauty schemata. I then discuss the stereotypes participants believe society places on women who perceived to be attractive or unattractive. After this, I detail how women evaluate their appearance and the emotional implications of these evaluations. I then share participants’ perceptions of and experiences with beautyism. I conclude the dissertation with a discussion chapter and focus particularly on the implications of the findings for body image researchers and intersectional feminist scholars.
CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Feminist Methods for Studying Oppression

Feminist research, broadly, assumes that women are subordinated in most societies and that this subordination is maintained by sexist attitudes, interactions and institutions (Acker, 1992). Methodologies used by feminists vary, including qualitative and quantitative techniques (Steeves, 1987) and different levels of focus (including intrapsychic, intrapersonal, and societal) (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). For the present study, I used a qualitative empowerment methodology of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. My methodology was similar to the one described by Kasper (1994)’s study of women with breast cancer and their experiences following mastectomy. This approach includes listening actively with participants, attending to participants’ emotional states and needs, fostering an egalitarian dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee, and allowing the participant to deviate from the interview “script” and express her voice. The interviewer primarily functions as a listener but is also conscientious of his or her participation in the interview and influence on the participant, the conversation itself, and the analysis of data (Kasper, 1994).

This approach has several advantages. Firstly, traditional research methodologies, although essential to feminist aims (Steeves, 1987), by their nature, limit and constrain the already-marginalized voices of women (Kasper, 1994). Further, women’s status in society involves multiple interlinking contexts and processes, as the meaning of “being a woman” and the oppression of women is enacted and re-enacted in a variety of settings (Acker, 1992; Stewart & McDermott, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Qualitative research provides rich contextual information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1988) and thus is well-suited
to describe women’s experiences of oppression and resistance, including experiences of objectification and responding to beauty standards. Further, qualitative research is well-suited for empowerment and is consistent with Gilligan’s notion of a feminist ethic of care (Kasper, 1994). For example, in the semi-structured qualitative interview, participants may be able to voice their needs, conceptualize their experiences, and potentially undergo important identity work or other cognitive-emotional experiences (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

**Philosophical Approach to Data Collection**

**Ethic of care.** Gilligan’s concept of an ethic of care (1982) is relevant to the qualitative interview process. Gilligan’s ethic of care is an explicitly feminist model that charts a trajectory not to abstract principles of justice, but to global interconnectedness and social responsibility (Gilligan, 1982). In this framework, ethical decisions are intended to foster mutually-supportive interactions (Gilligan, 1982). An ethic of care is also needs-oriented and involves identifying and being motivated to address others’ needs (Gilligan, 1982). Matteson and Lincoln (2009) adapted for research contexts Hayes et al.’s (1994) list of ethic of care behaviors in education. Matteson and Lincoln (2009) concluded that researchers conducting interviews with youth can demonstrate an ethic of care by being verbally responsive, encouraging, positive, and “providing humor and fun.” For example, researchers communicated responsiveness to participants by following up on participants’ comments and building rapport (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009). Conversely, behaviors such as ignoring the participant were identified as incompatible with an ethic of care (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009). In the present study, I practiced responsiveness by attending to participants’ emotional states and taking steps to alleviate any distress that participants might feel. For example, if a participant appeared uncomfortable disclosing certain information, I attempted to address the question in a different way later in the interview. If this
attempt was unsuccessful or if the participant appeared very uncomfortable, I discontinued probing on that point. Thus, I prioritized the well-being and autonomy of the participant over the completeness of the data. Although participants generally were quite forthcoming, there were some instances in which I withheld further questioning or probing out of concern for a participant’s emotional state or comfort. For example, I withheld directly asking certain participants to evaluate how they thought others rated their appearance. These participants had spontaneously discussed how they felt others perceived them, although they had not assigned a number value to this perception and would have the opportunity to rate themselves from the perspective of others on the questionnaire. I did not wish to force an additional return to a topic that was for them associated with bullying, harassment, or embarrassment.

Matteson and Lincoln’s (2009) notion of encouragement and positivity were conceptualized in this study as providing opportunities for participants to discuss their personal growth or experiences of empowerment related to body image, why humor and fun were conceptualized as building rapport and putting participants at ease. In this way, the interview process was conducted in a way consistent with an ethic of care. Typically, when a participant shared a difficult experience or expressed sadness, I followed the disclosure with questions designed to either elicit positive affect (for example, asking if there was a particularly supportive person in their life or activity or helpful coping strategy), or to position the participant as a mentor able to help others with similar problems.

For example, Helena expressed significant dissatisfaction and preoccupation with her appearance. She also seemed to place a high value on her professional responsibilities, which included working with students and on her role in her extended family. To help scaffold her to a positive way of confronting her body dissatisfaction, I asked her questions about how she would
respond to a student who was expressing similar dissatisfactions. I also gave her the opportunity to reimagine negative events in a positive way, specifically, to describe how she wished her mother had responded to her weight gain. I framed these questions as opportunities for Helena to share her expertise and interpersonal intelligence, in the form of sharing her comments on how other people should handle these situations and what the best responses would be. I also used these questions as a way of extending Helena’s negative experiences to others, thereby implying that her experiences are common and relatable. In contrast, Robin clearly valued her education and seemed naturally to approach problems in terms of oppression and justice. Therefore, I followed up her disclosures of difficult events with questions about how the prejudices she faced could be dealt with by society at the institutional level.

I did not directly contradict any participants’ evaluation of their appearance, even when I thought they were unduly harsh. This was both out a desire not to insert myself into the participants’ narrative (in other words, a desire to be an objective and dispassionate observer) and a desire not to dismiss participants’ very real feelings and perceptions. Although there were multiple cases in which I viewed a participants’ appearance as more physically attractive than they did (as well as some instances of the reverse pattern), these discrepancies generally were not large, appeared to be attributed to a fear of bragging rather than reflecting their true assessment, or otherwise did not seem to indicate a significant problem with body image. However, as I transcribed and coded the interviews, I realized that there were some instances in which my ethic of care would have been strengthened by questioning participants’ negative self-evaluations.

It is not the researcher’s job (and in fact is counter to an anti-beautyist aim) to compliment every participants’ appearance or counter every negative self-evaluation. Further, some participants might prefer that I remain neutral and objective and avoid evaluating their
appearance in any way. Certainly, there are limitations to how one can remark on someone’s appearance, particularly in a professional setting. Nonetheless, there were some participants—particularly Helena—who I felt would have benefited in a small way if, at the conclusion of the study session, I had said something to the effect of, “By the way, you said most strangers would rank you as a ‘2’ and I was surprised by that, I think you look really nice today.” I did not do this. However, I did at times verbally affirm participants’ self-compliments (for example, if they said they liked their hair).

**Sample**

The study participants included 30 women, by which point saturation had been achieved on the major topics of the interviews (participants’ perceptions of media and interpersonal influences on the definition of beauty, their experiences with body dissatisfaction, and their observations about beautyism). Participants were recruited through the university’s online announcement system, flyers in areas such as community bulletins, Facebook posts on community pages (with the approval of the moderators of those pages), and word of mouth in two towns in Eastern Washington. Snowball sampling was used in an effort to yield a more diverse sample, in keeping with DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree’s (2006) injunctive that samples be relatively homogeneous but exhibit variation on theoretically-relevant domains. Specifically, snowball sampling was used to promote diversity in participants’ age, profession, and marital status. Participants were aged 25-60, as this group is underrepresented in body image literature and can speak to many experiences (marriage, children, entry into a career, aging, etc.) that may relate to women’s body image. Interested participants contacted me through email. Despite efforts at recruiting a more diverse sample, college-educated and White women were somewhat overrepresented. Eighty-three percent of participants were White and all had at least some
college education, compared to statewide rates of approximately 77% of individuals identifying as Caucasian and 68% of adults over 25 having at least some college education (“Washington Population,” 2019 January). Additionally, although I did not ask participants for their religious affiliation or for how they had become aware of the study, snowball sampling appeared to have led to oversampling from two local churches.

Descriptive statistics about the participants are presented in Table 1, and participants are further described in Appendix A. One participant, Ivona, did not take the questionnaire because she did not have time. Additionally, two of the 30 participants declined to provide their age. The average age of the participants was calculated to be 41 years old, with a range of 27 to 60. The Body Mass Index (a measure of body fat that accounts for height) was calculated using the US National Institute of Health’s Online BMI calculator. BMIs of 18.5 to 24.9 are considered healthy by the NIH guidelines (National Institute of Health, n.d.) The average BMI in the study was 29, with a range of 16.8 to 65.1.

Participants’ total household incomes were primarily distributed between $50,000 and 150,000 annually. Twenty-eight of the 30 participants reported their income. One participant (4%) had a household income of less than $25,000. Six participants (28%) had household incomes of $25,000 to 49,999, four (14%) had household incomes of $50,000 to 74,999, eight (29%) had household incomes of $75,000 to 99,999, eight (29%) had household incomes of $100,00 to 149,999, and one participant (4%) had a household income of over $150,000. Participants were highly educated. Of the 29 participants who reported their level of education, sixteen (55%) had postgraduate or professional degrees, ten (34%) were college graduates, and three (10%) had some college experience. Most participants had been married at some time in their life. Twenty of the 30 participants (67%) were married or in domestic partnerships, five
(17%) were divorced and not currently married, and four (13%) had never married. Most participants were White. One participant identified herself as Asian Indian, one as Mestiza, one as “other” but did not specify further, one as Asian / Pacific Islander, and one as White Hispanic. The remaining 24 participants (83%) of the participants identified their race or ethnicity as White.

Participants were asked to evaluate their attractiveness in any manner they chose in the questionnaire but rated their attractiveness in numerical form on the survey, using a 1-7 Likert-type scale, where “1” indicated “very unattractive” and “5” indicated “very attractive”. Table 1 presents the Likert attractiveness ratings that participants believed represented their attractiveness from the perspective of strangers, friends, and romantic partners, as well as from their own perspective. Four participants were single and did not answer the romantic partner perspective.

Table 1

Participants’ perception of how others evaluate their attractiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strangers</td>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>5.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>6.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>4.90</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted, in which I used a list of predetermined, open-ended questions to guide the interview. However, ample room was left for digressions, and I skipped some questions in the interest of time and conversation flow. In addition, over the course of the study I made minor adaptations to the interviews in response to previous interviews. For example, I clarified the question “What sorts of thoughts or feelings do you think most
people have about women who are attractive?” by asking participants to imagine a scenario in which “the average person” sees an attractive or unattractive woman walking down the street. I also began to ask participants directly if they felt tensions between their values of not caring about attractiveness and their actual reactions to other women or their own appearance, after I used this probe in one interview and found that it led to important elaborations. Further, I sometimes asked questions by memory rather than by reading off the protocol, which lead to subtle changes in wording. Interviews ranged from one to three hours, with an average duration of an hour and a half. Interviews were video- and audio-recorded. I submitted all study materials and protocol to the Washington State University’s Institutional Review Board, which declared the study exempt. See Appendix B for the list of interview questions.

Interested participants contacted me through email, at which time I would email them the informed consent form for their review and schedule their interview. I then went over the consent form again with them at the time of the interview and obtained consent. The interviews were structured to build rapport, or trust and comfort, with the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This was accomplished in part by beginning with easy-to-answer, non-sensitive questions and progressively working toward more sensitive issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtre, 2006; Kasper, 1994). The interview also drew on Shultze and Avital’s (2011) description of laddering, in which rich and potentially empowering data are generated by guiding participants to compare, contrast and evaluate the constructs they discuss. Such an approach is compatible with Mills, Bonner and Francis’s (2006) constructivist approach, which highlights the collaborative nature of the interview process and the agency of the participant in this context. After the interview, participants completed a questionnaire of their age, race or ethnicity, height, weight, marital status, number of children in the house, and number of times they had been
pregnant. They were then asked to use a Likert-type scale to rate their physical attractiveness as they saw themselves and, separately, as they believed loved ones and finally strangers saw them. Additional data was collected about their media use, using items from Hust & Rodgers (2018). They then completed Stunkard’s (1983) Figure Rating Scale.

Most study sessions were conducted in rooms that had been reserved on campus or at the local public library. However, some interviews were conducted in private spaces at participants’ requests, such as offices or conference rooms at their place of work. Approximately two weeks after each interview, I sent participants a follow-up email with a summary of their interviews and invited any corrections they might have. A few participants sent back clarifications or additional information, while others did not have further feedback or did not reply. All participants were compensated for their time with a $10 gift card to Safeway, Starbucks, or Subway.

Audio interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher, and a random sample of 25% of the transcripts were verified against the video recording for accuracy by an additional trained researcher. Although the interviews were transcribed verbatim, when reporting the data, I omitted non-meaningful expressions such as “um,” “like,” and “you know” as well as stammered words or “false starts” (such that “I don’t, it’s not really…” would have become “it’s not really”). I did this partly for ease of reading and partly because some participants expressed concern about overusing “you know” or appearing inarticulate in the transcripts.

Given the topic of the study, I was particularly sensitive to the possibility of interviewer effects. I am a thin, White, generally well-dressed and attractive woman and was in my late twenties at the time of data collection. Before the start of the study session, several participants mentioned that they had styled their hair in preparation for the interview, which suggests some self-consciousness generally. However, several participants felt comfortable enough with me to
mention disliking aspects of their appearance that they had in common with me, such as acne and curly hair. Few participants directly commented on my appearance, and when they did so, the comments were brief and isolated. For example, Ophelia mentioned that my outfit reminded her of her daughter, and a few participants paid me an appearance-based compliment.

In addition to interviewer effects, the positionality of the researcher is important to consider with respect to data analysis (Bourke, 2014). I am a heterosexual, cisgender woman from the Pacific Northwest and grew up in an economically secure household with a traditional family structure. I have never been married or pregnant, have never been overweight, have never had a disability, and have never lived outside of Washington State. Thus, I have a limited personal understanding of the experiences or oppressions of LGBT individuals, people with disabilities, people of size, people in poverty, or other ethnic groups, among other modes of difference. To help address this lack of insider knowledge, I tried to create space in the interviews for my participants to discuss their personal experiences, including through topics I had not anticipated, and to review previous research and writings on these aspects of identity.

Analysis

An iterative thematic analysis was used, in which categories of phenomena emerged from and were identified in the data in multiple iterations. During the open coding phase, phenomena were identified and coded (that is, given a label that summarizes their content). In the axial coding phase, these codes were disaggregated, that is, grouped into categories and subcategories based on shared properties of the codes. Selective coding was used to articulate the relationships between these categories, and between the categories and the theoretical frameworks of the study (schema theory and social cognitive theory, with some codes also pertaining to objectification theory and social comparison theory). This approach is similar to Strauss & Corbin’s (1998)
description of grounded theory; however, the theoretical framework was determined a priori and guided the development of the interviews. Nonetheless, relationships between themes that emerged from the transcripts and the theoretical framework were not determined a priori and were articulable only through the final phase of coding. For example, the schemas of beauty that participants identified were determined during coding, and the relationship between each of these schemas and social comparison theory was developed after these schemas were identified.

During the analysis process, Strauss & Corbin’s (1998) method of constant comparison was used to avoid focusing excessively on unique cases or miscategorizing statements. This was accomplished by comparing the specific text being analyzed to what themes or categories have already emerged. Comparisons were also made between participants, as comparing and contrasting cases can help key themes emerge. Further, these comparisons helped me to identify contexts in which certain properties of a category (for example, dissatisfaction as opposed to satisfaction) with one’s body become salient or differ.

Reflexivity was involved in all stages of the study, through memos and consideration of positionality. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have advocated the use of notes, called memos, to help clarify the research process, preserve sudden insights or concerns, and document the research process. These memos can be detailed and serve as an “auditing” mechanism. For example, Kasper (1994) used memos to document her expectations, motivations, intentions, concerns, realizations, conundrums, and experiences related both to the analysis of women’s attitudes toward their mastectomy experiences and to the construction of a methodological paper. In the present study, I used memos throughout the data collection and analysis stages and discussed my experiences with Dr. Stacey Hust, a Communication researcher specializing in gender, health and sexual behavior, parent-child communication, and media.
Although this study is not designed or explicitly intended to assess the impact of identity intersections on these issues, Cole (2009) suggests that researchers should keep intersectionality in mind as they interpret their data. Intersectionality exists when individuals experience multiple oppressed or marginalized identities, for example by being female and Latina and having a disability. These experiences can lead to additive and/or qualitative differences in the experience of each type of oppression (Cole, 2009; Nash, 2008; Steeves, 1987). Throughout the memo-writing and data analytic process, I asked Cole’s (2009) three questions: what diversity exists within the sampled population (here, women age 25-60), what inequalities exist between these sub-groups, and what similarities exist between seemingly disparate groups?
CHAPTER THREE
DEFINING ATTRACTIVENESS

Although beauty is subjective, shared preferences for certain physical features exist, such that individuals tend to agree when rating the attractiveness of people in photographs (Peskin & Newell, 2004; Rule & Ambady, 2009). Such “shared taste,” or perceptions held in common with other participants, are about as important as “personal taste” or individual preference (Hönekopp, 2006). Thus, people appear to have a shared, general understanding of physical attractiveness, although individual differences do exist. This shared understanding can be described via schema theory, in which individuals have a mental template of a construct that they can use to categorize information, including but not limited to unfamiliar objects, events, or ideas. Further, the schema can be used to facilitate processing of new information, which gives people frameworks with which to understand events and other constructs (Mandler, 1984). A beauty schema, therefore, is an individual’s understanding of what is and is not physically attractive in an individual. In the present study, the term “beauty schema” refers specifically to female beauty, as men and women’s physical attractiveness is evaluated in different ways (Fink, & Penton-Voak, 2002; Komori, Kawamura, & Ishihara, 2009).

Individuals’ perceptions of the attractiveness of female faces appear to be partially rooted in biology. Traits that can function to signal individual’s sex, youth, and health, and thus are potentially adaptive from an evolutionary standpoint, appear to play a role in perceptions of attractiveness. For example, neotenous features (that is, features perceived as “cute” in juveniles that are preserved in adulthood) are generally viewed as attractive. These include large eyes that are spaced widely apart and a small nose and chin (Cunningham, 1986; Furnham & Reeves, 2006). Additionally, features viewed as more expressive are also generally viewed as more
attractive. These include high set or arched eyebrows, a large smile (Cunningham, 1986; Borelli, & Berneburg, 2010) and large pupils (Cunningham, 1986). Other facial characteristics found to increase women’s attractiveness include symmetry and averageness, a flat middle face, and large lips (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). Factors aside from facial structure also play a role in how humans typically perceive women’s attractiveness. For example, clear, smooth skin (Kościński, 2007; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999) and hair that is shiny (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999) and long (Swami, Furnham, & Joshi, 2008) increase attractiveness ratings, as does youthfulness (Henss, 1991).

Culture and other non-biological factors also play a role in the perception of attractiveness. Thus, what is viewed as attractive in one culture and time may not be considered attractive in another. Among Westerners, a low waist-to-hip ratio, slim body, and large breasts are typically rated as more attractive (Furnham & Baguma, 1994; Singh & Young, 1995), but intercultural variation in these preferences exists even among Western countries (Furnham & Baguma, 1994). Additionally, non-Westerners oftentimes prefer heavier women (Furnham & Baguma, 1994), in stark contrast to Western culture’s fixation on thinness. Ideology may also influence perceptions of attractiveness. For example, Western men’s sexism predicts their preference for larger breasts (Swami & Tovée, 2013). Further, it has been argued that White supremacy has led to the devaluation of African physical features, including dark skin (Collins, 1999, p. 149). Thus, sexism and racism may influence people’s schemas for how the ideal woman should look. Beauty schemas may also be influenced by classism, in that they favor cues of wealth and social status. For example, the contemporary Western preference for tan skin may be related to the use of tanning as a status symbol (Jackson & Aiken, 2000). Similarly, there is some evidence that clothing affects perceptions of attractiveness through status cues, as well as
through the presentation of the body (Hill, Nocks, & Gardner, 1987). In this way, non-biological factors such as racism, sexism, and classism influence how individuals define physical beauty. Finally, acknowledging that perceptions of attractiveness are partially motivated by biology does not logically require these biological tendencies be immutable, unaffected by environmental factors, or without individual variation.

Within a given society, the general set of expectations about what is and is not physically attractive for women can be termed the *dominant beauty schema*. This schema includes both universal and socially-constructed preferences for women’s physical appearance and varies between cultures. However, correlational research suggests that the dominant beauty schema evident in Western media is prevalent in non-Western societies as well, in association with the globalization of mass media (Yan & Bissell, 2014). For example, exposure to Western television was associated with greater preferences for thinness among Fijian adolescents (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, Gilman, 2002). In the present study, the term dominant beauty schema refers to societal beauty standards as identified in previous research (for example, Sarwer, Grossbart, & Didie, 2003) or by the present study participants. Although the focus is on beauty in Western culture, dominant beauty schemas from other cultures will be discussed as well, as some participants contrasted American beauty standards with beauty standards from other cultures.

Schemas are not static entities but are subject to change as incoming information challenges the individual’s understanding of a construct. Two key processes describe these changes: *assimilation* and *accommodation* (Piaget, 1977; Miller, 2010). In assimilation, individuals use an existing schema to make sense of new stimuli. For example, an individual may internalize the dominant beauty schema, and over the course of their life may incorporate stimuli such as new fashions, celebrities, or aspects of physical appearance into this schema. In
this way, the individual conceptualizes these new stimuli within a preexisting schematic framework. In accommodation, the individual encounters a stimulus that their existing schema is inadequate to categorize or describe. In such a case, a separate schema is developed to make sense of the new stimuli.

The present study investigated women’s understanding of the dominant beauty schema (which they may or may not internalize) and their own individual beauty schemas. Participants described two competing schemata for defining female beauty. They perceived the dominant beauty schema as focusing on physical features, but oftentimes used assimilation or accommodation to transform the dominant schema into one focused on psychological features. The dominant and alternate, beauty-as-psychological schemata were in tension with one another. Although the beauty-as-psychological schema was oftentimes framed as more inclusive and empowering, both schemata can be applied in objectifying and discriminatory ways.

This chapter provides a description of the culturally dominant beauty schema that individuals in the present study identified or reflected in their definitions of attractiveness. This schema presents a gendered understanding of beauty that intersects with prejudices such as heterosexism, racism, ableism, ageism, and sizism. Using this definition of beauty, the extent to which individuals can control their own physical attractiveness is limited or uncertain. Next, I examine the ways in which participants assimilated psychological features of beauty into the dominant beauty schema or created new accommodation schemas based on psychological features. Finally, I discuss the tensions that emerged between dominant and alternate schemata and the implications of the findings of this chapter for objectification theory and beautyism.

Culturally Dominant Beauty Schema

To begin each interview, I asked participants how they personally defined physical
beauty or attractiveness for a woman. I next asked them to compare their definition to others’ definitions. Some participants also described certain features as attractive at other points in the interview, for example when describing a friend they found beautiful. The physical features that individuals reported were attractive to themselves or others included facial characteristics, skin and hair quality, body shape and weight, hygiene and grooming choices, age, race, health, and physical abledness. However, despite my explicit use of the word “physically” in the question, all participants described at least one psychological feature as being part of their definition of attractiveness.

The physical features that participants described in their personal definitions and in their descriptions of societal beauty standards tended to match the characteristics identified in past research as contributing to attractiveness. Eyes were particularly important to participants’ discussions of both personal and societal definitions of attractiveness. The women discussed eye size and position in a manner consistent with previous literature, which suggests that large, widely-spaced eyes are more attractive (Cunningham, 1986; Furnham & Reeves, 2006). For example, participant Frances suggested that in general, “size of the eye, shape of the eye, that kind of stuff, yes, I think absolutely people do evaluate those kinds of things in terms of beauty.” Additionally, more than half of the participants listed their eyes as an attractive or favorite part of their appearance, and/or compliments about their eyes as their favorite compliment. Eyes were therefore not only important, but were socially acceptable to compliment (as opposed, perhaps, to more overtly sexual or private body parts, such as breasts).

Research has also suggested that women with fuller lips are viewed as more attractive (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). Consistent with this, some participants suggested that larger or fuller lips are generally considered attractive. For example, Tess recalled hearing college
students discuss the beauty of a particular women’s lips. She said:

   I just love listening to students because even among women they are looking at each other and they say ‘Oh but why is she attractive, oh let’s look at, oh look at her lips, it’s her lips.’ They look and analyze the Facebook pictures.

Thus, Tess witnessed multiple people not only sharing their appreciation for lips, but also discussing with each other the role of lips as the source of some women’s attractiveness.

   Although some research suggests that facial symmetry is attractive (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999), other authors argue that symmetry has no effect independent of facial feature averageness (Baudouin & Tiberghien, 2004). In the present study, Annie was the only participant to cite symmetry when evaluating her own appearance. Some participants mentioned symmetry in their definitions of attractiveness, and two people indicated awareness of literature on symmetry and facial attractiveness. Specifically, Helena and Rowan both suggested that they thought they had heard or read in studies that symmetry is important in attractiveness and that this might therefore be included in their definition of beauty. In contrast, Violet felt that her preference for symmetrical faces was “instinctive.” Thus, it appears that some people feel aware of their personal preference for symmetrical faces, while others merely feel they have been told that such preferences exist. In the latter case, symmetry may be associated more accurately with people’s perceptions of the dominant beauty schema than with individuals’ actual preferences.

   Also consistent with previous research on the popularity or perception of tanning (Banerjee, Campo, & Greene, 2008; Chang et al., 2013), participants tended to prefer tan skin. For example, Kim said, “I always liked my hair, and I like that I tan pretty easily, so I’ve got a more golden tan…I’m just glad I’m not pasty white or whatever, so I like that about myself.” In this way, Kim not only appreciated her tan skin, but also denigrated pale skin. Previous research suggests that attitudes toward pale and tan skin may be rooted in cultural associations between
skin color and socioeconomic status (SES), such that tan skin is valued in cultures where it is associated with wealth and devalued in cultures where it is associated with manual labor (Swami et al., 2008). Consistent with previous research (Fink, Grammer, & Thornhill, 2001), skin quality was discussed as well, with participants describing attractiveness as involving clear, clean skin. This is consistent with previous research findings that skin quality influences perceptions of physical attractiveness.

**Waist-to-hip ratio.** Some research suggests that a small waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is important when evaluating the attractiveness of female bodies, although this preference is not applied equally to or by every individual (Kościński, 2014). This means that in general, individuals rate women’s bodies as more attractive if they have a waist that is narrower than their hips (Singh, 1993), and a ratio of .7 is generally preferred (Del Zotto, & Pegna, 2017). WHRs are independent of weight, but instead describe the shape of the body. In other words, the WHR does not indicate if the individual is thin or heavyset (Singh, 1993). Because the WHR includes only measures of the waist and hips, even a small ratio is not necessarily indicative of an “hourglass” figure, where the bust and hips are the same size. The preference for a small WHR is uniquely associated with ratings of female attractiveness, although weight also affects attractiveness ratings and is subject to greater interpersonal variability (Furnham, Petrides, & Constantinides, 2005). Some researchers have argued that the preference for a small WHR has evolutionary origins, serving as a secondary sex characteristic (that is, a characteristic of post-pubertal females) and a marker of fertility (Singh, Dixson, Jessop, Morgan, & Dixson, 2010). The WHR is not a strong indicator of medically-defined obesity (Neovius, Linne, & Rossner, 2005). Because WHR is uniquely associated with attractiveness and is a secondary sex characteristic, it is a distinct phenomenon from weight and has attracted much research attention (Furnham,
Given the importance of the WHR in attractiveness literature (Streeter & McBurney, 2003), one might expect participants to discuss body shape extensively when describing the ideal body. Indeed, participants did discuss societal ideals regarding body shape in a manner consistent with the literature. For example, Tess said people usually define attractive women as those who “have the perfect measures, like having 90 60 90, so small waist, big boobs, big buttocks.” Further, participants identified that such a shape was especially important for heavier women. Frances referred to the hourglass shape as compensating for heaviness in the plus size model industry when she said, “if you’re a plus-size model you still…have a good hourglass shape, which means your belly is smaller than your boobs or your hips.”

However, participants did not extensively discuss the shape of the body, especially relative to the amount of attention the WHR is given in the literature. When defining female attractiveness or describing their own attractiveness or body worries, twelve participants mentioned the proportion between the waist and some other body part (hips, buttocks, breasts, or shoulders). Of these twelve participants, only two specifically focused on the ratio of waist and hips, without reference to an overall “hourglass” figure. For example, Dawn said that she had “a fairly small waist-to-hip ratio and that’s considered classically attractive, so I’m happy about that.” Discussions about the proportionality of waists were generally described in terms of societal or personal preferences for hourglass shapes. For example, Ophelia said that in high school and junior high she had heard her peers praise women with hourglass shapes, and Frances said, “I sometimes feel like the hourglass shape is very beautiful.”

Breast size, another well-known component of attractiveness (Czerniawski, 2012), was also relatively absent from the interviews. Western men and women tend to prefer medium or
large breasts (Dixson, Grimshaw, Linklater, & Dixson, 2011; Lynn, 2009; Zelazniewicz, & Pawlowski, 2011), and breast augmentation is the most common cosmetic surgery in the United States, with more than 300,000 procedures performed in 2018 (American Society of Plastic Surgery, 2018). In the present study, 17 of the 30 participants mentioned breasts in their interviews. Annie and Pippa both described societal expectations that breasts be large but not “too large.” Tess felt men expected Colombian women, and women in general, to have large breasts. However, not all participants placed a high value on large breasts. For example, Lucy and Bonny spoke derisively of “fake boobs,” and Ophelia thought her small breasts had aged better than large breasts would have. Molly had a breast reduction for medical reasons and reported feeling completely unconcerned with what the size or appearance of her breasts would be post-surgery. In summary, participants’ comments about body shape and attractiveness matched the existing research but were not central to their discussions of attractiveness, particularly when describing their personal definitions. This discrepancy may indicate that participants assimilated a greater range of WHR ratios into the dominant beauty schema, and thus saw a wide range of body shapes as attractive. Alternatively, it may indicate a lack of conscious awareness of or ability to articulate WHR preferences.

Stigmatized Appearances and Physical Attractiveness

Social stigmatization refers to the ways in which a society identifies certain groups and holds negative attitudes against these groups (Link & Phelan, 2001). For example, individuals may face stigmatization on the basis of their obesity (Brewis, 2014), disability (Lalvani, 2015), age (Azulai, 2014), race (Kang, DeCelles, Tilesik, & Jun 2016), sexual orientation (Saewyc, 2011), or gender conformity (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2013). These characteristics also have visible cues or aspects—for example, obesity is directly visible, and gender nonconformity may be
expressed through hair or clothing. Previous research has suggested that dominant beauty standards perpetuate stigmatization by excluding certain marginalized groups, for example by deeming pale or “white” skin as attractive and dark or “black” skin as unattractive (Hunter, 2013). The following section describes societal definitions of beauty as it relates to well-known societal stigmas, including those based on weight, disability, socioeconomic status, age, race, and heterosexual femininity.

**Weight.** Heavy people are stigmatized in Western culture. Some individuals report viewing obese individuals as bad, lazy, stupid, worthless, or unmotivated (Puhl, & Heuer, 2009). Overweight teens and children are more likely to be bullied (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014), and adult overweight women report receiving hurtful remarks (Eisenberg, Berge, Fulkerson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012) and workplace discrimination (Randall, 2012). This stigmatization is not universally evident, as across cultures, individuals who are of a lower socioeconomic status tend to prefer heavier body sizes (Swami, 2015). The thin ideal refers to the expectation, prominent in Western culture, that slenderness is attractive for women and heaviness is not (Thompson & Stice, 2001). The thin ideal dominated the participants’ discussion of beauty, although this was more evident in participants’ discussions about body image than in their definitions of beauty. Some participants reported having been exposed to the mentality that their attractive face made up for their heavy, and therefore unattractive, body. For example, Annie said of a plus-size celebrity she admired, “her face is not what you would say like ‘Oh my god beautiful,’ which a lot of times, [with] fat women they’re like ‘Oh well at least your face is pretty’ so she doesn’t even have that.” Similarly, Florence recounted that her dad’s comments about her having “a pretty face, but” was “fully ingrained” within her. The phrase “You have a pretty face, but” meant that her face was attractive, but her (at the time) heavy body was not. In
this way, Florence’s father taught her to separate her facial attractiveness from her bodily attractiveness.

In addition to the perceived dominance of the thin ideal in society, some participants included thinness in their personal definitions of attractiveness and were explicit in their endorsement of certain body types. For example, when asked to describe attractiveness, Robin, who had a BMI of 65\(^1\), answered “a woman who is pretty fit.” For Kim, with a BMI of 27, being “height-weight proportionate” was especially important part of attractiveness, as was looking “fit.”

Nonetheless, several participants across a wide range of BMIs (low 20s to low 60s) rejected thinness as a physically attractive feature. In other words, they deemphasized or removed the thinness criterion evident in the dominant beauty schema, thus allowing the inclusion of heavier bodies in their beauty ideals. For example, Ivona (who did not report her BMI metrics, but was slender) repeatedly suggested that “people with curves, women with curves are more beautiful than a stick thing.” Emma (with a BMI of 24.5), who also had a self-reported history of eating disorders with some ongoing weight concern, said “I think women look good like when they have full hips, which is not really normal, I suppose, that’s not usually the ideal.” Thus, Emma demonstrated a partial rejection of the thin ideal that she had once internalized.

Participants included health in both societal and personal definitions of attractiveness, often in ways that may have served to reframe the thin ideal as a preference for physical health. For example, Florence described what she finds attractive in others as “being in a right size

\(^1\) An index of body weight that is standardized across height, here measured by participants’ self-reported height and weight and calculated through the US National Institute of Health’s Online BMI calculator, BMIs of 18.5 to 24.9 are considered healthy by the NIH guidelines (National Institute of Health, n.d.)
body...In my mind, what a right size body is somebody that looks healthy and fit. So not too skinny, not too big, but just like in a right size body.” Similarly, Ginny identified a subtype of attractiveness that was “healthy attractiveness, that they’re just physically fit.” More generally, Jillian said, “I feel like beauty is being healthy,” and included sleeping in her description of health practices. However, participants’ references to physical health tended to focus on weight and weight-managing behaviors, such as exercising or avoiding sweets, thereby rendering health and thinness synonymous.

Muscularity also emerged as an aspect of attractiveness, which similarly have served to reframe thin ideal acceptance as health-focused and unrelated to societal beauty standards. Dawn, Emma, and Frances were particularly interested in musculature. Dawn said that although her husband did not find “washboard abs” attractive for women, she herself did. She also admired the effort that women put into attaining “that level of fitness.” Dawn’s quote suggests that the male gaze—even of her own partner—did not dictate her own idea of beauty for a woman. Emma said, “I used to like women looking strong before that was a popular thing… I always thought like Oh that looks good, you know, that’s something I would like to look like.” Frances’s preference for muscular women was more specific than a general appreciation for evidence of physical fitness. She said, “This is bizarrely specific, there is nothing that is more amazing to me than a very well-chiseled deltoid and bicep combination.”

All three of these women were physically active, and reported feeling concerned about their weight at times. For example, Frances indicated that her interest in attending a gym had started as a cover for her pursuit of thinness, saying, “While it looked like I was taking care of myself it, in hindsight it was trying to find my own way of obtaining that ideal body, of being skinny, of not having too much body fat, all of that.” Emma had a history of over-exercising and
restricting her diet to the point of fainting but had recovered from this self-described eating disorder while retaining a drive for thinness and interest in fitness and musculature. Taken together, these comments suggest that for some women, interest in fitness may be intended as a “healthy” reframing of pathological weight management techniques or as a pathway to recovery.

Both lay and medical professionals often assume that medically-defined fatness is inherently and universally unhealthy, but actual evidence to support this position is lacking (Burgard, 2009). In fact, many obese individuals are metabolically healthy and do not have the health problems associated with obesity, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes (Muñoz-Garach, Cornejo-Pareja, & Tinahones, 2016). In the present study, participants frequently associated thinness with health and heaviness or obesity with unhealthiness. For example, Winn expressed concern that popular discourse about body shaming and celebrating “curvaceous” bodies might lead some individuals to embrace a body ideal that is “too large and unhealthy.” Participants’ emphasis on health when defining beauty, and their association of thinness or “fitness” with health, suggests that reframing the thin ideal as a health issue may still result in stigmatizing heavy women as unattractive, without actually promoting inclusivity or health.

Further, the interpretation of health as attractive in and of itself has implications for the acceptance or rejection of the thin ideal, disability, and the intersections of these topics. Participants framed the “healthy” criterion as a rejection of societal beauty standards and a more meaningful, attainable form of beauty. However, the popular assumption that to be “overweight” is to be unhealthy, combined with the valorization of health, can contribute to the stigmatization of heavier people (Jutel, 2006). Further, participants’ perceptions that disabled people are viewed as less attractive may exacerbate this stigmatization for individuals who are both overweight and experiencing disability or health problems. Definitions of beauty that focus on health may
exclude individuals who have mental or physical disorders or illnesses. Conversely, it is possible that the stigmatization of people with mental or physical disorders (Kowalski, Morgan, & Taylor, 2017) may contribute to the inclusion of physical and psychological health in the definition of attractiveness.

Although participants celebrated fitness and physical health (and thinness as a presumed marker of health), some comments provided evidence that people stigmatize eating disorders. One participant\(^2\) was highly uncomfortable discussing her past issues with weight concern and unhealthy weight loss techniques, which she deemed excessive and embarrassing. Additionally, Daphne, who self-identified as underweight and attributed this to medical issues, shared multiple stories of being criticized or bullied for her presumed eating disorder. She said:

> What I don’t think a lot of people realize is you get stigmatized [for being skinny] just as much as if you’re considered fat by societal norms...it’s not normal to just be skinny in our culture anymore. People who are thin can’t just be thin, they must be unhealthy, they must be doing something to maintain that physique, and if they go to the gym it’s because they over-exercise. If they’re too thin and you don’t see them eating a lot [people assume] it’s because they’re anorexic.

In this way, Daphne critiqued the notion that every thin woman has an eating disorder. She also expressed annoyance and offense at these unwanted, impolite comments about her supposed eating disorder. Her comments, together with participants’ discussions of fat-shaming suggest beauty may be a no-win situation, wherein women are judged or insulted if they don’t meet standards and if they do. Further, Daphne’s description of thin-shaming has implications for how we understand the stigmatization of mental illness, specifically eating disorders. Unwanted comments like those Daphne described receiving, which included being called unattractive because of her thinness, could conceivably contribute to women’s use of health and fitness

\(^2\) whose pseudonym I will not disclose because of her obvious embarrassment and anxiety revealing this information
regimens to hide pathological weight maintenance behaviors. Her discussion of the stigmatization of fatness and thinness did not include a critique of the stigmatization of women who are in fact suffering from eating disorders, but rather the assumptions made about whether an eating disorder is present.

Disability. Several participants suggested that people may view disability as unattractive and problematized this bias as a cultural phenomenon due to discomfort with difference. Frances and Winn explicitly included able-bodied or “less disabled” in their descriptions of societal definitions of attractiveness. Isobel recounted her shock at witnessing an acquaintance’s daughter breaking an arm on a playground only to have her mother’s first response be, “Oh, I hope she’ll still be pretty!” This anecdote reveals both the importance the mother placed on her daughter’s beauty and the mother’s assumption that a damaged arm would be unattractive. Other participants discursively linked or compared disability with attractiveness, by elaborating on the stereotypes or stigmatization associated with disabilities when asked questions about people’s reactions to unattractive others. For example, when Tess argued that it’s a “waste of time” to make assumptions about people or treat them differently based on their physical appearance, she spoke of:

[T]he struggles of women that are beautiful, and the struggles of women that are not so beautiful or that have a disability or that have an eye problem or that cannot walk or something like that.

In this quote, Tess volunteers a connection between beauty and disabilities, presumably because of their shared visibility and stigmatization. Other participants linked disability to beauty not just because disability can be visual, but because it is related to evaluations of beauty. Charlotte’s explanation of how her childhood hospital stays had informed her definition of attractiveness implicitly linked illness or physical difference with how beauty is evaluated,

I would go to [hospital] eight times a year, spent a couple weeks at a time in a hospital
Charlotte’s quote suggests that before her hospital experience, she had considered beauty to have to do with what you look like. Further, it implies that people in a hospital—that is, those experiencing physical problems—may not be seen as beautiful by physical definitions under the dominant beauty schema.

Robin, who used a walker, has strong emotions about these perceptions, referring to her stigmatization as part of her “deep hurt.” She said that people with disabilities “have it twice as bad,” because no one wants to go on a date with a woman with a walker and “leg that won’t work right.” However, Robin felt that people denied this reality and claimed not to care about her disability. Instead of acknowledging the ableism she faced, people instructed her to develop a positive self-image. Robin’s response to this was that she already had developed a positive self-image, and simply wanted people to acknowledge the ableism she had encountered from her father, online dating sites, and people in general. “Unless you find a very special person, you’re gonna be looking for God’s love your whole life because you’re not gonna find love with regular people,” Robin said. “That’s the reality, and nobody wants to admit it.” Robin’s comment is significant because it expresses society’s reluctance to acknowledge ableism in the context of attractiveness and because it links attractiveness to social acceptance. Further, her discussion of how working on her self-image could not change how other people view her underscores her perceived lack of personal agency related to attractiveness. Although appreciating one’s own appearance may offer benefits, it cannot necessarily repudiate appearance-based stigmatization or exclusion.

**Socioeconomic status.** Some participants suggested that appearance and wealth are related. For example, Daphne repeatedly suggested wealthy people invest in their appearances more than people living in poverty do and attributed this to the importance of appearance in
status and identity within wealthy people’s social groups. In contrast, Molly and Lucy both described not having been able to afford fashionable clothing growing up. Ophelia and Helena suggested that weight and financial status are connected via access to gyms and certain foods, such that those who are less wealthy cannot afford the exercise facilities or health foods that might help them lose or maintain weight. Helena had experienced this in her own life, gaining weight after transitioning to a lower-paying job. In this way, definitions of attractiveness that appear egalitarian and under the control of the individual, such as “taking care” of oneself or looking “healthy,” may in fact privilege individuals high in SES.

Further, several participants argued that high socioeconomic status (SES) is viewed as attractive in and of itself. For example, Frances said, “I think the higher class somebody looks the more attractive they are, in general, because as a society we pursue wealth, we pursue higher socioeconomic income statuses.” Robin, who felt marginalized as a disabled and overweight older woman, critiqued social status and conformity to middle-class norms for driving the definition of the ideal body. She said that middle and upper-middle class families tend to be physically active, with children attending the YMCA “from the time they’re born” and playing on soccer teams, and parents who work out. Of these middle-class families, Robin said, “they’re all into this physical fitness and how you eat and how you look, and if you don’t look that way, you’re sort of marginalized tacitly.” Thus, bias against lower-SES individuals may be expressed in definitions of attractiveness that necessarily and purposely exclude them.

Age. Research suggests that ageism, or negative attitudes toward older people, can negatively impact women’s body image (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Participants in the present study suggested that society defines attractiveness as youthful, and that this has implications for older women’s body image and beauty practices. Annie complained that advertisements tell
women “you need to put on some beauty cream or you’re gonna have an old face, [shocked noise], and that’s the worst, you know.” Nina said that women in contemporary media “always have to be beautiful, they always have to be youthful.” Similarly, Lucy commented, “I hate to see the older generation get sucked into thinking they have to look younger than they do. I think a lot of women are afraid to get older, and wrinkles aren’t bad. If you wanna cover them up that’s fine, [but] gray hair isn’t bad.” Some participants also internalized or shared in this youth-oriented definition of beauty, as when Nina suggested, “I think naturally your skin changes, you get gray hairs, you lose some of that youthful you know, and obviously I don’t think anyone loves that.”

However, markers of age were not universally devalued. Several women commented on the growing popularity or acceptance of gray hair. Pippa, who had gray hair, said, “It’s kind of funny right now because my hair is not colored, and I’m seeing all this junk on Facebook and in all these treatments are going to get hair that looks like this.” Like Pippa, Gwen perceived gray hair to be currently in fashion. She said, “I see more and more women not, or men, not coloring their hair or letting it be whatever it is.” Aside from this fashion for gray hair, women’s comments on youth and aging suggest that age, like weight, health, and disability, may be an aspect of oneself that is stigmatized as unattractive and unacceptable.

Race. In addition to being thin, healthy, non-disabled, and young, societal beauty standards dictate that the ideal woman is White. Paleness was not required or even desired for Caucasian women, as Carrie observed, “I realize some people really value white skin, most Americans value tan skin.” However, participants noted beauty standards that generally value light skin over dark skin. For example, Violet, who was from Bangalore and who had lived in a variety of non-Western countries before coming to America, complained about her family’s
commentary on her tan: “I come here, had my baby, finished my Master’s, went home for a
vacation, and two of my aunts, the only thing they could tell me was ‘You’ve grown so fat and
dark!’” Autumn, a White woman, mentioned Eurocentric beauty standards and elaborated, “I feel
like you know there’s kind of a standard that you have to be skinny, you have to be light-
skinned.” Just like societal standards dictate that darker skin is attractive on White women but
not on other ethnic groups who are associated with dark skin, Annie suggested that Western
beauty standards value full lips for White women but not in other ethnic groups associated with
full lips, such as Black women, whose lips may be stigmatized as “too full.”

Some participants argued that preferences for blue eyes reflect a racist standard of beauty.
White participants Annie and Bonnie were also aware and critical of societal pressures for
women to use skin lightening products, as Bonnie described in the case of a Sudanese model.
She said the article was about the model’s refusal to bleach her beautiful dark skin. Bonnie had
been pleased to see that most of the comments on the article were positive, but some people
wrote things like “The person that told you that [to bleach your skin] was absolutely right.”
Similarly, Annie described “gross” beauty standards that include being White and having blue
eyes. Jillian was also critical of beauty standards that celebrate whiteness and blue eyes. She
recounted the following about her sister, in which Jillian referenced Toni Morrison’s book about
a Black girl with an unhealthy longing for blue eyes. She said that her sister had a tendency to
tell Jillian’s son “You’re so pretty with your blue eyes, where’d you get your blue eyes, they
come from the Blue Eyes store?” Jillian asked her sister not to do this because it was “this Toni
Morrison thing, The Bluest Eye, I read that book.” However, her sister couldn’t “help herself”
from complimenting the boy’s blue eyes. Jillian’s concern for her son and the phrase “she can’t
help herself” portrays racist beauty standards as insidious and difficult to overcome.
Participants also suggested that beauty standards could vary by culture or race. Several women explicitly labeled the societal beauty ideals that they were most acquainted with as being “Western” or “White.” For example, Pippa said, “I think it’s [people’s definition of beauty] predominantly Caucasian, blond or light-colored hair, or you know the whole blond-haired blue-eyed [raises fingers in ‘air quotes’] “European” sort of ideal.” Participants of color, as well as White women who had lived in predominantly non-White countries for traditional or missionary work, described different ethnic groups as each having a standard of beauty that was applicable to them. April, who is Vietnamese-American, felt that she had two separate beauty standards which applied to people, an Asian one and an American (and, implicitly, White) one. She said:

I have kind of the two standards, because my dad and I would watch a lot of Chinese shows or whatever and all of their all of their people also looked a very certain way. So like I feel like there is this Asian beauty standard and this American beauty standard. I judge Asian people according to that one and then I judge everyone else according to the other one.

April’s discussion of the role of media in communicating beauty ideals for Asians suggests that these different beauty schemas are rooted in cultural, rather than innate, preferences.

Additionally, April’s grandfather, who emigrated from Vietnam, expressed concern that his daughter might adopt the grooming practices he associated with White people and thus “be like them.” He said:

“Don’t highlight your hair and be like them, that’s not attractive, the black hair is attractive and like the eyebrows are attractive.” They’re like, “Don’t remove all of your eyebrows like those other people.”

In addition to his implied concerns about assimilation and ethnic identity, his comment also reveals the importance her grandfather placed on the relative attractiveness of White American and Vietnamese beauty standards.

Holly also felt that different beauty standards exist for different ethnic groups and suggested that each has a corresponding body type. She said White models are expected to be a
“stereotype,” specifically, “tall and thin.” In contrast, African American women could be “curvy and muscular” and Asian women were “cute and little and everything about them is petite. Holly’s comment associated the “stereotypical” feminine body ideal with White women and positioned body ideals for Black women as less restrictive, something Black women are “able to be.” This alternative ideal is both traditionally feminine or sexualized (“curvy”) and traditionally masculine (“muscular.”) In contrast, Holly described Asian women with emphasis not only on their (perceived) relative smallness, but on the femininity of their smallness, with words like “cute” and “petite.” Thus, the stereotypical body ideals that Holly described may align with racial stereotypes of White women as the norm (“stereotypical model”), Black women as sexual (Watson, Robinson, Dispenza, & Nazari, 2012) but unfeminine (Cooper, 2010), and Asian women as girlish or cute (Nam, Lee, & Hwang, 2011).

Three participants spoke of beauty standards related to “exotic” features, such as dark eyes. Nina, who was White, endorsed this standard. She said, “I love a really ethnic-looking, like a dark hair or you know really dark eyes, that looks kind of exotic.” The Western construction of the “Exotic Other” has these negative implications, including fetishization and sexual objectification (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). Frances and Tess were critical of beauty standards related to “exoticness.” Frances, who is White, said:

We have this conception of kind of a stereotypical Middle Eastern complexion. It’s a little bit darker than pale white, as being exotic and therefore attractive, but if your skin is too dark then it is seen as less attractive by a lot of people. Again, it goes back to whiteness being quote ‘normal.’

Frances’s comment suggests that “exotic” beauty standards suggest that Western notions of “exotic” beauty reflect racism and ethnocentrism rather than inclusivity. Tess, who identified as a Mestiza Colombian, spoke critically of media’s tendency to sexualize and exoticize Latina women. She said, “The screen is sending a message about...how to exoticize this kind of beauty.”
When men exoticized her, she explained, they assumed she was sexually permissive, or were unwilling to recognize her ethnicity when they perceived she did not fit their stereotype of Colombian women as voluptuous. To some extent, beauty standards of “exoticness” may also be applied to European-Americans. For example, Nina, who spoke of her appreciation of “exotic” and “ethnic-looking” beauty in the form of dark hair and eyes. Later in the interview, she suggested her half-Spanish stepdaughter did not need to wear makeup because of her ethnicity. Nina said, “She’s part Spanish and so she just kind of had darker skin...she was just very naturally beautiful, and she didn’t really need anything to like enhance what she had.” In this way, Nina’s praise of her Hispanic daughter’s appearance was similar to her praise of “exotic” and “ethnic” beauty. The extent and implications of applying “exotic” beauty ideals to Southern European women is not well understood and requires future research.

Exposure to multiple racial or ethnic groups and beauty standards may have impacted how participants perceived others’ appearances. For example, Violet attributed her tendency to look at faces rather than bodies to her experience as an immigrant who had lived in five countries. She explained that when going to a new country, she initially had trouble telling non-Indian people apart, and therefore learned to pay close attention to facial features. She also felt less capable of assessing the attractiveness of non-Indian women (but not men) than she did assessing the attractiveness of Indian women. This contradicts previous literature, which has found that race of the viewer or the target does not have a large influence on interrater agreement when rating facial attractiveness (Coetze, Greeff, Stephen, & Perrett, 2014). It may be that cultural differences in women’s beauty practices or grooming account for Violet’s difficulty evaluating women’s appearances, as her ability to evaluate men’s attractiveness was unaffected by race.
**Heterosexual femininity.** Perceived gender conformity was viewed as attractive and included both self-presentation and the perceived femininity of facial features or body shapes. Beauty is a gendered phenomenon, one more closely associated with women than with men. Women are expected to maintain an attractive appearance and be subject to the male gaze. Indeed, objectification theory suggests that an important form of sexism is the overvaluing of women’s aesthetic and sexual appeal and undervaluing of all else about them (Moradi & Huang, 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that the dominant beauty schema included culturally-defined markers of femininity, particularly hair. Hair was mentioned by all 30 participants and emerged as an important component of attractiveness and grooming choices. Pippa described the gendered importance of hair when she said:

In some cultures, hair is a big deal. It’s like it defines you. It can tell, you know, you’re from this tribe not that tribe because of how your hair is. As women, we put a really high value on hair.

Although participants expressed personal preferences for short hair or straight hair, long, curly or wavy hair was more frequently cited as a cultural expectation. Masculine or androgynous facial features are also frowned on in the dominant beauty schema for women. For example, Florence stated, “I would think that the [hypothetical] feminine woman might be seen as more attractive than the butchy [masculine] woman.”

The association between hair, femininity and beauty also emerged in participants’ discussion of hair color. Specifically, blondeness was associated with femininity. In conjunction with this association, participants also linked blondeness with whiteness. Although participants did not specify personally finding blond hair more attractive than other colors, they did mention blondeness as a societal beauty expectation, often in association with blue eyes, being Caucasian, and being thin. For example, Nina evoked the image of a “size 2 or you know, perfect blonde
hair” woman representing the ideal societal beauty standard, and Tess said, “North American girls, how men see them from down there [Colombia] when they go there, so the stereotypical view is the blonde, blue-eyed, very white skin.” Molly did not cite blondeness in her definition of attractiveness, but repeatedly, discursively linked blondeness and thinness with attractiveness, such as in the description “I thought was perfect, she was a cheerleader, you know blonde, she looked cute, petite little thing.” Similarly, Ophelia described her sister as “just darling, little southern Californian blonde cute skinny girl, you know…. In this way, participants associated blondeness (and, implicitly, whiteness) with a delicate, implicitly feminine build. Descriptors like “cute” and “darling” further denote feminine qualities.

Participants’ descriptions of societal beauty standards also included gender-normative behaviors. They argued that behaviors and traits associated with femininity are generally viewed as attractive, while those associated with masculinity are viewed as less-attractive. Frances, whose hair was long at the time of the interview, felt that when she had short hair she was treated not only as different, but as unpleasant. She said that people assume short haired women are “aggressive,” “bitchy,” and other “negative stereotypes. “[People] assume that you embody more masculine characteristics that are undesirable in a female,” Frances explained.

Frances’s comment suggests not only that women with short hair may be perceived as masculine, but also that they may experience hostile sexism for deviating from the traditional feminine role. Ambivalent sexism theory posits that women who are viewed as feminine are generally held in positive regard (benevolent sexism), while those who do not conform to feminine gender roles are held in contempt (hostile sexism) (Glick & Fiske, 1996). From this perspective, women who do not meet societal beauty standards may experience more hostile sexism, as Frances described. Frances said, “I think people interact with you based upon how
attractive they think you are and how close to their social expectations you are, for gender specifically.” The nature or rigidity of gender stereotypes may by region within the United States. Jillian said that in the American South, female teachers were reluctant to express their concerns to male board members because to do so would be “rude,” and “that’s really not pretty, that’s not attractive.” She added, “it’s hard to convey how beauty is perceived versus your behavior and how it’s tied together” in the South. She related that gender norms regarding beauty and assertiveness or passivity led Southerners to “hate” Elizabeth Warren but “love” Melania Trump. She also expressed that “loud” lesbian women could be accepted in the South, but only to the extent they conformed to that particular social stereotype and were similarly unwilling to “show up at that school board thing” (challenge men in power).

Personal hygiene, clothing choices, and other aspects of self-presentation—hereafter referred to as grooming choices—were also related to the gendered nature of beauty and the notion of women as the fairer sex. Participants described the role of grooming choices in perceptions of femininity and attractiveness, as in Florence’s comment “the gender presentation is something where I think there’s judgment or stereotype around women and beauty or attractiveness too.” Similarly, Molly said “that’s the really big thing in the South is a lady is a lady and you look like one.” This link between grooming choices, femininity, and attractiveness had the effect of associating beauty itself with femininity. For example, Emma commented:

I guess a lot of men are attractive too, but I always feel like...men are the stem, and women are the flowers, and there’s a huge variety and it’s easier to see the variety in women. It’s not easy to tell the difference between stems. Stems look kind of roughly more or less the same...I think women are more variety of beauty.

This perception has implications for benevolent sexism, in which women are stereotyped in ostensibly positive ways that function to justify their oppression. In benevolent sexism, women are viewed favorably when they adhere to gender roles but are punished when they
deviate from these roles. Thus, the greater cultural appreciation for the beauty of women in general is paired with greater stigmatization for women who are not perceived as beautiful (Franzoi, 2001). Emma’s comment also reveals a devaluation of men’s physical beauty—their attractiveness is evident, but less noticeable and less interesting. Such a response is in keeping with associations between men’s perceived romantic or sexual value and their non-aesthetic qualities, such as wealth (Wang et al., 2018).

In summary, participants identified aspects of physical beauty for women that match the dominant beauty schema. This schema prioritizes thinness and traditional feminine gender roles, as well as whiteness, poverty, and able-bodiedness. Thus, the dominant beauty schema contributes to the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Some participants attempted to redress the exclusionary nature of the dominant beauty schema by assimilating other features into it, such as health, or downplaying the importance of other criteria, such as thinness. In this way, participants attempted to widen the boundaries of beauty so as to include more women or reduce pressure to achieve certain standards. However, this assimilation into the dominant schema was not always successful and does not necessarily entail reduced belief in the importance of physical attractiveness for women.

**Attractiveness and Controllability**

Participants would often discuss attractiveness in terms of self-presentation and grooming choices, rather than facial features or other less-controllable visual characteristics. Grooming and attractiveness were closely tied to each other, as is seen in Isobel’s statement that in society “the more put-together you are the better, the more attractive you are.” Conversely, grooming choices were often discussed in terms of professionalism, appropriateness, or self-care rather than, or in addition to, beauty. She said that she associated makeup with professionalism more
than attractiveness, and that people are taken more seriously and treated more nicely when they
wear makeup. “Women are supposed to wear makeup,” she said. April’s comment suggests that
women are expected to undergo appearance management to be “taken seriously,” and that this
practice has been at least partially divorced from its root origins (as cosmetics are designed,
advertised, and generally intended to increase women’s attractiveness). Reconceptualizing
beautifying practices as professionalism may thus mystify or obscure the importance of
attractiveness for women in the workplace and the societal expectation that women adhere to
beauty norms.

At the same time, treating grooming and attractiveness as synonymous can also lead to a
view of attractiveness as controllable or even as a personal responsibility. For example, when
asked if her life might have been different if she had been more or less attractive, Gwen replied
that because she had worked in a conservative work environment, she might not have gotten a
job if she had not dressed “like I wanted the job.” Her attractiveness “might have gotten in the
way” if she had dressed inappropriately for an interview. Gwen’s comment implies a relationship
between self-presentation, attractiveness, and appropriateness, in other words, looking like you
“want the job.” It also presupposes that clothing choices, rather than facial features or other
aspects of the body, determine her attractiveness.

Similarly, Pippa argued that unattractiveness, considered separately from attractiveness,
was controllable, partly through weight management. She said:

I think it [avoiding being physically unattractive] would just have to do with that self-
care. If you’re overweight and your body can’t do what you ask of it, and you do have a
lot of health issues because of that, that’s not taking care, that’s not making the best you,
that’s not taking care of that vessel so you can do that good in the world.

Like Gwen, Pippa viewed unattractiveness as potentially controllable and as reflecting attributes
that might have bearing on one’s behavior and activities. Thus, the way in which participants
understood attractiveness as controllable could conceivably have an unintended consequence of supporting beauty-related biases.

Ambiguity about how specific features contribute to judgments of attractiveness may also relate to participants’ level of awareness of beautyism or commitment to anti-beautyist stances. Previous research has also identified some aspects of physical attractiveness that were minimally discussed or entirely absent in the participants’ discourse. Specifically, there was relatively little mention of the proportionality of facial features, facial flatness, cheek shape, or chin size, although these have been found relevant to perceptions of beauty (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). This discrepancy could imply a lack of conscious awareness of the role of facial features in attractiveness. In contrast, participants were very aware of weight and body shape when discussing attractiveness.

Participants’ perceptions of beauty as subjective and intangible, together with the vagueness of the participants’ physical descriptions of attractiveness, suggest some ambiguity in their understanding of attractiveness. This ambiguity could have implications for how participants come to understand the social consequences of attractiveness and for how they interact with others. Some research suggests that individuals positively stereotype attractive others to psychologically justify or make sense of their initial desire to be friends with attractive people, rather than positive stereotypes leading to such a desire (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010). Other research, investigating racial biases, suggests that the ambiguity of evidence being evaluated increases the likelihood of making racially-biased decisions (Livinson & Young, 2009). These participants’ emphasis on intangible aspects to physical attractiveness, as well as their apparent difficulty or reluctance articulating what makes someone physically attractive, creates space for ambiguity and may therefore mask the beauty bias. For example, Gwen’s
argument that individuals should “look like they want the job,” combined with April’s association between makeup use and appearing professional, suggests a potential barrier to an anti-beautyist stance. It is possible that some employers may interpret women who do not apply cosmetics or engage in other beauty practices as not looking like they “want the job,” consistent with Annie’s anticipation of someday having “someone who supervises me tells me [not wearing makeup] is unprofessional.”

**Beauty-as-Psychological Schema**

Participants could also respond to the perceived shortcomings of the culturally dominant beauty schema by creating an accommodation schema, in which women’s physical attractiveness included or was restricted to psychological features. In the alternative schema that emerged from the interviews, physical features were minimized or absent. This accommodation schema was often explicitly framed as more empowering and less superficial than the dominant beauty schema. However, the accommodation schema was itself fraught with tensions and potentially stigmatizing boundaries that paralleled the dominant schema. Participants’ understanding of what features make a woman attractive were varied and complex, often revealed tension between societal beauty standards that focus on particular features and alternative definitions that were potentially empowering. Some participants suggested that unattractiveness does not exist, as beauty can be found in every person and object. For example, near the end of the interview Jillian said, “I just feel like all people are beautiful, you just have to see that person and then they’re beautiful.” Jillian also suggested that while some people may be viewed as ugly by “human” standards, living things from toads to humans can be “beautiful” and “perfect” without meeting a particular standard. In this way, Jillian framed beauty as existing outside of a physically-defined context and as more abstract, or perhaps spiritual, while still associating
beauty with worth and perfection.

**Psychological and spiritual features.** More frequently, participants responded to the question “How do you define physical attractiveness for a woman?” by identifying psychological features in addition to or rather than any actual physical ones. Out of 30 participants, only six (Robin, Violet, April, Autumn, Kim, and Helena) started their definition of attractiveness with an unambiguously physical feature, while an additional six (Florence, Winn, Charlotte, Gwen, Isobel, and Carrie) first listed a feature that could be related to affect or psychological features rather than physical ones (a smile, for example). Each of the remaining 18 participants began their definitions with an entirely psychological or comportment-related feature. For example, Emma stated that “my real belief about attractiveness is who you are on the inside.” This beauty schema would not deemphasize the importance of attractiveness but would instead deemphasize the importance of physical features of attractiveness. Similarly, Blair revealed a preference for psycho-spiritual rather than physical features as the basis of attractiveness. She said, “People have told me that [tearing up] I shine. I like that one, because it’s more of the inside being able to be seen from the outside. I like that.” In this way, the accommodation schemata that some participants developed represented a more meaningful or values-driven definition of physical attractiveness.

Although the participants did describe the physical aspects of eyes as appealing, they also discussed eyes in a manner consistent with a focus on psychological features. For example, they viewed eyes revealing a person’s humanity, character, or feelings. For example, Nina and Florence both defined beauty as a light in someone’s eye. Lucy stated, “I’m always attracted to eyes, male, female, whatever ‘cause you can see and feel a lot, so if a physically or a person isn’t beautiful their eyes, you can see a lot in their eyes.” Some participants also spoke of eyes as a
sort of family heirloom and therefore valuable, as shown in Frances’s comment that her eyes had “become more of my favorite because my son has my eyes, so yeah, it’s also one of my favorite things about him.” In this way, the participants’ focus on eyes in evaluating their own and others’ attractiveness may function to link beauty to social receptivity and individuals’ internal characteristics.

Some participants distinguished between personality or “inner beauty” and purely physical beauty. April said that words like “gorgeous” and “stunning” indicated a beautiful person, but “I wouldn’t use that as like a character description.” Similarly, Pippa saw psychological attractiveness as separate from physical attractiveness:

If I feel good about whatever it is I’m wearing, that’s the attraction part. I still keep coming back to that whole package, the whole holistic view, that’s what it’s gonna exude for me… I’m not displeasing necessarily to the eye, but I won’t necessarily turn heads. But it’s the whole thing, you know, that’s how I walk, how I’m put together, how I articulate myself.

Thus, Pippa’s holistic view referred to the construct of attraction rather than the construct of physical beauty as an aesthetic phenomenon. Other participants suggested that psychological features affect perceptions of the individuals’ attractiveness. For Florence, the link was direct, as she suggested that “the physical represents a lot of the mental as well, in my opinion.” Similarly, Kim suggested that feeling confident “is reflected in the way you look.”

All 30 participants suggested that their own definitions of attractiveness were in tension with or differed from other views of attractiveness in some way. Twelve of the participants suggested that their focus on psychological features of attractiveness was not typical in society, even though this focus was common within the sample. For example, Pippa said that her definition differed from most women’s, who would have responded by listing physical features like “tall, thin, long hair, da dee da, they would rattle off some long legs, flat stomach, big boobs,
whatever, whereas I’ve grown beyond that.” In this way, Pippa indicated that societal standards for beauty are immature or childish, something to be transcended. Annie also viewed societal beauty standards negatively, although her critique centered on the structure of society rather than individuals’ failure to “grow beyond”:

> I think mine [Annie’s definition] does not compare with others...our whole society is based around these really gross beauty standards which objectify women...there’s these *really* specific expectations for just society has that are almost impossible for any woman to really attain, and so I don’t think mine compares to that at all. I think mine’s more about being okay with yourself, because you can really see that in a person, you can see when they’re just okay with themselves, and that does make them super beautiful, I think.

Thus, Annie felt that her accommodation schema of beauty was more inclusive and thus allowed women to accept themselves. Her use of words like “gross” to describe societal beauty norms underscores her disapproval of the dominant schema. In contrast, in her accommodation schema, women lack strong negative responses to their appearance--they feel “okay”--which enables them to appear *better* than okay--“super beautiful.” In this view, women’s acceptance of their non-idealized appearance is in a sense rewarded with beauty.

Similarly, participants appeared to approve of defining physical beauty through psycho-spiritual features. Several participants suggested that psychological features should be more valuable than physical features when assessing attractiveness. They argued that psychological characteristics, such as kindness, are less superficial, healthier, or generally better than physically attractive features. Ophelia suggested that her definition of attractiveness was “*way* conservative” compared to beauty in mainstream culture and linked this difference to her religious beliefs. For example, she said that she felt particularly influenced by church leaders and other women in her congregation. She also said that her faith taught her to dress modestly and value all people as “children of God” rather than focusing on appearance.
Tensions Between Dominant and Alternative Schemas

Blair thought that society in general was moving towards defining beauty in psychological rather than physical terms. Kim felt that most individuals already find kind people attractive but may not be consciously aware of this pattern. Other participants expressed their preference for psychological definitions of beauty in wishful terms. For example, when asked what changes she would make to how people understand beauty if she could, Robin said, “I just think I would get rid of the physical stuff, you know, and try to make it [beauty] more human, internal, how you are, content of character.” Similarly, Helena said: “I wish beauty was just based on who that person was as a character or as a contributor. I wish it wasn’t based on how a person looks. I wish there wasn’t that pressure put on people in general.” Emma thought that children were more likely to respond to inner beauty than outer beauty, thereby linking physical definitions of beauty either onset of adult sexuality or with the corrupting influence of socialization. In summary, participants generally preferred psychological definitions of beauty, but several described this definition as aspirational or ideal rather than actualized.

In addition to explicitly defining physical attractiveness during the interview, many participants spontaneously made evaluative statements about attractiveness of other individuals. Some participants described feeling badly about making negative evaluations of others’ appearances. For example, Blair commented, “I do still have to tell myself things, like when I see somebody maybe with messy hair or bad teeth or something like there where I’m like ‘Ohhh,’ and I have to still tell myself ‘Stop it.’” Similarly, Holly said that she critiques others’ appearances in media imagery when she has a bad day, because its easier than to “pick yourself apart.” However, she avoided beauty imagery and so did not do this often. Holly’s comment reflects the notion that one can and should overcome their impulse to negatively evaluate others’
appearances, and further frames this impulse as unkind—something you do to others but would not want to do to yourself.

However, some participants also felt that evaluating others’ attractiveness is normal. To this effect, Florence said, “I feel like that’s human nature, to make judgments about people, about their beauty or about their attractiveness.” Similarly, Tess commented, “I have learned to acknowledge beautiful women and yeah they’re beautiful and that, yeah, there is nothing wrong with that.” However, she then expressed her concerns about discussing attractiveness, specifically that someone might use offensive language or encourage children to develop their self-worth based on things like fashion. Tess also spoke strongly about the importance of intellect over appearance and was reluctant to define physical beauty at the start of the interview. Conceivably, these tensions between defining attractiveness, evaluating attractiveness, and differing from others’ definitions of attractiveness could arise from the desire to reject the hyper-emphasis on women’s attractiveness that previous research demonstrates is present in society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Noser, & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). In summary, many participants seemed uncomfortable or less interested in talking about physical aspects of attractiveness aside from relatively controllable features, such as comportment and hygiene. Nonetheless, participants’ discussions of the visual, physical aspects of attractiveness were not limited to grooming. Daphne considered some women to be “naturally pretty,” while Nina suggested that “you can see someone, and they have that sense of physical attractiveness.” Holly viewed the transition between appreciating physicality and psychological features as a developmental one:

You just don’t have enough sense of self in your teens and twenties, where it’s totally physical. For me it was very physical. But life is kind of a leveling field, especially as you get into your late twenties early thirties and on, I assume, that you judge more than just surface level.

Thus, while it was normal to evaluate others’ physical attractiveness, it was also normal to grow
beyond this practice with age and experience. In this way, participants again associated the dominant beauty schema with immaturity and superficiality.

Participants reported that their perceptions of both men’s and women’s physical attractiveness could change over time in response to learning more about the individual’s personality and social behavior. For example, Robin said, “I think the more you get to know someone, the more they do find you attractive.” Similarly, Emma reported “I feel like the more you know people the more attractive they become, for sure, unless they’re really mean, in which case the less attractive they become.” Only Kim problematized this dynamic. She said,

In terms of who you are it [physical unattractiveness] can be devastating because you can be so beautiful inside, but if you’re not beautiful on the outside it takes people longer to realize how beautiful you really are.

Thus, the eventual perceptions of one’s inner beauty does not necessarily negate their lack of outer beauty and one may still be and feel disadvantaged.

**Tensions when defining attractiveness.** When participants described attractiveness in psychological terms, they may have done so in part to avoid the concept of physical attractiveness. Such avoidance may have served to challenge beauty standards, to cope with feeling physically unattractive, or to provide a socially desirable response. For example, Ginny’s earlier comment “I think there is a trend to say everyone is beautiful and I think I try, I know I try, I totally try to do that” illustrates Ginny’s desire to follow a social trend and give a socially acceptable response. Clearly, Ginny experienced tension between her personal tendency to perceive some people as less attractive and the radically inclusive definition of beauty she aspired to adopt.

In general, participants saw focusing on one’s physical appearance to be shallow or unhealthy. Gwen reported that a friend’s “obsession” over her own appearance precipitated the
end of their friendship, while Pippa critiqued self-portraiture (selfies) as “self-centered,” “egotistical,” and “self-absorbed.” Beliefs that intangible characteristics are more important, worthy, or comfortable to talk about than physical attractiveness may have suppressed discussion about physical aspects of attractiveness. In a more extreme example, Charlotte, a married 42-year-old woman, claimed to be unable to make any sort of assessments of physical attractiveness of men or of women. She suggested she had no idea what her friends or family members thought of her attractiveness, and in fact stated that she had never even thought about her own attractiveness:

Whitney: How attractive do you see yourself, yourself as being? You can kind of answer that any way you want.

Charlotte: I’ve honestly not ever really thought about it, not at all.

Charlotte’s claim that she had never considered her own attractiveness may be evidence of discomfort acknowledging beauty standards.

This purported beauty blindness was not shared by the majority of participants, who did make evaluations of attractiveness. However, some participants preferred not to discuss physical attractiveness in terms of physical features or did not feel confident in doing so, as is evident in these responses to the question “What physical characteristics make a woman look beautiful or attractive?” For example, Pippa expressed discomfort with defining physical attractiveness, and said, “Oh wow, you gotta start there, huh? What physical characteristics, that’s tough.” Evidently, Pippa would have preferred to begin by discussing non-physical characteristics, indicating the greater acceptability or definability of psychological definitions of beauty to her. Similarly, Tess said:

I have such a hard time with those words, beautiful and what looks beautiful. For me personally, I don’t pay attention to physical characteristics to speak about the beauty of a human being. I look at other things that are more in terms of what gets me to be connected to that person….
Her comment placed personal connection and appreciation of others’ humanity in opposition with appreciating one’s physical appearance. In this way, she portrayed beauty not only as superficial, but as in conflict with more meaningful concerns. Physical characteristics were a distraction that she doesn’t “pay attention to.”

However, defining physical attractiveness in psychological terms is potentially problematic. Psychological definitions may still be exclusionary, such that individuals who have poor social skills, have mood disorders, or who are experiencing stressful circumstances may be viewed as less attractive. Not everybody is confident, happy, or social. Further, the emphasis on psychological features such as kindness and friendliness may reflect or become intensified by traditional gender roles. Some participants suggested that society often deems women more attractive if they adhere to gender roles such as marriage and child-rearing. She said that Western definitions of a beautiful woman included heterosexuality, motherhood, and “opinionated to a point. I would say too strong-willed is unattractive [by Western standards].”

In addition to general “inner beauty” or other intangible qualities, participants frequently listed confidence, positive affect or friendliness, and kindness or upholding values as features that made someone attractive. There is evidence that women who deviate from traditional gender roles by expressing agency are viewed as less nice (Rudman & Glick, 2001). To the extent that kindness, warmth and character are used to assess physical attractiveness, women who do not embody traditionally feminine traits could then be viewed as physically unattractive. For these reasons, defining attractiveness by psychological features does not necessarily make attractiveness equally accessible to everyone. Furthermore, these gendered expectations parallel the prominence of gender roles in the dominant beauty schema. Thus, accommodation schemas that focus on psychological features may similarly reinforce ambivalent sexist attitudes against
women who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

Accommodation beauty schemas may also replicate the potential classism of the dominant schema, where beauty practices and grooming expectations are important. Signs of sophistication or education may confer attractiveness and at the same time indicate a higher socioeconomic status. For example, several participants also mentioned the role of carriage, comportment, and eloquence in defining physical attractiveness. Winn said that to her, a beautiful woman is “composed both physically and also verbally, so in their communication and in their posture,” sits upright, and if she is “eloquent with her words.” Although class is not explicit in this description, it is in some ways reminiscent of “finishing school” and implies sufficient education for speaking well. Beauty defined in this way also assumes the physical and intellectual capacities to stand upright and speak eloquently and may thereby exclude women with certain disabilities.

**Beauty-as-Psychological Schema and Objectification**

Defining physical attractiveness in terms of psychological features may function in opposition to objectification, wherein women are valued solely for their physical appearance. Indeed, this definition allows for a non-objectifying appreciation of a woman’s sexual appeal, in that her mental life and internal qualities make her attractive. In contrast, objectification theory suggestions that acknowledging a woman’s internal characteristics would interfere with the focus on her sexual appeal. Further, psychological definitions may democratize attractiveness: you cannot control the size of your eyes, but you can exert some control over the friendliness of your demeanor. Additionally, the tendency of participants to view qualities such as kindness in terms of physical attractiveness may also reflect the importance of those qualities to participants. This pattern is intuitive: if you wish to associate yourself with people who are kind and cheerful, then
you will find people with these qualities more attractive. Evaluating individuals as more attractive based on qualities such as kindness and confidence may also serve to reward people who have those qualities, thus encouraging women to be kind and confident.

However, there is a limitation to the use of psychological definitions of attractiveness as an alternative to objectification. When conceptualizing a woman’s personality as her “inner beauty,” one is reframing her inner, non-visible qualities in aesthetic terms, which may itself be a form of objectification. Instead, psychological definitions of beauty may simply shift the focus of objectification from a woman’s body to her behavior or demeanor. In fact, to the extent that women’s beauty is highly valued, psychological definitions may distract people from appreciating traits such as sweetness or confidence in their own right instead valuing such qualities primarily for their sexual appeal. Just like the sexualization of women of color can reduce women’s culture and ethnic heritage to “exotic sexiness” for the benefit of the White gaze, so can beauty-as-psychological schemas reduce women’s internal characteristics to their aesthetic quality.

Further, psychological definitions of beauty implicitly value attractiveness over unattractiveness. They associate positive internal qualities with physical beauty and negative ones with ugliness. Such an association is evident in Kim’s quote:

Anytime you learned to do something well... You feel better about yourself, and when you feel better about yourself inside, and you’re skilled at things, it gives you a natural confidence that I think is reflected in the way you look.

Thus, accommodation schemas which prioritize psychological definitions of beauty retain many of the potentially problematic elements and implications of the dominant beauty schema. They do not necessarily challenge the importance of beauty--in some form or another--for women. They may also perpetuate ambivalent sexism, ableism, and other social stigmas. Like the dominant schema, with its emphasis on thinness and self-presentation, the beauty-as-
psychological schema may appear to make physical attractiveness controllable by the individual. However, like with the dominant schema, women’s access to beauty may in fact be limited.

The potential negative impacts of the beauty-as-psychological schema for women have not been previously researched. However, if women are indeed viewing their inner qualities in aesthetic terms, they may experience outcomes not predicted by the classical formulation of objectification theory. For example, “inner beauty” objectification may render some of women’s motivations extrinsic rather than intrinsic, by positioning their strengths as subject to the male gaze. It may also interact with depression, anxiety, or other forms of negative affect so that the worse you feel, the less attractive you become.

Summary

In summary, participants’ discussions of the definition of physical attractiveness reflected two competing schemata: the culturally dominant beauty schema and the beauty-as-psychological schema. In many ways, participants’ understanding of beauty reflected a desire for inclusivity, self-acceptance, and appreciation for women’s internal qualities. However, their responses also at times suggested internalization of the thin ideal, traditional gender roles, and biases such as ableism, thus rendering their rejection of the dominant beauty schema incomplete. By redefining physical attractiveness in psychological terms, participants may have inadvertently objectified personality in a manner similar to the objectification of bodies. However, their efforts to revise the dominant beauty schema also demonstrate their resistance against restrictive and superficial societal beauty standards.
CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNICATION AND THE DOMINANT BEAUTY SCHEMA

Both interpersonal communication (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Jones, 2004; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011) and media (Lin, 1998; Stern & Mastro, 2004; Yan & Bissell, 2014) play a role in the construction and dissemination of traditional beauty standards such as the thin ideal. A large body of research has highlighted the potential impacts of media images of thin, attractive models on women’s body image, eating disorders, appearance anxiety, and other feelings or experiences related to body image. For example, experimental exposure to idealized images of people, particularly women, has been associated with greater body dissatisfaction and weight concerns (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). These findings are partly explicable through social comparison theory, such that women feel worse about themselves when they compare themselves to idealized imagery of women (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Research has also highlighted the influence of family members on body image, particularly with respect to weight (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Jones, 2004; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). However, less is known about the role of communication in disseminating beauty standards other than the thin ideal, or about the contexts in which interpersonal communication of these ideals occurs.

Dissemination of the Dominant Schema

Media communication. Media have been critiqued for the preponderance of beautiful women and the exclusion of women and girls with less attractive appearances (Lin, 1998; Stern & Mastro, 2004). This is accomplished not just by making models thinner, but by digitally “perfecting” those images and thus associating thinness with other characteristics deemed beautiful (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). One analysis of promotional announcements during prime-
time television shows across five networks found that no highly unattractive women were featured (Eaton, 1997). Some research has attempted to compare rates of attractiveness among men and women in television. For example, an analysis of 505 commercials in the late nineties, performed by four independent coders, found that only 6.4% of women shown were rated as unattractive on a three-point scale (Lin, 1998). Although these studies are older and need to be replicated for the modern media landscape, they are strongly suggestive of a gendered pattern in the inclusion and exclusion of characters or actors based on attractiveness (Eaton, 1997; Lin, 1998; Stern & Mastro, 2004).

Compared to men, women in media appear to face a disproportionate burden to be attractive. An analysis of women on MTV in the early nineties found that more than half of female characters were rated as extremely attractive, while only 2.2% of men were. Women on television shows have been found to receive more appearance-based compliments than male characters, which may suggest to viewers that women but not men need to be physically attractive (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). In another study, 60% of female characters but only 19% of male characters were the subject of an admiring gaze (Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994). Female television characters are also more likely than male characters to be provocatively dressed (Glascock, 2003). Taken together, these findings suggest that women in the media are presented as aesthetic objects to a greater extent than are men, and that unattractive women are excluded and rendered invisible to an extent that their male counterparts are not. Media promotes the idea that women must be beautiful in the first place, or else be absent from the screen and thereby symbolically annihilated. Symbolic annihilation refers to the idea that media feature marginalized groups such as women in stereotypical ways or not at all, essentially erasing these groups (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 2000). The symbolic
annihilation of less-attractive women may send the message that such women are unwanted or are unworthy of being seen.

Media imagery also present an impossible fantasy of what individual women should look like. The images of beautiful women that are ubiquitous in print and video media are designed and fabricated through a variety of means. Digital manipulation is so commonplace and subtle that it oftentimes escapes notice (de Perthus, 2005). Such manipulation can be used to make models thinner and to “perfect” features (Reaves, Bush Hitchon, Park, & Woong Yun, 2004), such as skin texture and color, breast size, and the appearance of hair and limbs (Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012). Further, photographers, makeup artists, and other professionals are all employed to use a wide array of techniques to manufacture a final image that looks perfect (Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012). Such manipulations are also used in film and television (Merry, 2016 March 18). These images create a world in which women not only lack wrinkles, gray hair or substantial body fat, but also lack pores (McGraw, 2013), knee creases (Shaw, 2012), visible bones (despite their thinness) (Stewart, 2011), and other realities of human anatomy (Brändlin, 2015). Thus, even the subjects of these photographs and films cannot compete with the manufactured, heavily stylized images of themselves. All women and girls, even highly attractive ones, will be at a disadvantage if they compare themselves to the beauty standards and norms set forth by media.

Further, idealized images of beauty may serve not only as indicators of what is attractive or how women should look, but to associate with other qualities, such as glamour and wealth (for instance, in a perfume ad) or romantic success and general importance (such as in a film). Thus, these media portrayals link women’s and girls’ value to their appearance (Diedrichs, Lee, & Kelly, 2011; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). Although the specific
connotations of media imagery are not well researched, there is evidence that viewers see some beauty media as inspirational or providing vicarious pleasure. For example, commercials relating to physical appearance and the thin ideal have been found to lower women’s estimation of their own weight and decrease negative affect, compared to neutral programming (Meyers & Biocca, 1992). This surprising finding may be due to the message put forth in the commercials that thinness is attainable, allowing individuals to imagine themselves as thin and thus alleviating negative affect (Meyers & Biocca, 1992).

Most previous research on media imagery and body dissatisfaction has tended to focus on communication of the thin ideal or of the objectification of women (Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009; Bessenoff, 2006; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2015). The ways in which other components of the dominant beauty schema, such as facial features, are disseminated have received less attention. It is critical to investigate this topic because media and society value not only thinness, but also physical attractiveness (Cash, 1995; Diedrichs, Lee, & Kelly, 2011; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). In this sense, overall attractiveness is an overarching construct within which specific cultural beauty standards, including thinness, youth, and Whiteness, can be contextualized and understood.

**Interpersonal communication.** Cultural tendencies to objectify women and define their beauty in specific ways can affect women’s and girls’ interactions with others. Women are expected to appear attractive to others and may face harassment or negative comments if they do not. For example, retrospective data indicates that many women were teased for appearance in childhood and early adolescence, particularly by peers and brothers (Cash, 1995). Some teasing or other unwanted comments involve weight (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Cash; 1995; Jones, 2004; Meyers & Rosen, 1999; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Obese men and women have reported
receiving weight-related comments and being a source of embarrassment to family members (Myers & Rosen, 1999). Similarly, adolescent girls have reported receiving weight-related teasing and pressure to lose weight from family or friends (Ata, Ludden, & L ally, 2007; Jones, 2004; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Additionally, teasing over facial characteristics was reported even more than weight-related teasing in a sample of college women (Cash, 1995), which highlights the importance of facial attractiveness for body image research.

Women may also receive sexual remarks and appearance-based comments by strangers. Stranger harassment occurs when a stranger makes unwanted sexual comments to someone, typically a woman, in a public setting such as a street (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Stranger harassment has received scant research attention, even though it is a common, everyday experience (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). As many as 41% of female college students experience stranger harassment at least once a month, with 31% experiencing such harassment at least every few days (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Some college men have reported that stranger harassment is prosocial and a necessary positive reinforcement for women who are attractive (Kissling, 1991). However, one male participant in a study openly admitted that his purpose in engaging in stranger harassment was to make women feel like “part of the scenery” and “just meat, bitches” (Kissling, 1991). Indeed, women often find stranger harassment degrading or threatening (Kissling, 1991) and are more likely to try to ignore such comments than to find them complimentary (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Taken together, the research on appearance teasing (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Cash; 1995; Jones, 2004; Meyers & Rosen, 1999; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011) and stranger harassment (Fairchild & Rudman, 2009; Kissling, 1991) suggests that appearance-related comments can be unwanted or distressing, whether critical or (ostensibly) favorable.
Appearance-related comments from others may influence women’s attitudes about how they look. Meta-analytic research suggests that perceived pressure from peers (Cafri, 2005, Jones, 2004), family, or dating partners to meet beauty standards is implicated in body dissatisfaction (Cafri, 2005), and may occur regardless of age and ethnicity (Cafri, 2005) or beauty standard internalization (Jones, 2004). Perceived pressure from family or peers to meet beauty standards has been directly correlated with negative body image (Annis, Cash, & Hrabosky, 2004; Snapp, Hensley-Choate, & Ryu, 2012). For example, women who perceived themselves to have experienced stigmatization for their weight reported greater appearance investment (that is, preoccupation with being attractive) than did women who had not experienced these situations (Annis, Cash, & Hrabosky, 2004). Experiencing stranger harassment is also associated with self-objectification, or taking the role of an outside observer to view oneself as an aesthetic or sexual object (Davidson, Gervais, & Sherd, 2015; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Perceptions of how one is seen by others may also play a role in the relationship between appearance-related comments directed at oneself and body dissatisfaction or self-objectification. Garcia (1998) highlighted the importance of meta-perceptions of attractiveness (perceptions of how one is viewed by others) when investigating appearance anxiety, as some women report that others’ (assumed) perceptions inform their own. Thus, the relationship between the perceived comments and their correlates may be bidirectional.

The following chapter describes the role of communication in participants’ exposure to and internalization of the dominant beauty schema, beginning with media communication and ending with interpersonal communication. Consistent with previous content analysis research showing that women in media are likely to be attractive (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002), participants’ comments suggested that mass media symbolically annihilates less-
attractive women and focuses on women’s beauty. In this way, media provides ample exposure to information about what features are considered beautiful and emphasizes the importance of female beauty. Additionally, interpersonal communication of the dominant beauty schema occurred in a variety of contexts in both childhood and adulthood. Social media bridged the gap between media and interpersonal communication and further reinforced the dominant beauty schema, potentially in a more personally-relevant way. Together, media and interpersonal communication sent the message that physical attractiveness is important, a message that participants perceived to be particularly influential during childhood.

**Media Perpetuates the Dominant Beauty Schema**

Participants recounted ways in which they felt or suspected that media influenced their definition of attractiveness, as well as the way they understood media to impact other people. They believed multiple media platforms had influenced their definitions of attractiveness and understanding of the dominant beauty schema. Tess saw media’s influence as particularly important in shaping people’s beauty schemata, and said, “I think media is a big part of that construction of beauty and how we relate and how we see other people as beautiful.” Film, television, and magazines were particularly likely to be cited as media influences. For example, when I asked Dawn “Where do you think your idea of what a physically beautiful woman looks like comes from?” she first listed television and magazines. Similarly, Daphne said, “I am sure that I’m adversely impacted by magazines and social media, pop culture, that sort of thing.” Rowan felt that music influenced her understanding of attractiveness, through album artwork and the clothing choices of her favorite musicians. Participants also speculated that their definitions of attractiveness had been influenced through indirect or incidental media exposure. For example, Kim believed that as an adolescent, magazines may have influenced her even
though she had not read them. She said:

We didn’t get magazines at home like Sixteen\(^3\) or some of those, but when I got to the grocery store or whatever I might hang out at the magazine rack. You definitely feel some of media’s idea of beauty when you look at the models and look at the movie stars...I’m sure [magazine racks] had some influence on that, but not like I assiduously studied it and tried to buy things just that way.

In this way, Kim learned about the culturally dominant beauty schema through media, even though she did not necessarily seek this information out or act on it. Robin specified that marketing was responsible for individual’s definitions and said, “I think a lot of people base their opinions of attractiveness on marketing.”

Participants also observed how others define beauty itself through media. For example, Kim learned that different cultures have different beauty standards by reading National Geographic magazine. Carrie reported that her definition of beauty developed partly from “comments that friends would make about TV or people on TV or just celebrities....” Her comment suggests that media can spark interpersonal conversations about whether one is physically attractive. Social media emerged as a particularly important arena for observing others’ ideas about beauty. For example, Autumn attributed her definition of beauty in part to seeing “people on Facebook.” Robin gleaned information about men’s dating preferences on the online dating website that she used. Participants also learned about others’ attitudes about beauty from social media. For example, Winn heard her teaching assistants discussing what clothing and makeup they liked or disliked while scrolling through celebrity photos on social media. Blair said that she knew about other people’s definitions of attractiveness based on the comments they made on social media about their own and others’ physical features, including skin quality, hair texture and length, and makeup. She and Ginny also felt they’d learned about societal attitudes

\(^{3}\) Participant may have meant Seventeen magazine
about beauty--for example, the value of appearance-related compliments, the overall importance of attractiveness in society, or the undesirability of vanity--through people’s social media posts.

Several participants’ comments suggest that media influenced their definitions of attractiveness partly because of their assumption that for women, appearing in media is tantamount to being generally viewed as attractive. Holly, a White American woman, recalled, “I grew up watching Saved by the Bell, so that was the high school standard, and all of the girls, while they looked different they had that similar body style and expressive faces…. The idea that media defines beauty by including only women who have a certain look may be applicable across cultures. For example, April, who was the grandchild of Vietnamese immigrants, attributed her awareness of the beauty standard for Asian women versus other women to watching Chinese television shows with her father. She said, “that’s why I have the two standards, because my dad and I would watch a lot of Chinese shows or whatever and all of their people also looked a very certain way.” Thus, April distinguished between her expectations for Asian women’s appearance versus other (potentially, White) women. April felt her greater exposure to Western media influenced her understanding of attractiveness as well, and said, “I have definite biases like from the media and seeing mostly White people in magazines and stuff and that I grew up with that, so that’s attractive to me.” These two quotes also suggest that the simple prevalence of a particular look can inform beauty standards. Conceivably, greater diversity of appearances in media could therefore widen viewers’ beauty standards.

Violet, who was from South India, reported the influence of South Indian media on herself, specifically comic books about Indian mythology and old South Indian movies. She had felt that whatever was typically presented in the old Indian movies she watched must be what is deemed beautiful. She said these films “did sort of influence what, who I thought was
[attractive], because those were the faces I was most often seeing, being like, wow she’s an actress so she’s gotta be attractive….” This assumption—that being an actress indicates one is attractive—may have implications for perception. If individuals believe that all actresses are attractive, it is conceivable that viewers would alter their beauty schemas to accommodate actresses who deviate from the dominant standard. If so, the dominant cultural schema could evolve through coincidental trends. For example, if several actresses who rise to prominence in a given year happen to have red hair, audiences could interpret this coincidence as evidence that red hair has become a cultural beauty ideal. To investigate this possibility, future research should examine the relationship between the physical characteristics of prominent celebrities and audiences’ beauty schemas. It is also conceivable that audiences could perceive a particular woman as more attractive if they believe she is a media figure than they otherwise would. Further research is needed to determine if such perceptual distortions exist and if so, their impact on viewers’ body dissatisfaction. Another implication of the assumption that actresses are attractive may be viewed as part of the job description for female entertainers, which may lead to the exclusion of talented, but less-attractive, actresses.

To explain how media influences definitions of attractiveness, participants often pointed to the ubiquity of certain media types and media in general. Ivona said that as the parent of a 12-year-old girl, her awareness of the ubiquity of unrealistic beauty standards in media had increased. Pippa pointed to advertising, listing billboards, magazines, shopping catalogues, and newspaper ads, as sources of beauty imagery and suggested that young people are exposed to “exponentially” more media imagery than she was at their age. In fact, she viewed the prominence of these images as affecting the meaning itself of those images, rather than having a simply additive effect. For example, she asked, “If there was five of ‘em [images] when it was
me and there’s a hundred of ‘em when it’s them, is it the same message?” Seven participants described messages about beauty as a “bombardment,” and described media messages as a major component of this barrage. For example, Bonnie speculated that appearance dissatisfaction “has to do with how we get media images. We’re bombarded all the time with what an ideal should be and people try to reach an ideal.” Helena speculated that media had taught her to place value on her appearance, and that this mentality might begin to pervade the political arena. She said:

Hollywood in general is just full of people really concerned about the way they look all the time….I’m not seeing it as much in politics though I’m concerned it’s gonna go that way. With this quote, Helena viewed media portrayals as not only tied to entertainment media but spreading, potentially beyond media, to politics itself. Like Bonnie and Helena, Daphne was critical of media pressure to be attractive, and said, “I don’t think we should put the kind of strong emphasis [on attractiveness] that we do, that’s surrounding us in songs and books and TV and movies.”

Participants described media as not only offering a definition of attractiveness, but also as encouraging or demanding women to meet this definition. For example, Rowan felt that media’s message is “Try and be this, even this person isn’t this but you should try and be that.” Helena expressed a similar view and said: “[society is] sending this unrealistic message. This is what the world should look like. Everybody should be at this standard. You should strive to look like this or be like this.” Relatedly, some participants discussed the commercial intent of media, which prescribes what is attractive and unattractive to sell products. For example, Annie said:

It’s all like ‘Oh, you know, you need to lighten your skin, why don’t you get this lightening cream?’ ‘Oh, that hair on your legs? Nasty, you need to shave that, why don’t you buy expensive razors?’ So it’s all kind of related to try to sell us stuff. ‘Whew, you need to put on some beauty cream or you’re gonna have an old face, and that’s the worst!’

Awareness of the commercial intent of advertising is an aspect of media literacy and may help
viewers such as Annie to reject media messages (Friestad, & Wright, 1994). Further, Annie’s comment portrays media as critical and negative. Described in this way, advertising may be racist (promoting skin lighteners), ageist (denigrating the appearance of aging) and enforce traditional gender roles (female body hairlessness).

Participants also related media to cultural attitudes about body shape and weight. For example, in her discussion of how her definition of beauty had changed over time, Pippa described celebrities’ stories about their experiences with eating disorders and the anorexia-related death of Karen Carpenter. Carpenter was the lead singer of The Carpenters, a popular musical duo in the 1970s and 80s, whose repeated hospitalizations and eventual death at age 32 was for many Americans the first time they had ever heard of anorexia (Latson, 2015). In this way, celebrities provide information about and awareness of eating disorders. When Ginny provided her critique of the tension between health and body acceptance, she related an exchange between a newspaper advice columnist and the mother of an overweight young woman. Similarly, Jillian used her attitude toward Oprah’s public weight loss concerns to articulate her rejection of the thin ideal. These participants did not explicitly state that they had been influenced by the celebrity or advice column discourses they described. Rather, they invoked these discourses to illustrate their points about how other people approach obesity, thinness, and eating behaviors. This finding may be evidence of a third person effect related to media. In any case, for these participants, media appears to serve as a source of information about social attitudes and others’ experiences related to weight.

Media coverage of scientific studies emerged as another potential contributor to the development of women’s definition of beauty. Participants appeared somewhat aware of literature regarding facial symmetry. For example, Helena said, “Symmetry of the face, I think I
heard that somewhere, the more symmetry that is created visually, that makes us more attractive to other people.” Ginny reported having read that men are attracted to a woman’s chest first, and secondly or thirdly to her face, while women are attracted first to men’s power. She did not challenge these findings. Isobel said she had read that men evaluate women’s attractiveness based on their body rather than their face, and from this finding concluded that women’s facial attractiveness does not play as large of a role as the body does in how people are perceived. Taken together, participants’ comments suggest that news coverage of scientific studies of attractiveness could inform individuals’ understanding of the dominant beauty schema.

Some participants sought out research on the topic of beauty and found this content to be entertaining. Ginny enjoyed having access to newspaper coverage of scientific studies related to attractiveness and society and said that one local newspaper had “interesting studies like that” about once every two months. She also subscribed to the local university’s announcements and news to gain access to scientific research. Isobel reported that she had seen scientific studies on the impact of beauty in society through several platforms, including newspapers, online news media outlets and BBC America. Although participants enjoyed this content, there was little evidence of media literacy related to news coverage of studies of attractiveness. Participants tended to cite research as corroborating their opinions, as when Emma said of her observations, “things that I’ve read that kind of back it up.” Isobel was the only participant to critique scientific studies by explaining that studies tend to focus on men rather than women. Participants also tended to describe studies in vague ways, as hearsay rather than as specific sources. For example, Ginny was unsure if an article she had read about the importance of beauty to people was a study or a journalistic piece.

The ways in which studies are conducted, disseminated to the public, interpreted, and
remembered may impact how individuals understand attractiveness. Research on attractiveness may be particularly important because of its associations with expertise and authority. As discussed previously, participants’ comments suggested some ambiguity or ambivalence about the role of physical features in physical attractiveness. Popular media coverage of research on attractiveness may then serve as an accessible source of information on this topic. It is therefore important to ensure that science communication is aimed to minimize misinformation.

Unfortunately, accurate and informative media coverage of scientific research is complicated by the increasing tendency of people to learn about scientific studies through blog posts or other forms of social media (Brossard, 2013). In this way, “lay” audiences can access and produce media coverage of scientific studies themselves, without input from professional scientists or journalistic oversight. Little research has explored the implications of this new media landscape on individuals’ understanding of or attitudes about science (Brossard, 2013).

The ways in which participants described attractiveness and research suggests that scientific studies do inform some participants’ understandings as well as misunderstandings of physical attractiveness. For example, nine of the thirty participants suggested that symmetry is considered attractive. These comments may stem from direct or indirect exposure to popular news coverage of scientific research, as symmetry has been a key variable in this literature for decades. Competing research, however, has suggested that the apparent relationship between symmetry and attractiveness is an artifact of the effect of averageness of features on attractiveness (Baudouin & Tiberghien, 2004). Additionally, participants’ belief that research demonstrates men evaluate women’s attractiveness primarily by their breast size, rather than by their faces, is in fact contradicted by a large body of research (Currie & Little, 2009).

Nonetheless, participants expressed awareness of and interest in scientific literature on
attractiveness and society. They also tended to repeatedly express interest in the interview topics and the findings of the present research. Anecdotally, publications such as *The Huffington Post* (a left-leaning American publication) (Meraz, 2011) and *The Daily Mail* (a right-leaning British publication) (Charteris-Black, 2006) regularly discuss studies about defining or understanding attractiveness (“Attractiveness,” n.d.; “Results for attractiveness women”, n.d.), which also suggests public interest in scholarship on the topic. Responsible science communication about attractiveness can find a ready audience, but media literacy related to science communication may need to be further developed.

**Social Cognitive Theory and Media**

Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals can learn attitudes and behaviors from observing others, including through media. Viewers are more likely to adopt behaviors that they see rewarded, or that are performed by people who they like and feel similar to (Bandura, 2001). Participants’ descriptions of their encounters with media suggest that social cognitive theory may be applicable. Whether purposefully or incidentally, media consumption served as a means for participants to observe others. Some participants spoke of current media influences on their appearance preferences, both direct and indirect. For example, Rowan considered getting highlights to resemble the women in her “trashy gossip mags.” Some participants also reported that their awareness of men’s media had informed them about what men or boys find attractive. For example, Molly said, “I think we as women are looking at, ‘Well that’s what our men are looking at and that’s what they’re lusting after, that’s what we need to look like.’” Taken together, these comments suggest that women use media as a source of information for what they would prefer to look like as well as what others would prefer them to look like.

Participants’ statements suggested that they viewed childhood as a particularly salient
time for the development of their definition of attractiveness, and for media effects on this process. For example, Ginny felt she had been influenced by the women on the TV show *

*Gilligan’s Island,* while Ophelia cited *The Brady Bunch* and televised beauty pageants and Winn pointed to Disney movies. Nina believed that young people deliberately use media to form their initial definitions. She said, “I think naturally when we’re younger we look to the magazines, we look to the you know movies or TV or whatever, to set our personal standard of beauty…..” She also specified that the impact of media on her understanding of beauty had been more pronounced when she was “a lot younger” but was less so now that she was in her 40s.

Some participants explained that media associates attractiveness with positive outcomes or unattractiveness with negative outcomes. Daphne reported being surprised to see that on one of her favorite reality TV shows, women ostracized other women if they stopped meeting beauty standards. She complained, “I watch it [*The Real Housewives of New York*] now, I’m like, ‘That’s so sad’… but shows continues to perpetuate that and reinforce it.” Carrie linked this importance of attractiveness in media to power and gender. She said:

> [Viewers] see how important it is to people in the world because of the media… I feel like men gain their power through getting money or prestige in their jobs and women gain power through how they look, a lot of times.

In this way, Carrie saw media as suggesting that attractiveness is gendered, in that women use attractiveness to gain power while men use other avenues more overtly associated with socioeconomic status. This comment may also suggest that women’s “attractiveness power” is less socially valued or legitimate than men’s “money and prestige” power.

Participants’ comments suggest that media provide women with opportunities to observe how others understand and value attractiveness, thereby allowing social cognitive theory to come into play. Other research indicates that people are more likely to imitate likable or otherwise
socially attractive models (Bandura, 2001). Consistent with this literature, some participants talked about characters that had influenced their understanding of attractiveness. For example, Gwen reported that as a child, she’d wanted to have red curly hair “because I watched Anne of Green Gables.” Other participants discussed the ways in which the personalities or lifestyles of film and television characters made these characters personally influential. April suggested that television was a stronger influence on her than other forms of media “because I like the person for more than their looks, but I include their looks with their influence on me.” For example, she liked certain characters that she saw as elegant and professional and came to associate those qualities with how the characters looked. April also said she enjoyed the beauty of her favorite female characters because it contributed to the “fantasy image” that they are “just that great.” April’s comments illustrate how favorite characters may influence individuals’ understanding of beauty in a way that static images of strangers do not. Individuals’ desire to look like their favorite characters or celebrities may not entail self-objectification, but may instead be a single component of a desire to emulate the particular media figures in general—including their non-physical characteristics.

Indeed, participants spoke of the characters and celebrities they’d wanted to emulate in both physical and non-physical terms. For example, Daphne laughingly said that when she had first started watching *Real Housewives*, she’d wanted to look like them because, “I thought I’d be a Real Housewife, I could be on Bravo [a television channel], and then I’d have all of these friends and it would be fabulous….” Thus, Daphne’s desire to emulate the beauty practices of the women on *Real Housewives* stemmed in part from the association of appearance with social outcomes like friendship. Winn reported having a similar desire as a child, but with respect to Disney princesses. She said, “I think I just wanted to embody everything, their clothes, the way
that they acted, the plot that they were in, like the narrative that they had….” Emma wished that she looked like Audrey Hepburn but attributed this mostly to Hepburn’s psychological attractiveness (namely, appearing kind or friendly).

Participants also referred to media for information about fashion and appearance so that they could be socially successful. For example, Dawn reported that she had looked at beauty imagery in magazines because she wanted to “fit in” and “look like everyone else, especially with the clothes.” Similarly, Ginny suggested that people’s desire to emulate media figures stems not from the attractiveness of the images themselves, but from the media’s association of appearance with social success. She described media messages as communicating “this is what we find attractive, this is the group, you’re either in the group or you’re out of the group.” Taken together, participants’ comments suggest that the desire to emulate media imagery comes not just from the role media plays in defining attractiveness, nor exclusively from self-objectification (treating oneself as reducible to one’s appearance and sexual aspects, Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Instead, media leads viewers to associate physical beauty with social gains.

The focus on emulating favorite media characters or actresses may also have implications for media literacy. Individuals may have less media literacy regarding the role of digital editing and retouching in film and television, as opposed to static images. Additionally, it is conceivable that the commercial intent of the beauty practices used in the production of entertainment media, as opposed to advertisements, may be less evident to some viewers. Appealing characters in entertainment media may also facilitate observational learning about beauty because the medium affords greater opportunities for narrative devices, including devices that link attractiveness to rewards, such as being the center of attention or securing romantic or sexual partners. As suggested in April’s comments about how television characters led her to associate attractiveness
with professionalism, television may also lead people to associate attractiveness with having a high-status job, going on interesting adventures, or other common narrative devices. Much of the participants’ discourse about media influence on attractiveness centered on the use of models in magazines and advertisements, and few participants discussed being influenced by favorite characters. This may suggest that fictional characters were less salient to the majority of participants, or it may suggest a relative lack of awareness or media literacy related to narrative-based entertainment media. Further research is needed to test the differences between viewing favorite characters or celebrities, such as in a television show, versus idealized imagery not associated with a particular persona or narrative, such as a fashion advertisement with an unfamiliar model.

Some participants viewed social media as having changed people’s behaviors and attitudes. Pippa described an argument by parenting blogger Glennon Doyle that people use social media to represent themselves to others in specific, not necessarily authentic ways. Pippa linked this idea of social media as self-presentation to college women’s decision to wear revealing clothing. She said:

The representative [social media alter ego] is the one parading around College Hill in a handkerchief. But then there’s who they are, who's probably sitting around with their girlfriends, probably talking. I think there’s more disassociation because there’s this alter ego that social media has created….

Pippa’s comment suggests that the quest to present a physically attractive self online leads to the creation of dual identities, their true self and their performative “alter ego.” Previous research suggests that women do portray themselves as physically attractive online (Rose et al., 2012), and that people high in appearance dissatisfaction are more likely to manipulate their photos to appear more attractive (Lyu, 2016). Additional research is needed to examine the relationship between social media use, idealized or manipulated self-photography, and identity.
Bonnie suggested that social media was a factor in college students’ increasing dependence on visual information. She did not explicitly link this dependence to consumption of media imagery of beauty, but Winn suggested that social media drew people’s attention to their own appearance more frequently than would otherwise occur. She said:

I think back to when I was in junior high and the only time that I checked myself in the mirror to like see what I looked like even was in the morning and if I ever went to the bathroom, but now it’s like I can whip out my cell phone and take 20 pictures of myself at any point sporadically. Not only can I do that, but I can also pull my phone 24-7 and look at how everybody else is doing the same thing. I just think it’s yeah it’s just completely different, and I think that social media has the largest role in that, ‘cause that’s how you display that to other people.

In this way, social media amplifies concern about one’s appearance by offering more opportunities to focus on one’s appearance and normalizes such focus by showing others doing the same. Further, Winn’s comment suggests that social media changed not how people define beauty or attractiveness, but rather the value placed on appearance. She argued that social media had changed the domain of appearance concerns from private (the bathroom) to public (posting selfies online).

**Participants’ attitudes toward media messages.** Participants often used negative language to describe the impacts of media on people’s understanding of beauty. This included referring to beauty magazines as a “trap” (Molly) or source of “pressure” (Ophelia) and the war imagery of media “bombardment” (Ivona, Molly, Nina, Lucy, Tess, Bonnie, and Jillian).” Nina suggested that when she’d had an eating disorder, her relationship with media imagery had an obsessive quality. She said, “that was probably the time that I was most bombarded with that sort of imagery in my head, ‘cause it really never leaves your mind.” Participants also blamed media consumption for specific, negative outcomes. For example, Ophelia thought that media consumption desensitizes people to sexual content, while Kim thought that media technology such as smartphones contributes to social isolation. Helena felt that society is increasingly
focused on women’s appearances and attributed this change to media, a trend which she found worrisome. She said:

I feel like there’s so much put out there in terms of what we see on the TV and social media…it’s just so much emphasis put on how a person looks that I’m afraid it’s becoming more and more and not less and less…

Thus, participants saw media messages about the dominant beauty schema as threatening, even increasingly so. They associated media messages with specific negative outcomes for individuals and society, including desensitization, isolation, and increased focus on appearance.

Many negative comments about media involved children. For example, participants complained of media’s “terrible messages with the kids” (Charlotte), celebrity women as being a “terrible role model” and children as being “raised by television” (Isobel). Kim described appearance-related cyberbullying on social media as “devastating for young people.” Adult men’s consumption of media was discussed less, although Carrie raised concerns about men’s susceptibility to pornography addiction. Pippa viewed some adult men as ignorant about the ways in which they were being influenced by unrealistic images of beautiful women, and said, “these guys see this stuff and they probably have no idea what that’s doing up in their head.”

Media effects specific to women in middle or late adulthood were not often specifically addressed. Participants’ focus on children, adolescents and college-aged women when discussing media effects is understandable given the developmental importance of body image during these periods (Markey, 2010; Smolak, 2004; Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013) and mirrors researchers’ tendency to focus on these populations in media effects research.

Nonetheless, participants did not often report that their own definitions of beauty were influenced in an unwanted way by their current media consumption. In fact, some participants
explicitly argued that they were not influenced by media. This may be an example of the third person effect, in which individuals believe that other people are influenced by messages while they themselves are not (Davison, 1983). Further, participants reported little change in their understandings of attractiveness over the course of their lives, aside from changes in fashion preferences (for example, away from the “big hair” and blue eyeshadow of the 80s) and shifts toward more psychological definitions of attractiveness. Thus, participants may have underestimated the influence of media communication on themselves or on adults in general. Social desirability bias may also play a role, as individuals may have concerns about appearing vain, easily influenced, or immature if they discuss being influenced in unwanted ways by media.

Additionally, some participants felt that they were not personally impacted by media because the type of media that they consumed was not as problematic as the media others consume. For example, Isobel said that she had not noticed a change in her definition of beauty after she quit watching television (from 30 hours a week to none) because she did not like “the more popular shows.” She suggested that media messages about attractiveness were to be found in celebrity news shows and television shows like “Two Broke Girls” and “Seinfeld,” but not in the comedies, crime dramas, and science fiction programming she had enjoyed. Isobel may have underestimated both the mainstream popularity of the shows she had consumed (for example, comedies and crime dramas are highly popular television genres, and she listed several popular comedy shows among those she had watched) and the prevalence of messages about beauty in these shows. Isobel also became visibly angry when discussing celebrities she disapproved of, including Madonna and Miley Cyrus, and appeared to direct some of this anger toward their fans as well (for example, referring to the “pea brain” of a Madonna fan she had worked with). Thus,
Isobel appeared to associate media effects with a celebrity culture that she did not participate in and with television shows she did not watch, rather than with her own media consumption. Additionally, eight of the 30 participants felt that their low consumption of one or more types of media such, as television, left them disconnected from popular culture.

Participants did not tend to mention novels in their discussion of media effects, even if they were heavy readers. This may be explained by the lack of pictures in novels. For example, when asked, Isobel suggested that books did not influence her understanding of beauty because “you can visualize the main characters any way you wanna visualize them, and again it’s more what they do than how they look.” It is also conceivable that books were less salient to participants in their discussions of media if participants viewed reading as a healthy, productive, or intellectual pastime. In any case, even in the absence of visual imagery, books may reinforce the importance of attractiveness for women and present unattractiveness in negative ways, or not at all. Many books do emphasize female characters’ attractiveness and present women in gender stereotypical ways (Ménard & Cabrera, 2011; Silver, 2010). Furthermore, novels have the capacity to devote large amounts of time to the development of appealing and engaging characters. As discussed previously, some participants viewed certain characters as having an impact on what associations or meaning they placed on attractiveness.

As in the case of books, few participants described the impact of music on peoples’ understanding of beauty, although Emma and Jillian did. For example, Emma described listening to music from male singer-songwriters, such as David Bowie, who did not endorse traditional beauty standards. Jillian reported that singer-songwriters she associated with feminism, such as Tori Amos, Ani DiFranco, and the Indigo Girls, inspired her rejection of traditional beauty standards in favor of authenticity and personal choice. Not only is music often associated with
images of highly attractive women in promotional materials, and not only are many if not most popular female musicians highly physically attractive, but music lyrics may also mention physical appearance. Nonetheless, participants did not appear to find music itself as relevant to understanding attractiveness as they did advertising, film and television.

The relative lack of discussion of music and complete lack of suggestion that books may influence people’s understanding of beauty has several possible implications. One is that imagery-intensive media is so much more powerful in perpetuating the dominant schema that other forms of media are comparatively unimportant. Alternatively, participants may have greater media literacy related to beauty imagery than to beauty messages in text or music. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which song lyrics and novels influence women’s appearance concerns or other similar outcomes, as well as the extent to which individuals recognize and challenge or accept the dominant beauty schema in these sources.

**Interpersonal Communication of the Dominant Beauty Schema**

In addition to media, participants discussed the impact of interpersonal communication on their understanding of attractiveness. When asked about the source of their definition of female beauty, some participants described the importance of comments parents or others had made about the participant. For example, Holly learned to include height in her definition of attractiveness through comments people would make about her clothing choices. She said, “I can remember hearing probably multiple people say…if you were just a little taller these pants would probably fit a little better…it’s not a good style for you because you’re shorter.” Similarly, Rowan thought that her parents’ comments about whether clothing was flattering on her influenced her understanding of attractiveness. She said:

I think all of that starts very early in your life. The idea of beauty and what’s beautiful first starts with your parents. They’re the ones that feed you your first compliments or
ideas of if something looks good or doesn’t look good, or if something’s flattering on you
or not flattering on you, or if there’s some improvement to be made in your body. I think
that’s initially where all those things begin.

In this way, Rowan suggested that parents communicate messages about the ideal body or
appearance to their children, before peers or potentially even media. Rowan’s metaphor of
“feeding” compliments and ideas further suggests that children are passive in this transmission,
while parents appear to engage purposefully. Helena also partially attributed her understanding
of attractiveness and its importance to her parents’ comments. When asked, “What do you
think…would be the relationship between physical beauty and character?” she answered,

Just hearing things from my parents I think probably is what started to mold my ideas,
and as I got older hearing ‘Well you need to present yourself well for other people to
have a good impression of you.’ So that professionalism and that first impression…

Helen’s experience suggests that parents’ appearance-related suggestions and criticisms may be
motivated by a desire to help their children be successful socially or in the workplace. In such
cases, parents’ messages about appearance may connect beauty standards with instrumental goals
and thereby emphasize to the child the importance of beauty.

Participants also described their understanding of societal beauty standards as having
been informed by others’ comments about what is or is not attractive in general. For example,
Carrie described hearing people say things like “She [an unnamed woman] has such great skin.”
In response to these comments, Carrie would ask, “What does that even mean?” Carrie reported
that people would respond by explaining:

‘Oh she doesn’t have acne’ or ‘look how porcelain her skin is.’ I’m of course going
‘Okay.’ Or [people would say] ‘Oh, she’s really tan’…‘Oh, it looks like your dad doesn’t
have enough money for you to get nice clothes,’ or ‘She’s a ten because she has a nice
rack,’ or ‘She had long legs and that’s what I’m looking for…’

Carrie’s description reveals how comments from boys and girls informed her understanding of
how women should look. Comments related to sexual attraction were particularly salient to her,
and she said, “For me personally, it was a lot of recognizing girls and boys commenting on the type of girl that they wanted to be with.” Media can serve as fodder for such appearance evaluation conversations. For example, Dawn recalled sharing magazines with boys and girls while in grade school and discussing how the women looked. She said:

I remember being on the bus, I think I was 9th grade or so, and I had one of my issues [of a magazine]. I passed it back to a friend, and a boy who was sitting behind me got a hold of it and there was a picture of a woman in a bikini on the cover. He was like ‘This is awesome!’ He thought she looked fantastic.”

Later in the interview, she described how she and a female friend would “pour over those magazines wishing we could look a certain way.” Participants like Dawn and Carrie learned about definitions of attractiveness that were not intuitive to them through other people’s evaluative expressions of someone’s appearance.

Compliments could affect not just how girls defined beauty, but also how they felt about being beautiful. When describing how body image can develop, Tess reported that families apply adjectives like pretty, beautiful, and cute to girls even in infancy. With such extensive and lifelong exposure, it stands to reason that girls learn not only how to evaluate their appearance, but also to include appearance as an important part of their identity. Similarly, Carrie described how comments from people about her beauty led her to make her beauty an important part of her identity. She said, “I realized that I had placed value on that, but it was because people were telling me that message.” Other attractive women have similar experiences, according to Carrie. She said:

I think most people I know who are very attractive. That’s what they put their effort into because that’s the message they’re getting. People are giving them positive reinforcement and it makes them feel like they need to keep that up, put more effort into it.

In this way, family and friends’ compliments about Carrie’s appearance may have unintentionally increased her appearance anxiety or critical self-evaluations, rather than helping
to diffuse or preempt her appearance concerns. Research suggests that a positive body image may serve as a protective factor against the impacts of exposure to thin ideal imagery in media (Halliwell, 2013). However, Carrie’s experience suggests that a positive body image may not always serve as a buffer against appearance-related anxieties or self-objectification. Instead, such comments may emphasize the importance of attractiveness as a source of approval.

Some participants had conversations with their romantic partners about beauty preferences and societal standards. For example, Frances said of her husband:

He and I have had conversations about social norms, especially around race perceptions of beauty. It’s interesting and it has kind of come up because my husband usually will qualify beauty based upon the ethnicity of the person he’s speaking about…He does it as a way of demonstrating his feminism and saying there are multiple forms of beauty…It’s a way of anchoring Black can be beautiful, Latina can be beautiful, Chicana can be beautiful, and that it’s not just this White standard of beauty.

Although such comments could be considered objectifying or othering, Frances viewed her husband’s comments as a form of resistance against racist beauty standards, an endeavor which she associated with feminism. Additionally, Violet and her husband evaluated others’ appearances recreationally. She said, “The two of us have several times just walked down the road and said ‘Hey that guy looks nice, that girl looks nice,’ just talk about how people look…it’s a fun activity.” Although Violet expressed embarrassment at admitting this behavior in the interview, she also felt this behavior was normal and harmless. Similarly, Gwen described herself as an avid “people-watcher,” although she was more focused on strangers’ fashion than overall attractiveness. Other participants also described deriving some enjoyment from female beauty, particularly in media. For example, Ivona and Pippa described the value of representations of people’s physical beauty in the arts, and Bonnie laughingly described a female friend whose eyes were so beautiful she could stare at her “like a creep…for hours on hours on end.” Thus, comments about attractiveness appear to not only impact how people understand
societal beauty standards but may also be used for entertainment or expression of personal values.

**Weight-related comments.** Previous research suggests that “fat talk,” or self-derogatory discussions of one’s own weight, is common among college women (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011) and may serve as an affiliative or bonding activity for adolescent girls (Nichter, 2000). However, one large study using a non-college sample found that most women did not participate in fat talk. Indeed, although female participants reported more fat talk than did male participants, they also reported greater pressure to engage in body talk that was positive or self-accepting (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009).

In the present study, the implications or meaning of weight also emerged as a topic of conversation, often in response to participants’ own weight. Molly reported receiving and rejecting messages about the importance of thinness that she heard conveyed through gossip. She recalled overhearing a conversation in a bathroom in which a woman she’d gone to high school with said, “Oh my god, did you hear Molly lost all this weight and now she’s engaged to be married?” Molly was not engaged at the time and was confused about how this rumor had begun. She said:

> I stayed in the stall until they left but I remember thinking, what the hell? Ah, she thinks okay I’ve lost some weight and now I’m automatically gonna get married?...And that’s kind of where my perspective said, Wait a minute, no! No, no, no, no, nothing, my weight has nothing to do with anything like that.

This incident spurred Molly’s rejection of the idea that her weight was related to her relationship status, which in turn challenged the thin ideal and societal expectations that brides should be thin. Similarly, Holly recalled receiving and rejecting comments meant to assist her in weight loss. She said:

> Lots of people will give encouragement. ‘It’s okay, it takes a long time to get back to your body weight,’ or...‘This exercise will help with those pregnancy hips,’ it’s like well...
these hips are my hips and I had them before I got pregnant, they’re not going…maybe this is what I look like, and maybe I’m okay with that.

Although people’s comments to Holly may have been well-intended, they had the effect of criticizing her body. Holly reacted to such criticism by asserting her body as part of her selfhood (“this is what I look like”) and her own emotional acceptance of this, although she did not necessarily reject the thin ideal itself.

Weight-related comments were sometimes couched in other language. For example, Helena perceived indirect messages about her weight from her mother, who would make comments like “You look so great!” when Helena lost weight and ask “Are you doing okay? Is everything alright?” when Helena gained weight. Although the relationship between these comments and her weight was not explicit, “I always kind of in the back of my mind at least internalize ‘Well, that’s what she’s asking me about.’” Helena disliked her mother’s weight-related comments, even when framed as a health issue, and wished her mother wouldn’t make them. “Unhelpful” but ostensibly well-intentioned comments like this occurred outside the context of weight as well, as when Carrie’s neighbor informed her that Carrie’s hair was thinning, supposedly as a health-related concern. Although Carrie was critical of this comment and appeared to question the sincerity of her neighbor’s concern, she did act on it and take steps to alter her appearance. However, weight-related comments appeared to be particularly salient and emotionally laden in participants’ narratives. For example, Molly, Annie, Florence, and Helena all reported having received frequent weight-related comments in childhood, and Molly and Annie described experiences with weight-related bullying or negative comments that rose to the level of trauma. For example, Molly attempted suicide twice in response to a comment from her father that she would never be able to attract a man because of her weight. Annie was bullied and ostracized because of her weight to such an extent that she did not begin to form friendship
until she was in college, and described her peers’ treatments of her as “abuse.”

**Contexts for interpersonal communication.** Conversations with family members and partners, as well as perceived pressure from these sources, influenced some participants’ attitudes toward beauty practices. For April, appearance-related comments were a form of pressure that influenced not only her definition of attractiveness but also her attitude toward beauty practices like makeup. Currently, there is little research determining the contexts in which conversations about beauty occur. With respect to body image, research has identified adolescent peer groups (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004; Voelker, D. K., Reel, J. J., & Greenleaf, C., 2015) and families (Curtis & Loomans, 2014; Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000) important contexts. In the present study, participants described hearing appearance-related comments in a variety of settings. These included the home, school, sports or other athletic settings, workplace, public spaces, and entire cities or regions. For example, Jillian reported that in the Southern towns she had lived in, attractiveness is paramount. It is customary there, she said, to comment on the beauty of blue-eyed women entering a room, to greet people with appearance-related comments and questions, and even to make negative comments to acquaintances who are not wearing makeup in the grocery store. Other participants talked about frequently hearing attractiveness-related comments made by strangers in public spaces. Tess reported:

> When you hear the conversations among men, mostly they are when you are in the cafés for example, and you happen to listen to a random conversation, and then comes a beautiful woman, some of the things that I have been hearing from men is like ‘Oh look at….’ You know, they start targeting a specific attributes of the woman to look at.

She elaborated that she had heard comments in shopping centers, cafés, restaurants, grocery stores, and “wherever you see a woman.” Violet described how her brother frequently commented on women’s appearances, much to her annoyance. She said: “Even though I was his sister I’m like, ‘Boundaries!’ I don’t need to know about her pearly white teeth. I don’t need to
know if she’s got a Barbie figure. I really don’t need to know that.” Thus, for some participants, hearing men’s comments about other women’s attractiveness was a frequent and uncomfortable experience.

Like Holly, Rowan, and Helena, April cited her parents’ comments as influencing her understanding of her appearance. However, she saw her father’s comments as particularly powerful specifically because they were rare. She said, “I guess like my dad would be more influential because he makes fewer comments [about appearance] in general.” In contrast, comments were frequent among women in her family and often related to similar themes. She said, “a lot of my stepmom and her sisters are very similar so they make the same type of comments,” and extended this pattern to her “female older relatives” in general. Together, April’s comments suggest a role for both novelty and repetition of comments in influencing her understanding of attractiveness.

Participants found beauty-related comments to be less frequent in some contexts, although no clear pattern emerged across all participants. Dawn said, “I’m in a professional setting, thankfully, and we tend not to comment on each other’s appearance too much where I spend most of my time, which is at work.” Ginny’s family of origin was similarly uncommunicative about appearance, and she said, “I don’t remember my mom and dad telling me anything [about attractiveness].” In contrast, discussions of beauty were more common in Molly’s extended family and Tess’s workplace (primarily from undergraduate students), for example. Taken together, participants’ perceptions of the contexts in which people comment on attractiveness suggest that family, workplace, and peer norms are highly variable.

Social contexts also emerged as influential, particularly through group norms. Gwen thought that peers develop or perpetuate beauty standards to fulfil social needs. Throughout her
interview, she emphasized themes of belongingness and identity over and above the aesthetic or sexual value of physical features. These themes were evident in her notion of grooming expectations serving to communicate oneself and to determine if someone will fit in with a peer group. For example, she said, “I remember in grade school…I had to have *these* shoes and I had to have *these* clothes and I had to wear *this* color because that’s what the popular girls wore.”

She also argued:

> I think sometimes people are turned off or they judge more quickly, whether someone has too much makeup or not enough makeup, they’re looking for what *they* think is attractive. I think that by trying to fit in, you’re trying to I guess gain entrance…Can I really make friends with these people? Do I have things in common with them?

In this way, Gwen viewed beauty standards as entirely subjective and as cues for identity and belongingness. Attempts to meet societal grooming expectations, which in Gwen’s interview were essentially synonymous with beauty standards, could therefore serve an instrumental and expressive function, namely, attempting to communicate oneself to prospective friends, or to appropriate the cues that socially successful others were sending. Florence made a similar connection between identity expression, peer acceptance, and the subjectivity of beauty standards. She suggested that people’s opinions about beauty are reinforced the fact that “your vibe attracts your tribe…you attract what you are.”

Family emerged as a context in which individuals both learn about the importance of attractiveness and use attractiveness to seek social acceptance. Nina thought her stepchildren’s biological mother had negatively impacted the children “because their mother was really always very hard on herself physically and emotionally, about her looks, even though she was very attractive.” Nina felt that she was having to “reverse damage that’s already been done.” Similarly, Gwen speculated that a childhood friend’s fixation on appearance had stemmed from a lack of parental approval generally. She said, "I think she felt she was never quite good enough,
that her older sister was always better or, you know, ‘Mom always loved you best’ you know type of thing.”

Summary

Both media and interpersonal communication provided opportunities for information seeking and modeling related to beauty schemata. In this way, beauty schemata are transmitted through the presentation or discussion of a particular look as an ideal. Additional transmission may occur through the association of physical attractiveness with an ideal lifestyle, social success, or other positive outcomes. This possibility may suggest that stimuli such as magazine images of unfamiliar models, which are widespread in research on appearance concerns and self-objectification, may not be as impactful as media involving more contextual information about the attractive woman. Further, how individuals discuss media with others may reinforce or challenge cues in the original message that the woman is attractive or an ideal to be emulated. It is also possible some media triggers appearance concern without triggering self-objectification. Instead, individuals may value attractiveness for its association with favorite media characters or intangible qualities, rather than as a purely aesthetic or sexual quality. Together, media and interpersonal communication provide ample opportunities for observational learning of how and why to be attractive. Given the prominence of social contexts and social goals in both consuming these messages and pursuing attractiveness, objectification theory in its strict formulation may not fully explain individuals’ desires to emulate idealized media imagery or to monitor their own attractiveness. Physical attractiveness for women is situated within a patriarchy, but it is also situated within complex social settings and motivations.
CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNICATION AND ALTERNATIVE SCHEMA

Not all media or interpersonal communication about physical attractiveness leads to the internalization of the culturally dominant beauty schema. Instead, individuals may resist these messages, or may encounter messages promoting an alternative or modified schema. For example, previous research has investigated women’s rejection of the thin ideal (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010), the rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards through movements such as “Black is Beautiful” and the rejection of Eurocentric beauty ideal (Falconer & Neville, 2000; Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011), and beauty ideals among Lesbian women that deviate from the dominant schema (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997; Krakauer, & Rose, 2002).

Alternative beauty schemas can take the form of assimilation, in which a schema is fundamentally changed. For example, a sample of British college women reported finding plus-sized models more attractive than the more typical thin models (Beale, Malson, & Tischner, 2016). In this case, participants did not simply include heavier women in their beauty schemas, but also excluded thinner women, which was a direct challenge to the thin ideal. However, other aspects of the dominant beauty schema remained intact. Some participants articulated that this apparent reversal of beauty standards was contingent on the women having “curves in the right places,” that is, an hourglass figure, consistent with the dominant beauty standards (Beale, Malson, & Tischner, 2016). Further, the participants associated this shape and size with traditional feminine gender roles and values, such as domesticity and purity, also consistent with the close relationship between the dominant beauty schema and gender roles for women (Beale, Malson, & Tischner, 2016). In contrast, thin models were denigrated not only as lacking breasts
and a feminine silhouette, but also as vain, selfish, and unlikable people lacking proper feminine values. Thus, resistance to the thin ideal does not necessarily entail a general ethos of body positivity or resistance to sexist ideologies (Beale, Malson, & Tischner, 2016). Nonetheless, specific components of the dominant beauty schema can be altered or rejected.

This chapter describes the ways in which women reject the dominant beauty schema and accept alternative beauty schemas, beginning with a discussion of media and concluding with a discussion of interpersonal communication. The participants’ perceptions of personal agency over the impacts of communication about beauty. The chapter also describes participants’ narratives about the role of media in challenging the dominant beauty schema or promoting alternative. For example, the roles of celebrity culture and non-beautyist media in rejecting the dominant beauty schema is discussed. Interpersonal communication is also addressed, including participants’ experiences with mentorship, body image conversations with friends and family, and participants’ efforts to mentor their children. The findings have implications for understanding women’s resistance against the culturally dominant beauty schema and their readiness for non-beautyist media.

**Media and Rejection of the Dominant Beauty Schema**

Some participants spoke of media effects as a voluntary process, from which one could choose to abstain. They described a sense of agency over media impacts, either through willpower or media literacy skills. For example, Gwen said, “I think movies, advertisements, all of that push a lot at you and then you have to decide how much it influences you or doesn’t.” Blair felt she might have somewhat greater resistance to media messages than most women her age, although she felt her circle of friends was similarly resistant. Pippa spoke about “letting in” media messages consistent with her values, filtering out the rest, and “being cognizant of images
in the catalogue…just having literacy of that kind of stuff.” Media literacy related to production of beauty images also facilitated rejecting media messages about beauty. For example, April felt less impacted by unrealistic beauty imagery in media after learning about the techniques used to produce the images, and Annie’s awareness of the digital manipulation of images through tools such as Photoshop, led to her embrace a more realistic beauty standard. In contrast, Bonnie felt that she could not yet readily identify instances of Photoshop.

Having a stronger sense of media literacy and agency to overcome unwanted media influences could conceivably facilitate women’s ability to consume media without internalizing the dominant beauty schema. Alternatively, the belief that individuals can simply choose not to be affected by the media they consume may lead individuals to underestimate the impact of media. Indeed, being able to identify ways in which media consumption currently (rather than retrospectively) impacts one’s own beliefs, attitudes, or mood could conceivably serve as a component of media literacy, although to my knowledge this has not been tested. The belief in a strong ability to choose not to internalize media messages may also contribute to victim-blaming, so that people may criticize women who develop body dissatisfaction for their evidently thoughtless consumption of media beauty imagery. To investigate these possibilities, further research is necessary to determine the relationship between media literacy, self-efficacy to reject media messages about beauty, and individuals’ attitudes about beauty and body image.

Some participants also suggested that environmental factors, such as culture, can enable people to resist media influence. For example, Carrie suggested that Brazilians consume American media but have not adopted American beauty standards. Gwen also felt that advertisements in the media she consumed had not impacted her in part because of her culture and background. She said:
I grew up on a farm, so we had to make things work in many ways. It couldn’t just be a car that I only drove on Saturday night…. It had to be more utilitarian and so many things, so I think and again that was my background where I grew up but it seemingly served me well.

In this way, Gwen (who tended to describe physical attractiveness in terms of grooming choices) felt that her inability to buy the products being advertised had protected her from their influence. This resiliency did not necessarily extend to interpersonal influences, as Gwen, Autumn, and Annie all indicated feeling more affected by people they knew than by media. Participants were also more likely to become emotional, either positively or negatively, when recalling interpersonal comments than media messages during the interview. Although some participants, such as Molly, did describe being dismissive of negative comments and letting such comments “roll off,” the impersonal nature of media messages may have made such dismissals easier.

**Celebrity Culture and Favorite Media**

Some participants felt that certain media personalities or characters had helped them develop their own attitudes toward physical attractiveness and to reject the dominant beauty schema. They cited influential characters and media figures as helping them to reconceptualize attractiveness. For example, Emma felt that her understanding of the importance of beauty (or lack thereof) had also been informed in her childhood by a humorous song a local radio DJ had sung while imitating Yoda from *Star Wars*. She said:

> One of the lines that I always remember was his line of advice, ‘Read beauty magazines, you not, make you feel ugly and green, they will, yes. Just one minute you wait! What’s wrong with being ugly and green, I ask, hmm?’ ‘cause he [was a] little green alien. So after that I was kind of like, ‘Hmm that’s a good point,’ and then I sort of thought differently about it, because of that piece of advice that Yoda had. When you’re a kid, Yoda is you know, God or sort of like a god, so that really informed it.

Similarly, Jillian attributed her shift away from valuing appearances and toward challenging gender norms to celebrity influences, especially Tori Amos, Ani DiFranco, and Jodie Foster. She noted the power of Tori Amos’s piano playing and the way in which she conformed to some
beauty standards and rejected others. She also felt influenced by Ani DiFranco’s song “I Am Not a Pretty Girl,” which is about not conforming to traditional gender roles of helplessness and passivity that people expect attractive women to fill. For example, the song begins with the lyrics “I am not a pretty girl / that is not what I do / I ain’t no damsel in distress / and I don’t need to be rescued.” Jillian saw Jodie Foster as not conforming to gender roles or basing her identity on “hyper-femininity.” These celebrity figures are arguably all conventionally attractive, but they helped Jillian critique the gender roles and expectations surrounding attractiveness and women in general. Emma also cited music as influencing her to devalue attractiveness, particularly musicians such as David Bowie and Paul Simon, who to her seemed to value internal characteristics more. Thus, entertainment media has the potential to communicate anti-beautyist messages to consumers or to promote a positive body image.

Winn felt that favorite characters are influential even in adulthood and said, “I think that we’re still influenced by fictitious characters even in our thirties.” She suggested that her favorite character Jessica Day from the television show *New Girl* had not directly influenced her understanding of attractiveness, but had helped her articulate her idea of beauty and how it compares to society. She said, “I can see the stark contrast of how I see beauty differently from when I was really little to now.” Winn’s comment emphasizes a potential area of media effects that is currently little-researched but may be particularly salient for adults, that is, media as a space in which individuals can see their preexisting values challenged, reflected, or clarified.

Social cognitive theory suggests that observational learning is more likely if the model is relevant to the observer (Bandura, 1969). Consistent with this, several participants specified that they found favorite characters to be particularly influential to them. In this way, viewers may imbue mass media communication with some of the social and emotional implications of
interpersonal communication. Media effects must be understood not only in terms of academic analyses of the content, but also in receivers’ interpretations (Austin, 2008; Austin, Pinkleton, Hust, & Miller, 2007). For example, Emma drew the message “beauty is not important” from *Lord of the Rings* even though the books emphasize the beauty of the prominent female characters and associate this beauty with their social status or value (Enright, 2008; Hatcher, 2007). Winn reported that she felt that the TV show *New Girl* featured a lead female character (played by Zooey Deschanel) who was a positive role model in part because she was “passionate and authentic” without being “perfectly put-together and skinny and all those things.” In contrast, my perspective of the same character is that she is thin, painstakingly well-dressed and coiffed, and conventionally attractive. Discrepancies like these highlight the importance of investigating people’s perceptions and responses to media messages (Austin, Pinkleton, Hust, & Miller, 2007; Austin, 2008), in addition to performing content analyses and other methods that prioritize the perceptions of the researcher.

Further, these discrepancies raise the question of how emotional connectedness to a narrative, personal experience, and other individual factors influence how people respond to media messages about physical attractiveness. For example, Winn explained that when she’d had a different hairstyle, people had told her she looked like Jessica Day, which she’d agreed with. This similarity presumably impacted how Winn interpreted Day as a character and as an attractive woman. Similarly, Emma’s interpretation of *Lord of the Rings* as deemphasizing physical attractiveness is not necessarily invalid but is not the only possible interpretation. Emma drew on certain aspects of *Lord of the Rings*, but not others, to connect with the message that resonated with her. Other media provide similar opportunities for multiple interpretations of messages about physical attractiveness. Emma’s and Winn’s comments may suggest the
possibility that viewers interpret media they like or identify with in a manner consistent with
their own values. Conversely, individuals may be quicker to identify messages they disagree
with in media they dislike. If so, individuals’ favorite media may serve as a way of resisting the
dominant beauty schema, if the viewer is so motivated.

**News Media and Attractiveness**

Participants were also aware of research related to the extent to which people value
attractiveness. For example, Ginny reported having read a study or poll—she couldn’t remember
which—in which people were asked if they would elect to become more intelligent at the
expense of their attractiveness, and subsequently asked this question of her family at the dinner
table. She was pleased to find that her family would choose intelligence over attractiveness.
Carrie was highly interested in the website *Beauty Redefined*, which she described as “these
women who have Ph.Ds and women in the media, basically, and they’ve done a lot of research
on the media’s influence on women. I’m obsessed. I read all of it.” Thus, Carrie was seeking out
experts’ critiques on society and beauty. Charlotte referenced pieces in *The New York Times* and
*NPR* in her discussion that people in society care too much about what others think of their
appearance, and Kim had read about teenagers and self-esteem related to body image. However,
Pippa said she’d seen research that found that people do not always “subscribe” to media beauty
standards. Thus, nonfiction sources could provide research summaries, polls, and critiques about
beauty culture and the importance of attractiveness for women.

Participants also talked about media that promotes a healthy body image. For example,
Annie appreciated media figures who discuss self-love and body positivity. Winn read critiques
of the thin ideal and weight-related stereotypes on the culture and opinion website *HelloGiggles*
and on social media and blogs. Similarly, Blair’s social media feed contained material about
positive self-image. She referred to Facebook content about self-acceptance as “positive social media” and suggested that people in her Facebook network believed in self-acceptance and not caring about physical appearance. She added that people use social media to “call out” others who care excessively about what someone wears or weighs. She said,

It could just be Facebook putting on there what it knows I wanna see, and so I see more videos of people doing those social experiments or whatever, where it is about self-acceptance and body acceptance and all sorts of different acceptances.

Thus, Blair suspected that Facebook had detected her desire to see content about self-acceptance and therefore made this content readily available to her. Others who do not click on or digitally respond to such content, however, may not be offered as many self-acceptance pieces on their social media feeds. Nonetheless, some participants speculated that interest in self-acceptance and a broader definition of beauty was increasingly prevalent in media. Nina said, “I think in some ways the media has been a bit better about trying to share a broader sense of beauty than it did, you know, several decades ago.” Nina referenced increasing racial diversity and Cindy Crawford’s mole as the beginning point of this shift toward a broader view of beauty. Cindy Crawford was a supermodel who rose to prominence in the 1990s and was famous in part for a mole on her face (Nolen, 2019). Nina felt that Cindy Crawford’s career success made beauty more accessible and was “a very positive thing.”

Tess recounted that in 2014, she had begun watching a Colombian news channel called Bogotá Humana and was surprised to realize that within a month of watching the channel, she had begun to “think more positively…in a different way.” She realized that the channel did not feature beauty-oriented advertising or require female anchors to be beautiful, and that it focused on Indigenous Colombian arts, culture, and social issues. In this way, Bogotá Humana sent the message that looks were not important. Tess’s discussion of Bogotá Humana also portrayed “mainstream” and celebrity-oriented media as being in tension with the prosocial, local coverage
of Colombian culture and arts. Specifically, her comments implied that mainstream media was both image-oriented and lacking coverage of Colombian culture, and that *Bogotá Humana*’s focus on Colombian culture was tied to the absence of image-oriented content. The tension that Tess perceived between mainstream and prosocial media may parallel the tension other participants experienced between physical beauty and values-driven definitions of beauty, where physical attractiveness is associated with superficiality. The tension between mainstream media and *Bogotá Humana* may also stem from the globalization of Western media and the lack of non-sexualized or authentic representation of Colombian identity in Western media.

Like Tess, Carrie found that nonfiction media coverage of topics that were important to her decreased her own concern about beauty. She read a memoir dealing with spiritual topics such as the nature of the afterlife, and said the book helped her realize:

> [W]e should be putting our effort into getting more light [a manifestation of one’s kind behavior] instead of being more beautiful, and I had never received such a concrete application of something that I could change in that way, so I really liked that.

Taken together, participants’ comments suggest that fiction, celebrities, music, and nonfiction media can serve as sources of messages that align with or help develop one’s own values and deemphasize the importance of physical attractiveness.

**Advertising and Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’ campaign.**

Most positive comments about advertising were related to the skincare brand Dove, which was mentioned by eight of the 30 participants. In 2004, Dove began an advertising campaign featuring women of different ages, sizes, and ethnicities, who were not professional models. The campaign included messages criticizing narrow beauty standards and encouraging women to feel and identify as beautiful (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Ivona described a Dove commercial “where they had women of all shapes and all colors and not conventional, oh they
were still pretty attractive women, you gotta give ‘em that, but they were trying it with this wide array and I loved it.” Here, Ivona phrased her observation that the women in the ads were attractive as a compliment to the women rather than a critique of the ad’s beautyism. Nina said that Dove did a “great job” of including different ages and bodies in their definition of beauty, and Ophelia said that their advertisements featured “not always thin-thin or the best hair or the best skin tone or whatever. They’re addressing all women. I love that.” Thus, participants appreciated the inclusivity of the ads and the greater perceived realism or attainability of beauty in the ads. However, Molly suggested that Dove may have been excessively pandering when they marketed different-shaped moisturizer bottles for women of different sizes. Most comments about Dove advertisements were favorable, although some participants did note that the women selected for the advertisement were attractive.

In contrast, critics have identified potentially problematic aspects of the Dove Real Beauty campaigns, including the use of photoshop (Collins, 2008), the paternalistic or condescending nature of the advertisements (Adamson, 2013), and the fact that Dove designed the advertisements to sell beauty products (Nash, 2013). Further, participants did not question the messages of the advertisements—that every woman is beautiful, that every woman should feel beautiful, and that women can control how beautiful they feel. These critiques aside, participants’ embrace of the Dove ads may reflect the paucity of body positive messages in media and participants’ desire for a more inclusive notion of beauty, rather than a lack of media literacy. Throughout the study, participants of a range of body sizes voiced a need for greater body diversity or fat appreciation in society’s definition of beauty.

**Considering Representation and Beautyism**

Near the end of the interview, I asked participants how they would feel if the media
featured fewer images of highly attractive women and more women who were not considered attractive; in other words, if media was less beautyist. Some participants responded that such media could have a positive impact on mental health. For example, Jillian contrasted hypothetical non-beautyist imagery (media featuring imagery of less-attractive people) with the “unhealthy,” prescriptive beauty imagery of today. Similarly, Carrie said, “It would be great, that might actually help. It would be one way to combat all the negative body image that women struggle with and negative self-esteem and eating disorders.” Thus, Carrie suggested that non-beautyist media would not only avoid creating problems, but could potentially help solve, or “combat,” these problems. More specifically, some participants suggested that non-beautyist media could promote self-acceptance among people who do not meet the dominant beauty schema. Annie felt that such media would help people with visible differences, such as moles, rosacea, or missing limbs, accept themselves. Daphne also said that because most people do not fit societal beauty norms, people would feel better about themselves when looking at magazines and billboards if media was non-beautyist. Further, she felt that advertising featuring women who were not highly attractive might help people use or refuse products without experiencing changes in their self-image. She said that such advertising:

\[\text{takes away that fear appeal, where if you don’t use this product you won’t be this beautiful, whereas hey I can use this product and still maintain my image of myself and be happy and comfortable, I’m still me.}\]

In this way, Daphne saw non-beautyist media as potentially useful to advertisers while still promoting self-acceptance and positive affect. Carrie also articulated a desire for non-beautyist media, and said, “if they had like the heroine be…not as beautiful or young, I feel like that would send the message that it’s accepted and it’s okay.” Similarly, Ophelia said, “I know how it’s important that everybody is seen and appreciated.” Non-beautyism may also have implications for women’s behavior. To this effect, Winn suggested that non-beautyist media would result in:
less selfie culture. I think that you would see women with higher self-esteem, think that you’d see less bullying, I think that the competition...eventually would probably run down and you would see women helping other women more instead of competing.

Her comments suggest condemnation of women’s responses to beautyism in society, as she assumed that selfies are problematic and that women commonly mistreat other women.

Participants also discussed non-beautyist media in terms of representation. For example, Blair felt that media was increasingly offering more positive roles for women who “were not the picture-perfect person,” as opposed to roles like “the sidekick or the silly friend or the stupid friend or the one that always got into trouble or whatever else….” In this way, Blair recognized that women who do not meet the beauty ideal are currently portrayed in media in a negative manner. Similarly, Ivona said of hypothetical non-beautyist media, “I like that where they’re bringing in marginalized people and making them part of the conversation, so I love seeing stuff like that, I really do, and I wish there were more of it.” Some participants described the potential for non-beautyist media to foster social change. For example, Jillian said, “any movie that humanizes someone who does not meet the standard, conventional standard, I think changes the viewer’s perception.” Tess said, “if all the media were like this we would be going on a different direction.” Tess linked this potential for social change with the representation of less-attractive people on television, and said, “people would start feeling more identified and more as regular beings, and caring less about whatever we look like, because there’s people like us on the TV.”

Both Tess’s and Jillian’s comments assume that less-attractive people are not currently viewed as fully human. Further, Tess described non-beautyist media as humanizing the general viewer (“we” and “us”) rather than humanizing less-attractive people in particular. In her quote, her concern was not with widening beauty standards, but with de-emphasizing physical attractiveness altogether.

Robin, the participant who vocalized the strongest sense of having experienced beautyist
discrimination, was also the most pointed in her critique of institutionalized beautyism in media. She suggested that “there should be fairness in media advertising,” and that advertising professionals should come together to develop an agreed-upon code of ethics like journalism’s ethical standards. Such a code might require advertisers to “represent all parts of society, you know, short, tall, fat, thin, abled, disabled, we need to show a reflection of our society.” She even speculated that such a representation might have prevented a real-life killer “who felt he wasn’t attractive and nobody wanted to date him” (apparently referring to Roger Elliot) from committing homicide. However, participants did not generally endorse codifying or requiring non-beautyist media, and noted barriers to producing such media. Some participants suggested that advertisements would not be effective if they did not feature women who met standards of thinness or attractiveness. For example, Gwen said, “I don’t know that they would sell the product if they didn’t have what they thought was the most beautiful model and stuff there.” Additionally, Emma and Violet described enjoying looking at beautiful women in general. Thus, imagery of beautiful women may contribute to media’s entertainment value for female as well as for heterosexual male audiences and contribute to effective advertising. Further research is needed to determine how viewers and advertisers weigh the benefits of image-oriented media against the benefits of non-beautyist media.

**Interpersonal Communication with Mentors and Role Models**

Modeling and message reception occur in interpersonal as well as media contexts.

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4 A discussion of the ideology of “Incels,” the hate group to which Elliot Rodger and at least one other domestic terrorist have had ties (Futrelle, 2018), is beyond the scope of this work. However, given the recent media attention Incel communities have received, it is important to note here that Incel ideology is highly incompatible with anti-beautyism and has different goals. For example, Incel communities valorize self-loathing and promote sexual and physical violence, particularly against women.
Interpersonal relationships, or the relationships people have with friends, family, romantic partners, and others, may help individuals to resist body dissatisfaction or pressure to adhere to beauty standards. Family support, in the form of psychological connectedness (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010), sources of positive or protective messages (Pelican et al., 2005), or open communication (Taniguchi & Aune, 2013) has been associated with more positive body image. Longitudinal evidence suggests that adolescent girls’ body satisfaction both predicts and is predicted by the adolescent’s sense of psychological connectedness to their family, and that both connectedness and body satisfaction decrease over time (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010). Adult women have recalled that during childhood, their parents or siblings helped them to appreciate or accept their appearance (Pelican et al., 2005). Conversely, college women who perceive themselves as having difficulty communicating with their parents are less likely to be satisfied with their bodies (Taniguchi & Aune, 2013).

In addition to familial relationships, relationships with peers, including friends, are a form of interpersonal relationships that may also serve as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction, although this positive impact may be attenuated. For example, Irish adolescents have also reported that peer compliments and advice can protect individuals from poor body image (Kenny, O’Malley-Keighran, Molcho, & Kelly, 2016). However, they also articulated that girls were complimented for their appearance only for conforming to beauty standards, such as how makeup, hair, skin, eyebrows, clothing, and facial characteristics should look (Kenny, O’Malley-Keighran, Molcho, & Kelly, 2016). Advice was intended explicitly to help individuals adhere to beauty norms, except in cases where advice-givers were perceived as attempting to sabotage a friend’s appearance out of jealousy (Kenny, O’Malley-Keighran, Molcho, & Kelly, 2016). Thus, supportive comments about appearance may function to increase rather than
decrease pressure to adhere to beauty norms. There is some evidence that a positive body image is protective against negative media effects (Halliwell, 2013) and frequent binge eating (Sonneville, Calzo, Horton, Haines, Austin, & Field, 2012), but further research is needed to examine body satisfaction attractiveness as a protective or risk factor for negative media effects. Self-rated attractiveness has also not received great attention as a risk or protective factor in media effects research, although there is evidence to suggest that low self-perceived attractiveness can be a risk factor for negative affect in response to beauty imagery (Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004).

Among adult women, dating partners and spouses may influence body image. In fact, wives’ body satisfaction has been found to be more impacted by their perception of their husbands’ evaluation of their body than by their childhood experiences with family (Pole, Crowther, & Schell, 2004). Women have reported that being desired and appreciated by their partners increases their body satisfaction (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007). Among a sample of college-aged heterosexual couples, there was evidence of a bidirectional relationship between women’s concerns about their body size and shape and size and shape and their relationship outcomes. Specifically, men’s relationship satisfaction appeared to predict women’s body concerns (Morrison, Doss, & Perez, 2009). Among adults age 60 or older, husbands’ satisfaction with their wives’ appearance was associated with wives’ body satisfaction (Oh & Damhorst, 2009). Husbands have been shown to play a role in attempting to assuage their wives’ concerns about their postpartum weight and body shape, although they also have reported privately desiring their wives to lose weight (Paff Ogle, Tyner, & Schofield-Tomschin, 2011). Some women have reported feeling more confident in their bodies because of their husbands’ praise or encouragement, while others have reported receiving criticism about their weight (Pelican et al.,
In summary, women’s romantic and sexual relationships may help reduce their body image concerns. However, the role of partners’ appearance-related approval in women’s body satisfaction has not been extensively explored outside of the context of weight-related concerns.

Research suggests that college women with a positive body image report seeking peers who are similarly positive (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). However, little is known about the roles of mentorship or role modeling in the development of body image. Several participants in the present study described individuals who influenced their own or others’ understanding of attractiveness through mentorship and example. Several participants described parents as potential role models, and participants frequently mentioned parents and siblings in their interviews. Molly described her extended family in detail, often using them as contrasts for her own views. For example, she found her stepmother’s emphasis on makeup and fashion unnecessary and reported that she did not share in her stepmother’s beauty practices. Florence specified that childhood was a key period in the development of one’s understanding of attractiveness, and listed friends, peers, parents, teachers, coaches, and clergy people as relevant influencers and role models. These individuals, Florence argued, impact young people’s understanding of attractiveness not just through words, but through their own behaviors: "how they’re showing up, how they’re eating or not eating, how they’re drinking or not drinking or how they’re dressed or not dressed….” Thus, Florence believed that adults impact children’s understanding of physical attractiveness even in the absence of verbal communication on the topic, and that these adult influencers are not limited to parents or other family members. Like with media, interpersonal messages about beauty are in this view ubiquitous.

Experiencing mentorship and learning from role models was not relegated solely to
childhood or adolescence, as some participants described the impact that their peers or mentors had on them in adulthood. For example, social media afforded opportunities for positive discussion. Autumn said of a friend, “She’s always posting things just you know the things that she posts and her views, I think that’s been an influencer to me.” Similarly, Ivona felt her understanding of the mind-body connection and its relationship to exercise was helped by a former boss who “was just this powerhouse of a tiny woman and really into fitness.” More negatively, she felt that the thin ideal had been “force-fed” to her through “the media and other women.” Thus, although Ivona had received interpersonal messages supporting the dominant beauty schema, she had found other female mentors to counter this message. Further, these interactions occurred in adulthood, again suggesting the importance of this period of life in the development of women’s beauty schemas.

Another participant, Jillian, recounted that between the ages of 25 and 35, she had gone through a “very conscious transformation of those inner structures” or personal understandings of attractiveness. In fact, she felt less influenced by her parents’ example than she did by the mentors she’d found in adulthood, at least when it came to understanding the importance of the role of beauty in romantic relationships, and insinuated that this was because of her desire to differentiate herself from her mother rather than identify with her. Instead, Jillian spent her mid-twenties to mid-thirties identifying female mentors who were twenty or even 40 years older than her to help her reformulate her ideas. She said:

To see what the male-female dynamic looks like when the woman isn’t trying to be the standard of beauty that I grew up with, and the male isn’t hyper-masculinized, and appearances don’t matter so much…I got to see some models of what that looked like. That was great.

In this way, Jillian linked beauty ideal with gender roles and romantic or sexual relationships. Jillian reported that this intergenerational mentorship and role modeling was beneficial for her
because these women had already worked through issues related to beauty standards and gender roles, and thus had wisdom to share. Furthermore, she said, some of these women had grown up with exposure to feminist thinkers like Gloria Steinem, and this familiarity with feminist theory was useful in approaching beauty-related issues. Now that she herself was 43, Jillian had assumed the role of feminist mentor for other women. She saw an unfulfilled need for such mentorship in society. She said:

    Maybe I’m wrong about this, but I feel like we need more intergenerational guidance. I didn’t have many women mentors growing up in the South who I felt like I could relate to who could guide me on any of this stuff.

Jillian’s comment suggests that older, more experienced women may have a particular role to play in helping younger women make sense of beauty standards and challenge societal pressures to be beautiful.

**Mentoring Others and Parenting**

    Participants’ comments and narratives revealed the potential of mentorship as a means of acquiring healthy ideas about physical attractiveness. Furthermore, research suggests that mentorship can benefit mentors as well as mentees (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). However, little research has investigated how women attempt to influence others toward modifying or rejecting the dominant beauty schema. Participants in the present study described their strategies for parenting, promoting body positivity, and challenging cultural norms, both with children and with other adults. Some participants provided people with factual information or resources about beauty and body image. For example, April described sharing information about photoshopping and the unrealistic nature of beauty standards with her boyfriend. Similarly, Ophelia sent copies of a book on menopause to friends because she’d found it personally helpful. Other participants had spontaneous conversations with friends and family
about body image. For example, Annie liked to simply let body image conversations unfold, and said, “it’s not like I go in with an agenda to be like, ‘I’m gonna make my family love their body!’ but somehow it gets there.” In this way, she felt that she had been a positive influence on her sister and mother.

Several participants described carefully monitoring their own language and communication, particularly with young people, to avoid perpetuating beliefs about the importance of attractiveness. For example, both Helena and Tess avoided discussing physical attractiveness with their nieces. Tess said:

I try not to use the word beautiful or beauty or pretty. I try to use other adjectives that might be more meaningful, and I try to highlight or emphasize the qualities that they have, like when they are caring or thoughtful about other people. So that’s what I say to them, when they are caring or thoughtful, and when the words beautiful comes…I will signify it by using those other adjectives. I tell my nieces, ‘Oh you are beautiful because you are a caring person, you know, you are such a caring person and loving person and you think about others, that that makes you beautiful.’

Thus, Tess either praised her nieces for their character and behavior or explicitly defined beauty for them in terms of psychological features. Similarly, Helena avoided talking about appearance with her niece because she wanted to emphasize the importance of aspects of her life besides her looks. She said:

When I hear other people say things about her appearance it breaks my heart. [I’m] like, ‘Don’t even go there.’ Ask her how her classes are going, and is she enjoying a certain subject, and what sports is she playing, what position, is she happy? I wanna hear that more than focusing on how she looks.

In this way, Helena did not describe herself as redefining beauty for her niece, but rather as de-emphasizing the importance of beauty. Clearly, Helena felt not only that her niece's appearance was irrelevant, but also that focusing on appearance would be hurtful and wrong. Tess and Helena described their determination to focus on aspects of their nieces aside from their beauty as helping to support their nieces’ self-esteem. However, they also conveyed anti-beautyist values, where
women’s positive qualities are viewed independently of their physical appearance and where their lives and activities are more interesting than their aesthetic appeal.

Blair observed a similar non-beautyist use of language in the comments her friends left for other women on Facebook. She noted that when younger women would post photos of themselves to Facebook, others would initially respond by praising their beauty. She speculated, “They’ll say things like that because…they know that that is what that person wants to hear, or maybe they assume that’s what they want to hear.” However, the women receiving the compliments would then attempt to deflect them, and a shift in language would follow. She said:

They [other commenters] are very much are like, ‘No, you are a strong beautiful woman,’ and they try to put those sorts of things in there like ‘strong’ and more of those sort of descriptive terms, rather than just beautiful, and ‘intelligent,’ and you know, different things like that rather than just ‘beautiful’ or ‘pretty.’

Through language like this, these Facebook friends would try to help the original poster link psychological features to beauty and thereby develop a less superficial understanding of beauty, something more than “just” pretty.

Participants also engaged in conversations with the intent or potential to influence how boys and men understand beauty standards and the importance of attractiveness. In this way, participants may have been able to help themselves and others resist societal beauty standards. For example, April described talking about photoshop and makeup with men, including her boyfriend. She said:

I have to explain to like the men in my life, like ‘Hey…there are these standards that women are being judged by and you don’t even know you’re judging them,’ like when you’re like, ‘Oh she looks tired,’ I’m like, ‘She’s just not wearing makeup,’ and that kind of thing, so bringing it to their attention so that they can be aware of it and respond better.

Thus, April’s goal was not just to raise awareness, nor to increase body positivity, but was also to reduce men’s negative “judgmental” responses to women not meeting the dominant beauty standards. In other words, April confronted beautyism. Participants also discussed the thin ideal
and sizism with men. For example, Emma felt that she had reduced, though not eliminated, her husband’s endorsement of the thin ideal by pointing out his biases, and Ginny thought that her husband had done the same for her.

Parenting emerged as an important context for discussions about attractiveness and society. Participants had different techniques for discussing cultural understandings of beauty with their children. Bonnie took an interactive approach, asking questions that could potentially promote her children’s self-reflection about their goals and motivations to be attractive (“what is our goal here?”). Some participants also noted the importance of being available, generally, for conversations about beauty with their children. For example, Ivona and Lucy advocated for open and honest communication with their children on issues related to attractiveness. Charlotte tried to make opportunities for body image conversations with her children as soon as she noticed an issue, oftentimes spurred by problems that she noticed college students were facing. She preferred this strategy of confronting body image and attractiveness issues head-on over expecting the school system to manage them. Body image conversations did not need to be premeditated, however. Violet, however, was already preparing for conversations she planned to have with her daughter, including sharing a metaphor for appearance-related diversity that her mother had taught her. She said:

As she [Violet’s daughter] grows up I think I will definitely be speaking to her about [appearance and conformity] …. My mom has a nice way of saying it, she’s like, ‘All the five fingers don’t look the same, do they? They’re all different widths. They’re all different heights. They all have different textures based on what kind of work you do, so don’t expect people to look all the same or like talk all the same.’

Thus, Violet had a plan for how to link diversity, identity, and physical appearance in a way her daughter could understand, when the occasion arose. For Nina, media use facilitated discussions about “real beauty” with her nine-year-old daughter. For example, she said, “sometimes a commercial will come on or something and it’ll provoke a discussion of what real beauty is as
opposed to you know Victoria Secret or whatever that might come on.” Conversely, Nina shared with her daughter her positive reaction to Dove’s Real Beauty campaign, which she felt promoted self-acceptance. In this way, Nina used media to stimulate discussion about what she considered a healthy view of beauty as well as what she considered unhealthy. In this way, participants like Lucy, Charlotte, Violet and Nina expressed both concern and a sense of agency or efficacy in dealing with media messages about female beauty.

Other participants expressed skepticism or anxiety about body image and attractiveness conversations. Isobel, for example, was skeptical of the capacity for interpersonal communication to influence others’ understanding of beauty or body image. When I asked her how she would respond to a girl sharing concerns about her appearance, Isobel replied that she would say “Ignore them, you know, beauty is on the inside not the outside, but my words would not mean much to them.” Isobel also reported that she did not think she had significantly influenced others’ attitudes about beauty. Other participants expressed anxiety about discussing body image issues or regret for unsuccessful communications. For example, Ginny felt unsure about how to address her daughter’s unhealthy eating behaviors while still being sensitive to issues around body dissatisfaction and weight stigma and dealt with this uncertainty through prayer. Carrie decided to abstain from commenting on people’s appearances altogether after a friend responded to Carrie’s offhand comment about her friend’s light eyebrows by drawing them in. Bonnie appeared frustrated that she was unable to help her friend’s college-age daughter overcome her body dissatisfaction. The young woman viewed Bonnie as “like Mom #2” and was dismissive of appearance-based reassurance from either woman, apparently viewing it as biased or obligatory.

Ivona spoke in detail about the complexities and pressures of fostering a healthy body
image for her daughter. She became emotional when discussing her daughter’s difficulties with self-esteem and shared that she felt highly motivated to try and help her. Ivona said of her daughter:

She’s talking about this stuff with her friends and at school and it really has cemented in me that I need to give her the tools to handle this stuff, ‘cause she’s gonna be bombarded with it. I want her to have the strength and her mind to say ‘This is who I am, you know, and I’m happy with my mind, I’m happy with my body….’

Ivona hoped not only to help boost her daughter’s confidence, but also to teach her the skills necessary to manage her own insecurities and dissatisfactions. At one time, her daughter left her diary open on a table and Ivona read a passage, which revealed her weight concern and other anxieties. Ivona’s description of her reaction to this event was impassioned:

She [Ivona’s daughter] says things like ‘I feel stupid and I feel fat and I feel lazy’ and I, [hand to chest] oh my gosh that breaks my heart…I don’t want her to need external validation, [but] that’s what I give her right now because that’s what I can give her. I want her to have internal validation for who she is and what she can do, and that she can make a difference in this world…I want her to have those resources inside her, and / or know where to find the resources to help her deal with stuff, whether it’s counselling if she needs that or friends or whatever she needs to get through, but really she needs to have it inside her to counterbalance all the stuff out there that’s negative, or just know that it’s not real. It’s so not real.

Ivona’s description of her response to her daughter’s diary links her daughter’s body image concerns with other aspects of her self-esteem and shows the difficulty that parents may have in trying to counteract societal influences that may be detrimental to their children’s self-esteem. Although Ivona’s frustration and sadness with this situation is clearly evident, her comments also reveal a belief that resources to combat these societal influences exist. Ivona’s response also focused on wanting to scaffold her daughter’s response to “all the stuff out there” and develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy, rather than necessarily avoiding unwanted messages.

For some participants, discussions about the importance and definition of attractiveness with their children were related to the experience of marginalization. For example, Violet felt
forced to have discussions about race and skin color with her three-year-old daughter. Someone had called her daughter Coco, and her daughter went through a period of avoiding socializing with other dark-skinned people. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the marginalization of people of color in Western beauty standards (Robinson-Moore, 2008) and American society generally (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2017). Weight-related conversations were already beginning to arise among the young children she interacted with as well, including a six-year-old girl who said, “[I] need to watch [my] figure.” Similarly, Robin felt that her own experience of marginalization she experienced as a disabled, heavy woman, and her son’s embarrassment over this marginalization, had sparked his rejection of idealized beauty standards and his preference toward what he termed “real girls.” She also reported that her son had overheard her talking with her sister about workplace discrimination they had experienced, and that this had likely influenced his rejection of female beauty ideals. Thus, body image conversations with children do not necessarily focus on body dissatisfaction and self-esteem but can also include social justice considerations, including anti-beautyist discourse.

**Summary**

Much research has focused on the roles of media (Lin, 1998; Stern & Mastro, 2004) and interpersonal (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Jones, 2004; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011) communication in perpetuating dominant beauty standards, such as the thin ideal. However, individuals in the present study also identified media that challenged the dominant beauty schema or sent the message that attractiveness is not important. Some participants also identified fictional characters or celebrities whose role modeling was particularly impactful for them. Women also identified the positive impact of mentorship and role modeling in the formation of a positive body image and promotion of anti-beautyism. In fact, some participants engaged in role
modeling and mentorship themselves, as parents, daughters, sisters, teachers, supervisors, and friends. Thus, while negative messages abound, both media and interpersonal communication may also serve as protective factors against beautyism and the internalization of the dominant beauty schema.
CHAPTER SIX

STEREOTYPES ABOUT ATTRACTIVENESS

The culturally dominant and alternative beauty schemas all include information about what features are or are not physically attractive in women. However, beauty schemas can also include information about what sorts of traits or other characteristics attractive people typically have. These schematic beliefs may constitute stereotypes, or beliefs and expectations about a group of people that are misleading or overgeneralized (Hilton, & Von Hippel, 1996). Previous research suggests that attractive individuals are indeed stereotyped, generally in an ostensibly favorable way. Tsukiura and Cabeza (2010) even suggest there is a neurological basis for people’s tendency to positively stereotype attractive individuals. The tendency to stereotype individuals based on their level of physical attractiveness is often referred to as the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920), what-is-beautiful-is-good effect (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), or, conversely, the what-is-beautiful-is-beastly effect (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979).

Attractiveness stereotypes are important to identify and challenge because they have the potential to influence individuals’ economic status, academic success, and social interaction. Attractiveness has a direct impact on financial status such that attractive men and women have higher incomes and less financial strain (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009), and experimental research suggests that unattractive women are more likely to be fired than moderate or highly attractive women (Commissio & Finkelstein 2012). Academics are also impacted, as research suggests teachers assign lower grades to less-attractive students (Malouff, & Thorsteinsson, 2016). Physical attractiveness confers benefits to women and girls in social settings as well. For example, attractive women have greater social influence and receive greater deference in dyadic interactions with less-attractive women (Haas & Gregory, 2005). Similarly, heterosexual
attractiveness, or attractiveness to boys, is a key factor in social popularity among fifteen-year-old English schoolgirls (Duncan & Owens, 2011). To the extent that attractiveness stereotypes play a role in how individuals are perceived in social, educational, or professional domains, these beliefs are powerful and damaging.

Attractiveness is associated primarily, although not exclusively, with positive stereotypes. People tend to rate attractive people as more extraverted, generous, kind, warm, caring, supportive, and disclosing (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010). Additionally, people stereotype attractive women as more extraverted, emotionally stable, and conscientious (Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015) and intelligent (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016). Men and women rate more attractive female faces higher in agreeableness, openness to experience, extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability (Segal-Caspi, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012), projected academic performance (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016), and social competence (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). More generally, Little, Burt, & Perrett (2006) have found evidence individuals stereotype attractive people as having whatever traits the perceiver happens to value. However, not all stereotypes about attractive women are positive. For example, images of highly attractive women in magazines have been evaluated by male and female participants in negative ways, including that they are vain, egotistical, snobbish, cruel, manipulative, immature, dumb, sarcastic, uncooperative, and have poor relationships with men (Kalof, 1999). Thus, it is possible individuals pursue or eschew attractiveness not just for itself, but for its association to these positive and negative stereotypes.

Some research has investigated the possibility that attractiveness stereotypes may be true. In this view, being attractive could cause one to be more socially desirable to others, leading to more social interactions, which would in turn influence the attractive woman’s social behaviors.
Additionally, some research does suggest that attractiveness is in fact positively correlated with intelligence (Kanazawa, 2011; Zebrowitz, Hall, Murphy, & Rhodes, 2002), consistent with stereotypes of attractive people as intelligent (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016). The relationship between attractiveness and intelligence appears to be bidirectional and involves both biological and environmental influences (Zebrowitz, Hall, Murphy, & Rhodes, 2002).

The relationship between attractiveness and social skills or personality is unclear. For example, in laboratory telephone conversations where participants did not know what the other looks like, those who were more physically attractive were rated by their conversation partners as more socially skilled and likable, suggesting that facial attractiveness may be an honest indicator of these traits (Goldman & Lewis, 1977). However, this study did not control for the possible impact of vocal attractiveness, which is correlated with physical attractiveness in women (Collins & Missing, 2003). Additionally, individuals who are high in extraversion and agreeableness, are also more likely to groom themselves in such a way that increases their physical attractiveness, thus creating a real correlation between attractiveness and personality stereotypes (Meier, Robinson, Carter, & Hinsz, 2010). Other research suggests that individuals stereotype attractive people positively because of an automatic desire to affiliate with attractive people (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010). Positive stereotypes of attractive people may even have a neurological basis, as moral and aesthetic judgments are associated with similar patterns of brain activation (Tsukiura & Cabeza, 2011). Culture may also play a role, as individuals can observe the favorable treatment of attractive people in real life and favorable portrayals in media (Eagly, 1991). More research is needed to determine if and how correlations between physical attractiveness and intelligence or social skills develop.

In the present study, I elicited discussions of stereotypes by asking participants to
describe what sorts of thoughts or feelings most people might have about an attractive woman they saw walking down the street, a question which was followed by asking the same question regarding a less-attractive woman. Most participants elaborated more on the first question, and either named fewer stereotypes for unattractive women, suggested unattractive women were generally viewed as “the opposite” of what had been discussed, or described stereotypes faced specifically by overweight women. Thus, the following chapter typically uses attractive women as the focal point around which stereotypes are discussed. These stereotypes participants discussed were generally divisible into three domains, namely the success, social, and wellbeing domains.

This chapter begins with an analysis of participants’ perceptions of ostensibly positive stereotypes about attractiveness, followed by a discussion of negative stereotypes. Next, I examine the interpersonal and media contexts of attractiveness stereotyping, including the prevalence of such stereotyping in society, the etiology of these stereotypes, and the motivations for engaging in attractiveness stereotyping. Finally, I discuss participants’ personal reactions to these stereotypes, including their criticisms of stereotyping and the impact of attractiveness stereotypes on their desire to be attractive.

Positive Stereotypes

When participants described stereotypes associated with attractiveness, professionalism, agency, achievement, and efficacy or talent were among the most frequent themes. Together, these themes comprise the success domain of attractiveness stereotypes. Prominent among these were the stereotypes of attractive women as generally successful. For example, Dawn suggested a common stereotype is “She’s successful because she’s attractive.” Gwen said, “If people felt someone was attractive, for whatever reason, I would think they would believe they would be
more successful.” Bonnie claimed assumptions about attractive women included that “they’re really great at their job.” In contrast, Charlotte suggested unattractive women are more likely to be promoted at work, a rare instance of a participant associating unattractiveness with privilege or positive outcomes. However, this was a minority view.

Many participants described stereotypes that link attractive women to qualities that could themselves lead to success in work or other domains. These qualities included professionalism, credibility, responsibility, maturity, and intelligence. For example, Robin said if you are attractive, people assume “you’re credible, you’re someone to be believed.” Jillian remarked on a popular association between general appearance and intelligence. She said, “I think there are stereotypes of what an intelligent person looks like, and it’s not necessarily like a beauty queen, but there is a kind of look, I think is why newscasters look that way and, you know what I mean?” Jillian’s comment may suggest media perpetuates stereotypes about attractiveness and intelligence. April linked perceptions of intelligence specifically to facial attractiveness, and said, “I feel like a man looking at them [two women in identical clothing] might consider the attractive one more professional because they’re not aware of the makeup and stuff,” thus associating facial attractiveness with professionalism. Her qualifier that men are “not aware of makeup and stuff” further implies it is perceived facial attractiveness itself, rather than willingness to adhere to grooming expectations, that evokes this stereotype. Annie elaborated on the associations between attractiveness, thinness, and success. She said:

I think for attractive women, they [onlookers] automatically assume that they’re successful, that they’re smarter, that they’re cleaner, more responsible. A lot of that for me has to do with size and assumptions that people have with size, but it’s also ‘Oh well she’s really beautiful so she’s definitely going places.’ There’s this weird assumption that you are automatically successful and skilled and the world is open to you.

In this way, Annie critiqued these stereotypes as “weird” or unreasonable, while also linking attractiveness with thinness and thus with weight-related stereotypes. Through these stereotypes
of success, intelligence, and competence, attractive women are not necessarily objectified. Instead, they are viewed as agenic, competent, and capable of achieving their goals.

Perhaps related to stereotypes of attractive women as more successful, participants also suggested attractive women are stereotyped as wealthy. Helena said attractive women are viewed as both “having it all together” and as “well-to-do.” Frances said people commonly associate “socioeconomic class” with attractiveness, and that this association was “unspoken.” The unspoken nature of this stereotype may indicate a societal lack of awareness of or readiness to acknowledge beautyism. Kim also felt people associate attractiveness with class. She said people assume attractive women have:

[T]he background, they’ve got the money, so feeling like the reason they’re that way [physically attractive] might be just because of how they were raised, the kind of money they have. That’s probably a stereotype, ‘cause you can probably find beautiful people in all walks of life and all cultures [and] economic background[s]….

Grooming choices also potentially accounted for much of the perceived association between attractiveness and wealth or status. For example, Tess suggested “people make a lot of assumptions in terms of what the woman does” based on her attractiveness and recounted a story of a male friend who had assumed his doctor was a secretary based on her unattractiveness, large glasses, and braces. This comment implies what one wears impacts their level of attractiveness and thus the assumptions people make about the prestige of their careers. Similarly, Pippa speculated some people respond to attractive women with thoughts like “I’m going to assume she makes more money because she’s all beautiful and doesn’t shop at Goodwill like I do.” Here, onlookers remark on appearing “all beautiful” in conjunction with not shopping at a thrift store, perhaps suggesting both physical features and clothing are stereotyped in relation to class. Alternatively, maintaining one’s appearance may contribute to both looking “all beautiful” and being assumed to have money. Personal grooming does influence attractiveness ratings (Meier,
Robinson, Carter, & Hinsz, 2010), and clothing can communicate socioeconomic status (Guy & Banim, 2000; Hill, Nocks, & Gardner, 1987) In either case, these participants described the association between wealth and class as an assumption rather than a necessary truth.

Social acceptance. Other appearance stereotypes emerged related to popularity, social skills and behaviors, and romantic or sexual relationships. Over two thirds of the participants suggested that attractive people are assumed to receive greater attention, admiration, or social success than less-attractive women. However, Dawn, Winn, Carrie, Tess, and Daphne also described this association as a stereotype. For example, Dawn said, “I assume that most people think if you’re attractive you’re going to fit in. It’s probably not true, but I think there’s some assumption there.” Conversely, Dawn suggested people would assume an unattractive woman had no boyfriends or a social life and went on to suggest people would attribute this woman’s successes to this lack of social engagements. They would believe an unattractive woman “had no choice” but to focus on her career. Stereotypes could also pertain to the health of the attractive woman’s relationships and family life, as Ivona admitted her own tendency to assume attractive women have “this perfect relationship” and “really well-adjusted kids.” Taken together, participants’ comments suggest they perceived society to stereotype attractive women as generally successful with friends, romantic partners, and family.

In addition to assumptions about social success, several participants referenced stereotypes of attractive women’s social behavior, primarily niceness. For example, Holly said attractive women would typically be viewed as “outgoing” and “nice.” Emma confessed, “When I was really young, I thought more along the lines of ‘Oh they’re pretty, they must be so nice.’” However, participants did not universally observe this stereotype. Ginny described the association of “nice” with attractive women; however, she immediately followed this with the
suggestion that such people may not be viewed as focused on being “kind.” Ophelia was noncommittal regarding the existence of a friendliness stereotype. When I clarified my question about stereotyping using “friendliness” as an example of a possible stereotype, Ophelia replied, “Hmm, friendliness based on their attractiveness, I’ve never put those together, it could be, why not, ‘cause I know a lot of attractive people that are very, very friendly.” Thus, participants inconsistently identified friendliness as a stereotype of attractive women.

Some participants thought attractive women are stereotyped as funny, interesting, or cool—in other words, as charming. For example, Gwen repeatedly suggested attractive women are stereotyped as funny, a sentiment Carrie echoed. Further, Carrie said attractive people were stereotyped as “cool.” Winn’s described the effect of this assumption on her childhood experiences, and said, “I think that it’s changed a little bit now but when I was younger it was definitely very clear, you were not weird if you were pretty and if you were in the popular group.” Tess suggested attractiveness was used as a cue to decide how “interesting this person might be.” However, most comments in the social domain pertained to attractive women’s general popularity or niceness, rather than their charm or social skillfulness.

Nearly half of the participants identified a stereotype that attractive women have happiness or untroubled lives. For example, Emma confessed:

There’s this tendency, and I kind of catch myself doing it sometimes too, where you idealize their life. You’re like, ‘Oh they’re attractive, their life must be perfect,’ when really you know, I know that it’s not. I think sometimes like ‘Oh they’ve got it easy because they’re pretty’ or ‘they’ll have it easier than me because they’re pretty’ or something like that.

In this way, Emma saw the stereotype that attractive people are happier as inaccurate but difficult to drop. Jillian said of the child pageant winners she had seen as a child in the South, “they looked happy, you know what I mean? They’re in the parade and their smiles are perfect, I
thought at the time.” This appearance of happiness, she said, had led to an attitude that winners were in a way “superhuman.” Thus, she had assumed that attractive people were in some way superior to everyone else, befitting their ostensibly superior lives. Conceivably, this stereotype stems from the combination of the success and social domains. The stereotype may also be related to the hypervisibility of attractive celebrities, who have beauty, fame, and fortune. In this way, attractiveness may become associated with a privileged and enviable lifestyle.

**Negative Stereotypes**

Not all stereotypes about attractive women were positive. Attractive women could be viewed as judgmental or unfriendly. Helena suggested some people might have the following thoughts in response to an attractive woman:

That person is going to think less of me because I’m not at that standard of beauty…they might be looking at me saying, ‘Oh man that person does not have it together’…if I’m judging this person seeing how beautiful they are, what are they thinking about me?

Blair said she herself had these thoughts sometimes, and said, “I expect them maybe to be more um exclusionary or judgmental of me.” She said that as a result, she was guarded around attractive women. Autumn also suggested the media teaches people that “these beautiful women…they’re not gonna talk to you, they’re gonna be mean or something.” Taken together, these comments suggest the very assumption that attractive women are sought after socially or valued by others may lead to the assumption that attractive women are antisocial or uninterested in friendship, because they have no need to form new friendships or can afford to be highly selective. Further, these quotes suggest a fear of being devalued by attractive women because of one’s lesser attractiveness. This fear may relate to the importance of attractiveness for women and the association of attractiveness with social value. Thus, people may stereotype attractive women as “nice” or as “exclusionary,” because both qualities may be possessed by someone who is socially desired by many others.
In contrast to the image of attractive women as successful and competent, eight participants suggested beautiful women are viewed as unintelligent. For example, Charlotte said, “I think kind of stereotypically people don’t think sometimes that a beautiful girl can be smart,” and Tess said, “with pretty women…they usually say that they are not intelligent, that they are dumb.” Other participants mentioned the “dumb blonde” stereotype. For example, Helena said,

I think that if somebody comes in and they’re tall and blonde and skinny and all done up that maybe people assume they’re not as smart as maybe the gentleman next to them who’s in a buttoned-up suit you know clean cut.

In Helena’s description, both the man and woman adhere to traditional grooming expectations (“skinny, “done-up,” “clean cut” and in a suit), but only the woman is stereotyped as dumb. Similarly, Charlotte identified the dumb blonde stereotype in the television show *Big Bang Theory*, which associated a brunette woman with intelligence and with unattractiveness and a blonde woman with lack of intelligence and with attractiveness. Potentially, the perceived stereotyping of blonde women as unintelligent could arise from the idea that blondeness and attractiveness are feminine characteristics, thus activating gendered stereotypes. Women are stereotyped as unintelligent compared to men (Emerson & Murphy, 2015), a gender dynamic evident in Helena’s description of a blonde woman appearing less intelligent than a man. However, most participants did not believe unattractive women are stereotyped as intelligent.

As described previously, participants’ comments on perceptions of attractive women suggest the belief that attractive women are generally viewed as successful, agenic and efficacious, within the confines of gender stereotypes regarding women’s intelligence. In contrast, less-attractive women are either denied access to the benefits of these stereotypes or are viewed as being, as Ivona put it, the “opposite” of the way in which attractive women are perceived. She said:

You see somebody who’s not conventionally attractive in that mold that we have and
your mind just goes to ‘Oh wow they must be sad’ or ‘they must just be messed up or slovenly or lazy’…. I think that’s just conditioned into us that something must be wrong with that person.

In this quote, Ivona suggested people are socialized to negatively view men and women who deviate from the culturally dominant beauty schema. Similarly, Daphne remarked on stereotypes of unattractive women as lazy or lacking conscientiousness. She said,

I think people think if someone is unattractive, they think that they don’t care about their appearance, they don’t care how they look, they don’t care how they feel or how other people judge them, they’re just lazy or they’re not interested.

The stereotype of unattractive women as lazy or unmotivated may exist simply as the logical extension of the stereotypes of attractive women as successful, responsible, and agenic. However, it is also possible the stereotype has arisen because of the associations of fatness with unattractiveness and laziness, a stereotype which is discussed later in this chapter. Additionally, some participants discussed the time or energy-consuming nature of beauty practices such as applying makeup and selecting the appropriate clothing. Thus, people may view less attractive women as not engaging in necessary beauty practices and therefore as lazy. Corroborating this interpretation, some participants also reported stereotypes that unattractive women are unmotivated—that they simply do not care enough about their appearance and have “let themselves go.” For example, Molly reported that some people treated her with an attitude of “Well gosh you just gave up, didn’t ya?...you could do so much more.” She had also been told, “You could be so pretty if, you know, if you did this, if you did that, if you wax your toes,” but she was dismissive of this advice. In this way, Molly critiqued the prescriptive nature of beauty standards for women.

Abstaining from beauty practices may therefore lead to being stereotyped as lazy or unmotivated. However, participants suggested attractive women also risked being stereotyped as focusing their attention and effort excessively on achievement or validation related to their
appearance. For example, Dawn suggested attractive women may be stereotyped as “conceited, too worried about her appearance, shallow,” while Annie selected the word “vain.” Molly described her brother’s decision to “give up on dating” because of his negative evaluation of attractive women as high maintenance. She said:

   He’d look at her and he goes, ‘Too high maintenance,’ just based off of looks. Whether he knew her or not he had gotten to that point where he’s like, ‘That just looks like too much for me to take on.’

At the same time, Molly explained, her brother was unwilling to date women who had certain flaws in their appearance. Thus, women seem to be placed in a no-win situation, where they are expected to maintain an attractive appearance but are also criticized for doing so.

   Self-focus in general also emerged as a stereotype that attractive women may face. Winn appeared to have employed this stereotype herself when she suggested she may have chosen a different career path if she’d been more attractive. She said:

   I think it [attractiveness] probably would have gotten the better of me…I think I would have just chosen a different life path, and I think that because of what I’ve chosen to kind of do with my life, which is focused on nonprofit and international development work…I don’t wanna say I’d be more vain but I do think that image would play a much bigger role than it does for me now--image, status.

Although Winn was speaking about herself, her concern she might have pursued a more status-oriented career if she’d been more attractive assumes attractive people are more focused on how others see them, and that less-attractive people may have more meaningful priorities. Thus, although people may view someone who does not look their best as lazy or unmotivated, they may also view someone who does look their best as self-conscious or vain. In this sense, beauty stereotypes are detrimental both to attractive and less-attractive women.

   Participants also suggested attractive women might be stereotyped as using their attractiveness for their own ends through self-serving tendencies, sexual manipulation, or reliance on men. Pippa discussed the gendered dynamics of this stereotype, and said:
I think it’s assumed that an attractive woman doesn’t have to do anything, because she can get who she wants. I think it’s assumed an attractive man brings with him some resources, but I don’t think it’s assumed that she does, and it’s assumed that she doesn’t have to because she can get that…[from a man].

Here, Pippa described how gender stereotypes may intersect with attractiveness. Pippa’s comment suggests that for women, beauty privilege (in the form of access to male romantic or sexual partners’ resources) may help compensate for sexism. Beautiful women are perceived to have a special ability to gain access to others’ resources, but are also perceived to need this ability, whereas men are not. In other words, beauty may give some women material advantage over other women, but this advantage assumes the general socioeconomic subordination of women to men. It is men who have the resources and divvy them out to women they find attractive. Pippa extended the stereotype of sexually manipulative women to generally dependent behavior. She said attractive women might be perceived as,

potentially uneducated, and this is gonna put me in a certain age bracket but ‘slept her way to the top,’ like, you know, doesn’t really have a career or a job, can’t be smart, somehow got there on the backs of other people, whether it’s men or women….

Pippa’s reference to her age (which was 53 years) implies that the stereotype of women “sleepting their way to the top” is less prominent among younger people. However, 31-year-old Annie also described the intersection of gender and attractiveness in this stereotype. She said, “One thing I think…women who are considered unattractive wouldn’t face is that if they’re successful, people are like ‘Oh well they just had sex with a bunch of people.’” In this way, although people may stereotype an attractive woman as having greater opportunities for workplace advancement or characteristics that promote success, they may nonetheless attribute her status, wealth or success to her sex appeal, rather than to her talents or qualification.

Molly and Isobel suggested men might stereotype attractive women as sexually permissive or available. Molly suggested many men share this assumption. Isobel was
ambivalent about whether or not men assume attractive women are sexually available. She said:

I don’t know, not with all this sexual harassment information coming out. My mind goes to men thinking that they, that she would be more willing to put out than the other [less attractive] woman, but I have no idea. Maybe they think exactly the opposite of that.

Research does suggest that men are more likely to assume that a woman is sexually interested in him the more attractive she is, and it has been speculated that such misperceptions may promote sexual harassment (Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012). Isobel indicated that increased awareness of sexual harassment might disrupt this assumption, a hypothesis which requires further research.

As we have seen, participants associated thinness with attractiveness or believed others in society made this association. It is therefore unsurprising that the stereotypes participants associated with attractiveness were highly similar to the stereotypes associated with weight, both in past research (Klaczynski, Goold, & Mudry, 2004) and by the participants themselves. For example, when asked to describe the stereotypes people might apply to an unattractive woman, Ophelia immediately brought up the issue of weight and suggested unattractive people might be viewed as lazy and lacking “initiative to take care of yourself.” Laziness and lack of self-care are also stereotypes applied to heavier people (Klaczynski, Goold, & Mudry, 2004). Participants in the current study also suggested heavy women are viewed as “lazy and unkempt and just bad people just ‘cause of their weight” (Annie), less “diligent,” (Violet), and “having let themselves go and not caring how they look” (Autumn). Similarly, Blair critiqued the stereotype of the “fat stupid friend” in television. Weight stereotypes, therefore, parallel the stereotypes of unattractive people as inadequately conscientious.

Research suggests people who are considered overweight may feel socially ignored (Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2011; Puhl & Brownell, 2006). Similarly, Pippa said people do not have thoughts or feelings when they see unattractive women, because “she might even go
through completely unnoticed.” Robin claimed unattractive women are “ghosted out” and unnoticed, and Violet said, “They [strangers walking down the street] don’t respond.” Molly thought people might respond to less-attractive women by thinking of the beauty practices the woman could engage in to improve her appearance. When asked directly about stereotypes and assumptions people might make about unattractive women, Emma instead described how individuals might be “meaner” to them. Taken together, these comments suggest less-attractive women and heavy women may face similar forms of marginalization and stigmatization.

When directly asked if there was a difference between stereotypes about heavy and unattractive women, some participants indicated people stereotype thin women less because they do not blame thin but unattractive women for their appearance in the way they blame heavy women. For example, Nina said,

I think you probably wouldn’t get someone having as harsh of judgments about their character…you wouldn’t be like, ‘That person with a big nose is so lazy,’ whereas I think with weight or things that are within your control, people can assume character judgments as well as ‘that’s unattractive.’

Similarly, Bonnie speculated that a plus-size model and a thin but unattractive woman would “probably have a completely different experience” because of the assumptions made about plus-size women. Ginny—who admitted to harboring judgment against heavier people and felt guilty about this tendency—said of the distinction:

I think there’s differences in the stereotypes, yeah. Women that are heavy, we might think, ‘Well they should be more active, maybe they’re lazy… maybe they eat too much or maybe they need to control their emotions another way, instead of eating fatty foods or sweet foods.’ But a woman who’s not attractive, I don’t think that’s anything that they could do, so it’s not anything that they could change…so the stereotypes of the heavy person I think are more, some people might be more judgmental towards that, while the stereotypes of an unattractive person, in our eyes we might be a little more sympathetic.

In this view, both fat and unattractive people are stigmatized. However, this stigma takes the form of blame in the case of fat people, who are viewed as being at fault for their appearance,
whereas unattractive people are pitied but not held responsible for their stigmatized looks. In both cases, however, the assumed goal is to fit a particular standard, and pursuit of this goal is limited by ability rather than personal preferences or beliefs. The pursuit of attractiveness is so important that society views it as a responsibility, and people with “big noses” are excused from this responsibility only because others recognize that such features are not under individual control. However, in reality, both noses and weight can be difficult to control.

Participants did acknowledge cosmetic surgery, and many knew people who had undergone cosmetic procedures or had undergone procedures themselves. For example, Florence had surgery to tighten her skin after her weight loss, and Molly had undergone bariatric surgery partly because of her parents’ concerns about her appearance. Other participants discussed having contemplated cosmetic surgery or understanding others’ motives for doing so. For example, Ophelia said of the idea of undergoing a cosmetic procedure herself, “maybe Botox would not be terrible, whereas 20 years ago I would’ve just thought that was the most horrible idea ever.” In addition to these personal experiences with undergoing or considering cosmetic surgery, six of the 30 participants had mothers, sisters, or grandmothers who had undergone face lifts, lip injections, or rhinoplasty. Thus, participants were aware of surgery as a means of controlling one’s attractiveness. Further, participants discussed the use of makeup, clothing, and other beauty practices to make oneself appear more attractive. However, participants still distinguished between controllable and less-controllable aspects of one’s appearance. For example, Nina said that people would be more likely to stereotype based on weight than on other aspects of attractiveness because people would not be as judgmental over “things that you have no control over aesthetically, a really big nose or whatever.” Similarly, Carrie said “We’re not really in control of [our looks], we’re born looking how we’re gonna look.” Both Carrie and Nina
mentioned cosmetic procedures in their interviews, but nonetheless identified attractiveness as being partially out of individuals’ control.

**The Interpersonal and Media Contexts of Attractiveness Stereotyping**

Some participants reported that stereotyping based on attractiveness occurs frequently in society. Ophelia argued that although society was moving away from focusing on appearance, “I still think attractiveness plays a key role in how people see and treat each other, I do.” Tess said her friend’s experience of stereotyping his unattractive doctor as a secretary “was something that caught my attention, saying ‘Oh my goodness, we are still making all the time…assumptions on people’s physical appearance.’” Tess’s use of the word “still” illustrates her belief, similar to Ophelia’s, that society could be expected or assumed to have decreased stereotyping but had not yet fulfilled this expectation. Nina believed beauty stereotypes are evident at an early age. She reported that her friend’s kindergarten students said their teacher was the smartest person they knew added that this was “because you’re beautiful.” To the extent that beauty stereotypes are pervasive and deeply embedded in individuals’ beauty schemas, these stereotypes may impact how society treats women.

Some participants even reported engaging in such stereotyping themselves. Ivona said, “I know I do it…I’ll see some beautiful woman walking out on campus and I’ll think wow, she must be really successful.” Holly said she found herself making attractiveness-based assumptions “all the time.” Several participants also suggested they had applied attractiveness stereotypes to people more in the past than they currently did. Generally, they attributed this shift to maturity and experience. For example, Helena posited that people lose their belief in attractiveness stereotypes in response to disconfirming evidence. She said of people in her workplace:

I guess we’ve experienced that, whereas younger generation, they haven’t broken through that façade yet….They haven’t experienced somebody who’s really cool who’s just flat-
Helena’s explanation for this age-related decrease in stereotyping may also be a sort of third person effect, in which individuals assume that persuasive messages will impact others but not themselves (Davison, 1983). Helena believed only people younger than herself would engage in the undesirable behavior of stereotyping attractive women. This perception is consistent with participants’ tendency to assume children but not adults or themselves are impacted by contemporary media messages. Alternatively, experience and maturation could lead individuals to adjust their beauty schemas in the way Helena described. Molly supported this view and attributed her change in beliefs to shared experiences and understanding. She said:

I don’t question why people look the way they do anymore. I know what it’s like. I do have a disability … I’ve had days where I’m at home and it’s like when did I take my last shower, was it three days ago, four days ago?

Although reduced belief in attractiveness stereotypes may be a natural byproduct of maturity, it was not viewed as inevitable. For example, Jillian said, “I think that idealization kind of evaporates over time, unless you really work to maintain it, and maybe some people do.” Jillian’s comment implies that beauty stereotypes function as wishful thinking, and that individuals passively discard their beauty stereotypes as they age. This view is not necessarily conducive to an anti-beautyism stance, where beauty stereotypes are problematized to a greater extent. Nonetheless, she and other participants in this study identified the existence of beauty stereotypes and viewed these stereotypes as inaccurate.

Some participants suggested media informs people’s stereotypes about attractiveness and unattractiveness. Most of these suggestions pertained to negative stereotypes about attractiveness. Blair suggested film and television portray “the more attractive person being mean, being exclusionary, being backstabbing, versus the not-as-attractive nice person.” Dawn
cited Disney films like Snow White, Descendants, and Tangled, as portraying evil women as beautiful and vain. For example, she said “the evil queen in Snow White wants to be beautiful, she has this image of being beautiful, and she uses that in the most, in a negative way.” Outside of Disney, Dawn critiqued “the image the young beautiful women who take advantage of older guys to get their money.” Media also communicated that beautiful women are exclusionary. For example, Autumn felt the stereotype that beautiful women “aren’t gonna talk to you, they’re gonna be mean or something” might be due to “media influence. Participants also noted the “dumb blonde” stereotype, as when Charlotte critiqued the show The Big Bang Theory for portraying stupid women as blonde and attractive and smart women as brunette and less attractive.

Some participants’ comments also revealed the impact of media on their own negative stereotypes of beautiful women. For example, Emma uncritically cited the song “Roses” by Outkast as a personal influence, with its description of a woman who is beautiful but also “bitch” and “gold-digger.” In her discussion of reality TV shows, Daphne said, “I see a lot of that, the fake hair and nails and everything else associated with total and utter failure in the rest of your life.” In conjunction with the stereotypes that participants identified in media, these negative associations contrast with the stereotypes that participants imagined a stranger to apply to an attractive woman. Although some participants did note fears that an attractive woman might be exclusionary and critiqued the notion of attractive women as dependent on their sexuality, they did not suggest that strangers would view attractive women as evil, the way media portrays them. This discrepancy may suggest negative media messages about beauty are not generally fully internalized.

In addition to negative stereotypes about attractiveness, some participants perceived
media as a source of ostensibly positive stereotypes about attractiveness. Jillian suggested Disney princess associate beauty with happiness. Holly thought media associated attractiveness with being “great” and “amazing.” She said:

I think because it’s [beauty] always in our face. It’s just naturally something that we’re supposed to want to attain…You watch TV, you look at magazines, we have movies, we have Princess Kate Middleton, who all these things are supposed to be amazing and it just so happens that they’re all attractive. I think that we’re just naturally driven to want to reach, we want to be great and what we’re being told is great is all of these attractive things.

This quote illustrates how media may perpetuate idealized expectations about the lifestyle attractive people have, alongside the dominant beauty schema. Tess also suggested a link between the desire to be like media figures and stereotyping attractiveness. She said:

All those [characters and celebrities] are in very subtle ways getting to our psyche and creating all those imaginaries, or how we see other people and how we see ourselves, and in those ways. That’s how we start expecting things from other people according to the physical appearance.

Thus, Tess saw media as playing an etiologic role in beauty stereotypes. She also described these expectations as being related to identity, or “how we see ourselves.” Beauty stereotypes, then, may have personal consequences and be applied to oneself.

Altogether, participants rarely mentioned the media in their discussions of stereotypes about attractiveness. Ginny, Carrie, and Charlotte also described media, such as sitcoms and film, as sources of stereotypes related to attractiveness. However, comments about positive stereotypes related to media were rare, and discussions of media stereotypes of unattractive people were almost entirely absent. Instead, participants centered their analyses and critiques around the narrowness, superficiality, or unrealistic nature of media beauty standards. This tendency to describe media stereotypes as it relates to attractive women may reflect the preponderance of attractive women in media and the relative lack of unattractive women to whom they might be compared. Nonetheless, future research should investigate in greater detail
what stereotypes about attractiveness are evident in popular media and how the ability to identify these stereotypes may facilitate rejection of media messages about the importance or nature of women’s attractiveness.

Participants also learned from interpersonal communication to associate attractiveness with certain qualities. For April, in addition to specific comments, the general tone of conversation was influential. For example, she spoke repeatedly of the association between attractiveness, beauty practices such as makeup, and perceptions of maturity, particularly by her father. When asked where her understanding of this association between beauty and maturity came from, she said, “I think it was a general sense like he might have said some things but I don’t really remember them, I just feel like he was more disapproving, and then if I had done that he would have been more approving.” Thus, April had a general sense her father associated beauty with maturity and at times evaluated her somewhat negatively in both respects. However, her memories of these exchanges were vague, and it is possible she applied her own schematic beliefs when interpreting her father’s comments or behavior. Like April, Emma felt she learned about appearance stereotypes in part from the tone of others’ reactions to her. She said of her tendency to stereotype attractive people as happier:

I pick that up from other people as well….People say that I’m attractive and other people have literally said to me, ‘No you’re pretty, you’re beautiful, you’re smart, you don’t have any problems.’

Through compliments such as these, Emma may have learned to associate beauty with intelligence and a lack of problems in life. Taken together, participants’ recollections suggest family and friends’ responses to women, both negative and positive, can transmit beliefs about the value of beauty and the internal qualities associated with it.

Participants described several motivations for stereotyping women based on
attractiveness, including envy, heuristic convenience, human nature, and sexual motivations. Stereotypes can also be convenient, as illustrated in Emma’s comment “it’s a stereotype, so I think it’s an easy ruler.” Florence suggested people have a desire to outgroup those who are neither “ideal” nor “normal,” and that this desire leads to judgmental stereotypes against unattractive women. Conversely, Charlotte saw attractive women as the object of stereotypes stemming from “envy,” and suggested this envy “evolved” from biological imperatives to procreate. Ophelia said it was “human nature” to judge others, and Pippa used evolutionary language. She said, “There’s something that clicks in our little pea brain or in our way back, you know, Neanderthal brain....” Potentially, biological or evolutionary motivations for stereotyping may be more difficult to change or control. When asked why people believe attractiveness stereotypes, Lucy said, “I think it goes more towards the sexual or sexuality part of it.” Similarly, Carrie said:

I’m not exactly sure. All I know is like it seems biologically men are programmed to fill in a woman’s personality once they see…I feel like their vision is such a large percentage of how they initially feel that it’s really hard for them to look past that.

Thus, Carrie saw men’s (hetero)sexuality as almost inevitably driving their perceptions of women, while she did not describe women’s perceptions of male or female attractiveness in the same way. However, Charlotte’s comment that envy relates to “biological imperatives” links women’s beauty stereotyping to men’s sexual responses. Taken together, these comments suggest some women may see attractiveness stereotyping as natural and even inevitable, though not necessarily as insurmountable, nor as benign.

Not all participants had an opinion on whether or how attractiveness stereotyping occurs. For example, I said to Rowan, “You mentioned the word stereotypes. Do you think that there are any stereotypes that people place maybe on a woman who is not seen as being very attractive?” She replied, “Hmm, I don’t know, kind of made crickets chirp in my head…I truly don’t know,
it’s made me think like well what do I think is unattractive, and I don’t know.’’ In this way, Rowan’s ambiguity in defining physical attractiveness also created ambiguity for her understanding of the social implications of women’s attractiveness. Further, some participants suggested people generally do not stereotype others based on their attractiveness. For example, Ophelia said, “I’m sure there’s still people that do that but I think there’s a lot more people, a lot more people today that go beyond the outside shell.” Here, Ophelia referenced a perceived cultural shift to less superficial ways of understanding others. Similarly, Nina said, “I think people realize ‘Oh, you can be intelligent and look any particular way.’” April also described the potential for a cultural shift against stereotyping, and said:

I guess I feel like there are changes happening in all of the [conversations] where people are becoming more aware of the perceptions that we have or stereotypes or all of that. I would want more people to know about all of that.

In this way, April articulated a positive cultural trend while also calling for change. A potential for avoiding the initial internalization of beauty stereotypes may also exist. For example, in contrast to Nina’s story of kindergarteners and their beautiful teacher, Violet suggested children do not stereotype based on beauty. She said that although she had experienced privilege based on her attractiveness in certain settings, she had not experienced this when working in a daycare center, and said, “that’s why I love kids, they just don’t stereotype that way.” Taken together, participants’ statements suggest that while attractiveness stereotyping exists, it is not universal or inevitable.

**Participants’ Reactions to Attractiveness Stereotypes**

I did not directly ask participants if these stereotypes were valid or not. However, all participants made at least one statement indicating that assumptions made about attractive or unattractive people were inaccurate or problematic. For example, nine of the 30 participants described these stereotypes as stemming from people’s inexperience or immaturity or recounted
overcoming their own assumptions about attractive or unattractive people. To this effect, Helena said that the “younger generation” hasn’t had enough exposure to counter-stereotype examples to overcome the assumption that attractive people are nice. Other participants criticized stereotypes as inaccurate or stemming from intrapersonal motivations such as envy.

Although some participants discussed attractiveness stereotypes as a normal and human reaction, participants also criticized attractiveness stereotypes as unfair, harmful, and inaccurate. Annie described the stereotype of attractive women being sexually manipulative as “crappy,” and said stereotypes of unattractive women were “gross.” Of her own experiences stereotyping others, Ivona said “I feel terrible saying these things but I think that’s just conditioned into us.” Her comment also indicates beauty stereotypes are socialized rather than innate. Ophelia critiqued stereotypes of attractive women as an unfair barrier to connection and friendship, and said:

> It’s also been a hindrance for some of them [attractive friends] too, where people don’t go to the next level to get to know them. They just kind of make the judgment call or whatever and then and then they just stop there and they don’t get to know them.

Thus, beauty stereotypes could overpower people’s perceptions of attractive women.

Attractiveness stereotypes may also lead to beauty-based discrimination and bias, or beautyism. Lucy noted a stereotype that attractive women are more likely to have talents or certain abilities, and suggested this stereotype was inaccurate. Belief in this false stereotype could conceivably lead to biased hiring decisions. Similarly, Tess expressed concern attractiveness stereotypes might lead to discrimination. Daphne thought people may falsely assume that attractive people live a charmed life. Such an assumption could conceivably influence hiring decisions and interpersonal interactions. Participants did suggest there is a basis in reality for some stereotypes of attractive women, particularly the assumption that attractive women are more likely to be hired.
However, participants made few comments suggesting the thoughts and feelings they or others experienced in response to attractive women reflected reality and were often critical or dismissive of their own initial reactions.

Additionally, participants critiqued weight-related stereotypes and occasionally expressed feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or self-censorship when they caught themselves stereotyping. In particular, Ginny repeatedly passed judgment on herself for stereotyping heavy women in ways at odds not only with her own values, but with the values she saw represented by those around her. Robin, who expressed some resentment toward attractive women, outright refused to share her reaction to a beautiful woman walking down the street. She said, “I won’t say what I would think about her.” Taken together, participants’ comments about stereotyping suggest they perceived stereotypes as generally inaccurate and potentially harmful, but also as normative and even natural. Belief that beauty stereotypes are innate and biologically-based may present a barrier to anti-beautyism. However, participants’ articulation of beauty stereotypes as widespread, misleading, and unwanted demonstrate a readiness to engage in anti-beautyist discourse.

Considerable research has investigated the roles of self-objectification (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011) internalization of gender roles (Pompper, 2016), and internalization of the thin ideal (Vartanian, Froreich, & Smyth, 2016) in women’s appearance concerns. These influences are evident in the current study, revealed through quotes about women as the fairer sex or the importance of valuing one’s body for what it can do rather than an aesthetic object. However, many participants also suggested attractiveness itself was not the end goal women desire when considering their appearances. Rather, the desire to be attractive may partially stem from other desires in the success, social, and wellbeing domains.

For example, Tess described a period of having longed to be more attractive. When I asked,
“what was it that you thought you were going to achieve if you had looked like that [attractive]?”
Tess responded that she wasn’t certain but speculated that it might have been “because of the relationships…like believing that you have more boyfriends or something if you were prettier.”
Stereotypes could also influence body image, as women evaluated their appearance not just by what they saw in the mirror but also by their perceived distance from the feelings or lifestyle they assumed attractive women have. For example, Emma went through a period of feeling unattractive, which she attributed in part to the discrepancy between how she had imagined attractive women feel about themselves and how she felt about herself. She said:

I just assumed they knew that they were beautiful…. They always just seemed like ‘I’m beautiful and I know it’…I think that’s how I perceived attractive women to feel, so I thought ‘Oh I must not be attractive because I feel so unattractive, so I must be ugly.’

Similarly, evaluations of one’s appearance could also relate to how people assessed themselves in relation to characteristics stereotypically associated with attractive women. For example, April said multiple times that makeup makes women look not only more attractive (and makeup was in fact one of the first things she mentioned in her definition of attractiveness), but also more mature, responsible and professional. This association influenced her own sense of her professionalism. She said:

I work in a professional environment. I feel like I’m less professional because I don’t spend as much time on my appearance as the people in the TV shows do. I always go ‘Oh that person is so like articulate and whatever and she’s so professional-looking,’ and then in comparison I don’t feel that I measure up in professionalism or anything like that because if I was, I’d be doing my hair and putting on makeup….

In this way, stereotypes of attractive women as successful, vain, confident, or other qualities may impact women’s body image and understanding of themselves. If a woman assumes attractive women are popular, always have romantic partners readily available, and are happy, then her own feelings of social awkwardness, loneliness, or unhappiness may lead her to infer she is not attractive.
Attractiveness was also associated with success and a perfect life, and several participants suggested attractive women were viewed simply as being “better” overall. For example, Isobel said “most people would probably say pretty people are better than not pretty people.” Nina suggested this perception was gendered, and said, “I think there’s just such a heavy emphasis on that [attractiveness] that it almost categorizes you the more you attractive you are the better you are, I think especially for women.” Thus, for women concerned about their beauty, attractiveness may function as a symbol rather than an end unto itself. During the interview, Frances clarified for herself her childhood understanding of attractiveness and its relationship to wanting to be attractive. She said:

The strange thing is I never thought…oh, no I kind of did think, I thought it would fix all my other problems. Like, if I was physically attractive…it was kind of like the physical appearance was the icing on a perfection cake. It would be the quintessential marker that everything was perfect and if I was perfect then everything else would [be]. Everything’s great because everything is perfect.

Thus, Frances saw physical attractiveness as a marker of general happiness or perfection. She imbued beauty with meaning that went beyond aesthetic appreciation.

These comments about stereotypes, assumptions and attractiveness are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they demonstrate that objectification theory alone is insufficient to explain why women wish for or pursue attractiveness. Secondly, they suggest a possible strategy to help women reduce their appearance anxieties. When women are objectified, they are reduced to their sexual functions and aesthetic value (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, participants in this study were not necessarily wishing to be decorative objects or the subject of the male gaze. Instead, attractiveness was associated with greater agency and dynamism: beautiful women are successful, they are a “Nobel Peace Prize winner ‘cause she’s beautiful” (Ivona), they are “ambitious” (Carrie), they’re “going to do something…they’ve got a purpose” (Holly).

Acknowledging and deconstructing these attractiveness stereotypes may help women to consider
alternative means of pursuing their end goals. Attractiveness is neither the only nor necessarily
the best avenue toward success, social acceptance, or happiness. When people consider what
they ultimately hope to gain through beauty, they may feel less discouraged by their lack of it.

Summary

Taken together, these comments suggest women face a complicated and sometimes
contradictory set of stereotypes about their achievements, abilities, and work ethic in which
intersections between gender stereotypes and attractiveness are prominent. Participants reported
attractive women are viewed as more successful, professional, credible, mature, and generally
conscientious than are less-attractive women. However, women who meet cultural ideals of
beauty may also be stereotyped as unintelligent and vain, consistent with feminine gender roles.
People may also attribute attractive women’s successes to their romantic or sexual relationships,
rather than to their own effort. Unattractiveness was described generally as lacking the qualities,
both good and bad, that attractive women were stereotyped as possessing. To the extent that
these stereotypes are evident in the workplace, attractive women’s looks could potentially lead to
quid-pro-quo sexual harassment or devaluation of her accomplishments, and less-attractive
women could be overlooked for hiring or promotion. The findings on attractiveness stereotypes
suggest that desires to be more attractive may stem at least partially from women’s desire to
attain career, social, and emotional goals, rather than from self-objectification and viewing
themselves as nothing more than an attractive shell. Furthermore, stereotypes serve as a barrier to
perceiving and appreciating each other as they truly are.
CHAPTER SEVEN

SELF-EVALUATIONS OF ATTRACTIVENESS

Rates of body dissatisfaction among American women range widely based on methodology and sampling, from 11% to 72% (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014). However, body dissatisfaction is generally thought to be prevalent among women, at least with respect to weight (Tiggemann, 2011). Women’s body dissatisfaction is associated with outcomes such as disordered eating (Brechan, & Kvalem, 2015), sexual problems (Carvalheira, Godinho, & Costa, 2017; Wiederman, 2000), depression, and low self-esteem (Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006). Similarly, drive for thinness is associated with eating disorders and depression (Wiederman, & Pryor, 2000). Adolescent girls report connecting body dissatisfaction with self-esteem (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002), and one study of nearly 3,000 German children and adolescents found appearance self-concept was the largest predictor of self-esteem, particularly for girls (Baudson, Weber, & Freund, 2016). Although most research on appearance concerns focuses on weight, some research has examined other topics, including college women’s concerns about acne or other skin conditions (Gupta & Gupta, 2013; Hanstock & O'Mahony, 2002), facial appearance (Jackson & Chen, 2007; Warren, 2014), and older women’s concerns about signs of aging (Clark & Bennett, 2015). However, little is known about how individuals, particularly adult women, evaluate their overall physical attractiveness.

Individuals may feel more pressure to evaluate their appearance because of their beliefs and assumptions about attractiveness, also termed body image investment (Cash & Labarge, 2004). Individuals who believe it is important to look their best can be expected to frequently assess or scrutinize their appearance, as information about their attractiveness is salient to them (Cash & Labarge, 2004). The need for this information can be exacerbated by the fact that
individuals’ appearances fluctuate from day to day and year to year, for example with their hormonal cycles (Putts et al., 2013). Further, in addition to the culturally-mandated nature of many beauty standards, attractiveness is ultimately subjective. Thus, individuals may not be certain of how attractive others perceive them. Social comparison theory posits that individuals are motivated to evaluate themselves, including their opinions and abilities. When objective measures are not available, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Thus, social comparison theory predicts that individuals will be motivated to compare their appearances to others.

In addition to the unrealistic nature of the media imagery that women have available to compare themselves to, they may be predisposed to judge themselves harshly when evaluating their appearance. Given the role of these evaluations in social comparison processes, it is important to understand how and with what accuracy women perceive their own attractiveness. Women have reported that others’ perceptions of their attractiveness increases as social distance decreases (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2011). Research also suggests a disconnect between women’s self-perceptions and meta-perceptions of attractiveness (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2011). Social media imagery may also play a role in how women misperceive their own attractiveness. For example, self-photography or “selfies” have become a common way to display one’s attractiveness online (Pham, 2015). However, it may be difficult for individuals to accurately assess their attractiveness using photographs. (Lu & Bartlett, 2014). Thus, they may be biased against themselves when evaluating the same photographs meant to reveal their attractiveness. As in the case of evaluating photographs of oneself, others’ appearance-related comments may also be ambiguous and subject to the individuals’ perceptions, as it is possible that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to interpret comments as teasing or critical than are other individuals.
(Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007). All of these biases may influence social comparison processes such that women feel more disadvantaged by these comparisons than others would perceive them.

Evidence suggests that interpersonal situations can prime women to compare their attractiveness to others, and that these comparisons are related to negative affect. For example, a sample of college women experienced a decrease in self-esteem when they believed their attractiveness was being compared to another peer’s. This was true for participants with “normal” and “overweight” BMI scores (Darlow & Lobel, 2010). Some women have reported that appearance-related comments were the typical cause of state appearance self-consciousness, while others reported that their own assessments of their attractiveness was more commonly the cause (Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Reynard, Skouteris, & McCabe, 2012).

Media are saturated with idealized images of attractive women, however, the relative absence of faces that are less idealized or that are not conventionally attractive has largely been ignored. Further, non-collegiate women’s perceptions of the meanings media place on attractiveness are not well understood but are theorized to have implications for social comparison processes and thus body dissatisfaction. These questions are important for understanding how women are socialized toward, or cognizant of, attitudes about women’s appearances and attractiveness. The following chapter describes what physical attractiveness participants ascribed to themselves, how they described making these evaluations, and the emotional impacts of their self-evaluations.

**Participants’ General Appearance Self-Evaluations**

**Self-perceptions.** In the interviews, participants tended to report evaluating their own attractiveness as average or somewhat above-average. Participants who rated their appearance as
average also tended to report they were satisfied with their appearance. Ophelia, Winn, Pippa, and Gwen all used the phrase “middle of the road” to describe their attractiveness. Other participants described their looks as “fine” (Annie), “decent” (Autumn), “moderate” (Kim), or other synonyms for average or satisfactory. Some participants used qualifiers when describing their attractiveness. For example, Dawn attributed her happiness with her appearance to her healthy lifestyle more than to her appearance itself, and said “I’m happy with how I look, I think overall, but more so because I feel good about putting in the effort.” Thus, she was satisfied to be doing the best she could for her appearance. Similarly, Isobel remarked,

I’m overweight, that right there puts me way out of anybody’s second glance, which is fine with me, but my face is pretty enough. Well it’s too fat, but I’m okay with how I look, I’m okay with myself.

In addition to her weight concern, Isobel’s comment suggests she feels facially attractive and satisfied with her appearance without standing out to others on the basis of looks. This was a sentiment repeated by other participants as well.

Holly rated her attractiveness as a 5 or 6 and specified she was satisfied with this because she looked good “for a mom.” Her comment reveals her opinion that motherhood is detrimental to a woman’s appearance. Previous research does suggest that pregnancy has a negative impact on women’s body image, particularly around weight issues (Gjerdingen, Fontaine, Crow, McGovern, Center, & Miner, 2009). However, Holly’s comments on motherhood’s influence on her body image related not just to weight gain, but to age and identity. She said:

As I approach middle age...I’m becoming more [concerned about] ‘That person looks like a mom, do I look like a mom?’ Not that I don’t feel like a mom. I think it’s just naturally where I’m second-guessing myself and figuring out where I am, who I am as I enter this new phase of life.

She elaborated that “looking like a mom” meant looking tired, unfashionable or out of touch with contemporary fashion, and appearing not to care about one’s appearance. Holly did not want to
look “like a mom,” but she also reported that she was more likely to compare her appearance to other mothers. Taken together, her comments about motherhood and appearance suggest that identity exploration (“figuring out...who I am”) has implications for body image as well.

A few participants did express that they thought they were unattractive, at least in an objective sense. For example, Ivona said, “I’ve never really felt like an attractive person” and recounted multiple experiences of being mistaken for a man based on her facial features. In her interview, she connected her physical androgyny to her perceived unattractiveness. Robin felt psychologically attractive to herself and to some men in her life, but said that overall, “I don’t think I’m attractive to men physically.” Robin’s comment raised an important point that although a woman may not be widely perceived as attractive, she can still be attractive to some.

Violet was critical of her appearance because of her weight gain and said she did not think she was attractive, but also thought she was facially attractive. In fact, she said her definition of beauty had been formed in part by the classic South Indian film stars she felt she resembled. She said:

When I’m watching those [films], I see that like a lot of the people in like the 70s, 60s, to 80s in India tend to look a lot like me, and that I guess when you watch it maybe as an eight, 9, 10, 11 year old you’re like ‘Hey, they’re in movies, why am I not in movies?’ Thus, Violet could identify with the attractive women in media. Similarly, some participants reported—although occasionally with trepidation or self-consciousness—that they were especially attractive. For example, Florence considered herself to be “very attractive” and remarked that when she had been at a heavier weight, she’d felt she could be a plus size model. Carrie said she had been referred to and treated as particularly attractive throughout most of her life, including being told she would someday be “Miss America.” Being unusually attractive, she realized, had come to be part of her identity. She said:
I used to get a lot of attention like for my looks like before I had kids, like ‘You’re so skinny, I wish I had a body like you,’ or ‘You are so beautiful’ or ‘You look just like you know such and such movie star.’ After I had kids I lost that identity, because I didn’t look like them anymore.

Carrie’s comments about looking like a potential Miss America winner suggests that some women and girls may see themselves represented in media beauty imagery, at least at some points in their lives, and thus may not find comparisons to such imagery aversive. Despite their attractiveness, both Florence and Carrie felt distance between their current appearance and professional models. For example, Carrie felt she was less attractive than she had been because of her weight, and Florence felt that although she could once have been a plus-size model, she could not now be a model because of her age. However, even at their current weights and ages, both women would most likely have been considered by the average observer to be among the most attractive of the participants in the study, in part because of their facial features. Thus, Florence and Carrie may have perceived less distance between themselves and models than would be the case for other women comparing themselves to media imagery. Future body image research using social comparison theory may investigate or control for such inter-subject differences by taking self-rated or other-rated perceptions of each participants’ attractiveness into account.

**Relevant others’ perceptions.** Participants tended to report that people close to them, including partners, family members, or friends probably saw them as more attractive than they saw themselves. For example, Frances said her inner circle probably rated her as an 8-10 on a point scale because they were influenced by her personality, but felt that a stranger might rate her as a 4-6. In this way, Frances distinguished between her physical attractiveness in isolation and her physical attractiveness when augmented by the influence of her psychological features. Annie elaborated:

Honestly, I think that’s a problem most people have is that they don’t realize that their loved ones don’t see their flaws. They don’t care if you have hair on
your upper lip or you didn’t shave. They don’t care. They see you, because they love you, and so I think they probably see me as more attractive than I see myself. They probably are like ‘Wow, it’s Annie, she’s beautiful!’ whereas I’m like ‘Eh, I’m alright.’

In this way, Annie associated perceptions of attractiveness with love, and perceptions of unattractiveness with flaw-finding. However, even when attending to her perceived flaws, she felt comfortable with her appearance.

In particular, participants anticipated being viewed as more attractive by their romantic partners than by themselves. In fact, when asked how attractive she saw herself as being, Ophelia’s immediate reply was to ask “Oooh, in my eyes or my husband’s?” Lucy said laughingly, “My husband better think I’m a knockout!” while Ginny explained the impact her husband’s evaluation had on her own, and said:

I know that I’m not movie-star-beautiful, but I think my husband thinking that I’m so beautiful and saying that I’m getting more and more beautiful every single day has made me feel like maybe even more than medium-attractive. Maybe three-fourths [of the way] to ultimate attractiveness, I guess, kind of growing every day.

Thus, Ginny valued her husband’s perceptions and felt she was closer to attaining some private ideal as time passed, rather than farther away, even as time passed and she aged. She also viewed her attractiveness as malleable, something that changed day by day but, did not indicate suffering from an unstable body image.

Blair, in contrast, reported deflecting her husband’s compliments of her appearance, and said “There is the part of my brain that goes ‘Well, he’s obligated.’” Like Lucy, Blair’s comment indicates a perception that husbands should find their wives attractive, irrespective of one’s objective attractiveness. Annie had a similar response to her mother’s appearance-based compliments but said that because her husband had “picked” her as his intimate partner, his compliments were meaningful to her. In this way, Annie viewed her mother as potentially
obligated to approve of her appearance, while her husband’s approval was not initially contingent upon any obligation. Other participants did not even mention their husbands in the context of appearance evaluations, despite being married. In summary, participants either tended to believe that those closest to them viewed them in a similar way to how they viewed themselves or were more favorable. No participant indicated those close to them would see them as less attractive than they themselves did.

Strangers’ perceptions. When speculating on how a stranger would see the participant's attractiveness, participants had a wide range of responses. Some specified that strangers would see them similarly to how they saw themselves, and others thought strangers would have a more favorable or less favorable perception. Other participants said strangers would not necessarily notice them. For example, Kim described herself as “moderately” attractive, and said “I don’t think I get a lot of second glances, but I don’t feel like I need to shrink into the sidewalk or anything when I walk by somebody….” Annie, a 31-year-old woman who identified as “fat,” described this lack of attention as a form of marginalization. She said:

I think because I’m fat I don’t register. I’m kind of a non-entity to a lot of people, which is fine. I’d rather be a non-entity than a point of obsession honestly. I think that fat people and older people are kind of invisible, older women specifically, are like invisible in our society, so I don’t think people really think about me.

Annie’s comment positions invisibility as the lesser of two evils, with women who meet beauty ideals of thinness and youthfulness as targets of unwanted attention. She also gendered this dynamic, which older men appear exempt from. Isobel expressed a similar sentiment, “I think that that strangers look and say ‘Oh fat broad’ and ignore me, and I’m out of their awareness completely.” In this way, Isobel and Annie linked thinness, youth, and beauty with attention, and lined age and weight with lack of attention.

Some participants’ evaluation of their appearance seemed unduly critical. For example,
Tess described herself as psychologically but not physically unattractive and indicated she did not meet conventional beauty standards. She seemed sincere, but the source of this negative evaluation was not clear to me, and Tess did not suggest dissatisfaction with any specific part of her appearance. Helena and Autumn were both critical of their hair and indicated struggling with distress or self-consciousness because of their hair, again for reasons that were not obvious to me. Other participants appeared to base their evaluations of their attractiveness primarily on their weight and were dissatisfied for this reason, or shared dissatisfaction with aspects of their figure or appearance that surprised me. These discrepancies could be due to individual differences in definitions of attractiveness. However, previous research has found that some level of appearance dissatisfaction is widespread among women (Gitimu et al, 2016) and girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017) and so it is unsurprising some women would have unrealistically negative perceptions of their appearance or parts of their appearance.

Uncertainty. Several participants did not feel they knew their level of attractiveness. For example, Rowan said she knew neither how to evaluate her appearance or how those close to her evaluated her appearance, before speculating that she was “regular” and that her loved ones see her in a positive light. Another participant, Charlotte, claimed to have no idea of her level of attractiveness. She said, “I’ve honestly not ever really thought about it, not at all.” She also said she had never spoken about her appearance with people close to her. This statement may reflect a response bias, as it seems unlikely a married 42-year-old women in American society would never have contemplated her own attractiveness or that the recruitment and consent form materials for the study would not have primed any such thoughts. Alternatively, this lack of interest in her own appearance could arise from the beauty blindness Charlotte attested to when asked to define attractiveness. However, most participants had some sense of what they felt their
attractiveness to be. This self-reflectiveness is consistent with society’s focus on women’s appearances.

Favorite Features. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe aspects of their appearance that they found particularly attractive, that they had been complimented on, or that they wished they could change. The traits or body parts participants described as attractive in themselves included their athleticism, body size or shape, eyebrows, eyes, face, legs, smile, fingernails, hair (including color, texture, thickness, and length), grooming choices, teeth, lips, skin, and relative youthfulness. Several participants remarked that they liked their eye color, including blue, green, and brown eyes. The most commonly selected features included eyes, smile, skin, body, grooming choices (especially those related to hair), teeth, and faces.

Generally, participants did not struggle to identify an attractive feature of themselves or display self-consciousness when doing so. However, some participants focused less on the visual appeal of a particular trait and more on its psychological aspects or personal significance. For example, Blair teared up when she recounted that “People have told me that I shine, I like that one, because…it’s more of like the inside being able to be seen from the outside. I like that.” Nina, Molly, Emma, Ginny, and Frances also appreciated the appearances of their family members and related this to their own. For example, Emma said “I do like the fact that I look like my sisters…I think they’re really pretty so I like that too.” Nina spontaneously identified her entire family as being attractive, as if it was a family identity. Molly identified her eye color and body shape with her genetic heritage, and said, “we have hazel eyes, they’re green and brown, and I’ve always thought they were gorgeous, I think they’re very pretty, my woodland eyes.” Ginny and Frances viewed certain features almost as family heirlooms, valuable because they were shared with loved ones. In the past, Ginny had wanted to change her nose, which was
similar to her father’s nose, but “then he passed away and I just wanna keep this nose forever.” Frances developed a deeper appreciation for her eyes because “my son has my eyes, so yeah, it’s also one of my favorite things about him.” Thus, participants’ positive evaluations of their appearances were not limited to aesthetic observations but included ways in which a feature expressed their character or connected them to others. In this way, they valued their appearances not just aesthetically, but also as part of their identity or heritage. Such feelings may be in opposition to objectification as they imbue the body with meaning independent of aesthetic or sexual evaluations.

Obstacles to Attractiveness

Consistent with previous literature focus on weight dissatisfaction (e.g., Brechan & Kvalem, 2015; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Samman, Fayet, & Petocz, 2012; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011), weight was the primary complaint participants had about their appearance. However, it was not the only complaint. Participants cited aging, aspects of body shape such as height or musculature, lack of feminine appearance, eyebrows, hair, body hair, eyes, the face, facial expressions, feet, grooming choices, the nose, teeth, and skin as aspects of their appearance they were currently critical of and/or had been in the past. Many of these complaints appeared to be essentially incidental in nature, such as Bonnie’s decision to wear mascara “because I have short eyelashes without it” and Annie’s irritation at an unruly cowlick. Other complaints were tied to social categories and gender norms. The following section will highlight these more socially significant comments on aging, femininity, disability, class, and weight in relation to participants’ self-evaluations.

Aging. For older participants, aging brought changes in skin, weight, and hair color. For example, Rowan complained aging had changed the skin beneath her chin. She said:
There’s like this wattle that’s coming, and I feel like it’s just going to keep coming, so I would change that. I wouldn’t actually change it, but if I could just snap and it’d be good. I wouldn’t mind if that was a little tighter.

Rowan’s comment illustrates the tension between self-acceptance and the dominant beauty schema. Participants generally disliked discovering wrinkles or other signs of aging. For example, Dawn said she and her husband “both sit in the mirror and lament the fact that the wrinkles keep growing, growing as we’re getting older.” However, she was more tolerant of her husband’s aging process than her own. She said:

I think they’re similar in the sense we’re both getting older and feeling it. He’s worrying about his hair loss and the wrinkles and his stomach and I’m worrying of course about ‘Oh I didn’t used to have those love handles when I was 18.’ But his are more related to guy issues, the stomach and the loss of hair on his head, which I actually don’t care about at all, it doesn’t bother me. Mine are related to the fact I had to dye my hair lock that’s gray and that drives me nuts even though I know it shouldn’t.

Dawn’s comment illustrates not only the tension between self-acceptance and beauty standards but also her acknowledgment of the contrast between her acceptance of her husband’s “guy issues” and her self-consciousness of her own perceived flaws.

Menopause was rarely mentioned, although Isobel warned me “it’s not usually positive.” She immediately added, “I mean, it’s not terribly negative.” Pippa attributed emotional fluctuations that affected her self-image to menopause. Ivona also described perimenopause as an emotionally turbulent time due to hormones but did not see a connection between perimenopause and body image. Although aging was not generally cited as a problem in romantic relationships, Robin and Pippa described the difficulties of dating in their 50s. Robin said, “At this point I’m not physically attractive at all, as a 53-year-old aging white woman with weight problems and a disability now.” In this comment and throughout her interview, Robin linked the dominant beauty schema with youth, thinness, and able-bodiedness. Pippa argued:

[Attractiveness] kind of matters, but it matters in that put-together sense. It matters in that I’m trying to take good care of myself. For the first time in my 50 years I’m like ‘Hey
maybe I should get some good face cream.’

Pippa’s comment suggests that as she has aged, she has placed greater emphasis on self-care or conscientiousness than on attractiveness itself. Taken together, these comments suggest that participants associated beauty with youth but appeared to adjust to aging with a certain amount of self-acceptance.

**Lack of Femininity.** Perceived lack of femininity also emerged as a source of negative evaluations. Robin said, “I have never been like looking like a girl or something, like long hair, you know, who could fit into any clothes. I always had a weird body, like a strong body, a tall body.” If she could change anything about her appearance aside from her weight, Robin would “wanna look more like a girl instead of this woman who’s strong-bodied…I wish I could be more like a girl who can wear high heels….’’ Thus, Robin appeared to associate beauty with femininity and femininity with thinness and frailty.

Emma described having been criticized for acting and dressing “too much like a dude” in her youth and was told by her family not to cut her hair because it would make her look too much like her brother. She admitted she had been “mistaken for a guy more than once…I also kind of don’t want to be mistaken for a guy again.” However, Emma still thought most people saw her as attractive, which suggests she perceived her androgyny as either controllable through grooming choices or as not antithetical to beauty.

Pippa, who once shaved her head in preparation for an extended motorcycle trip, said,

I used to say to my husband at the time, ‘You and your little gay lover are going on your trip,’ because I knew I don’t have a feminine appearance in general but especially without my hair.

In this way, Pippa felt that her appearance deviated not just from feminine beauty standards, but from femininity itself, and her baldness exacerbated this feeling. Pippa later stated that although she was glad she had shaved her head, allowing her to experience life while being visibly
“different,” she would not do so again because she could not “pull it off” aesthetically—her face was not feminine enough to offset the (masculine) lack of hair. Similarly, Ivona, who had androgynous facial features, had come to accept her appearance, but reported that in the past when she was mistaken for male,

I’d kind of look around just like ugh [covers face with hands], God I just wanna die because people are perceiving me as this mannish woman who is just not attractive, so unattractive that she gets mistaken for a man all the time.

Thus, Ivona viewed feminine physical features as important for women’s attractiveness.

The relationship between femininity and attractiveness may have been a source of tension for participants choosing not to adopt societal definitions of beauty. For example, Molly described several gender-stereotypical interests during the interview. However, she also repeatedly made statements distancing herself from traditionally feminine interests and described these interests as “concessions.” She said, “my only concession to being a girl is I wear nail polish” and “my one concession to fashion is I have books on dresses throughout the centuries, kind of thing, I love paper dolls.” Her word choice implied pressure to attend to fashion and “being a girl.” It also suggested she negatively evaluated her own interests in nail polish and historical dresses because of their associations with femininity. Further, she described her appreciation for Disney-style “princess gowns,” but framed this interest as impersonal, for example by saying that such clothing was “not something I want in my life.” In fact, Molly rejected societal beauty norms related to the thin ideal and rejected beauty practices such as makeup. She stated she “threw that whole notion of intervals of beauty out the window years ago,” choosing not to view physical attractiveness as something that varies in degree. She attributed this decision to her experiences as a “plus size gal” who still appealed to men, despite the cultural dominance of the thin ideal. Her comments also suggest that navigating grooming expectations and beauty ideals also entails navigating gender roles. Frances spoke more directly
about tension in her understanding of gender and beauty, saying:

I feel like I’m a little bit of a walking contradiction because on the one hand…I try to mark myself with these quintessential female markers [of beauty], but on the other hand I’m like No, strong, powerful [body].

In this quote, Frances paints her desire for a muscular, strong body as opposite of her traditionally feminine grooming choices and speaks of both these “markers” as aspirational. Taken together, these comments suggest that the dominant beauty schema is associated with femininity and is therefore a site of tension and identity work.

**Disability and class.** A few participants had experienced disabilities either in childhood or currently, and they related these disabilities to their body image. Taken together, their comments suggested a diversity of experiences related to disability and evaluating one’s attractiveness. Charlotte, who of all the participants expressed the least interest in her physical appearance, had been repeatedly hospitalized as a child and would “see all kinds of different people, and I think that just opened my eyes to the fact that beautiful has nothing to do with what you look like.” She had worn a back brace but had not felt less attractive because of this. Charlotte believed the hospital environment had helped her to discredit the notion of physical attractiveness. Thus, disability entered her narrative only in a positive and illuminating way. In contrast, Ginny felt self-conscious over her disability, a “lazy eye” which she had surgery to correct when she was 15. She said:

[the surgery] changed eyes and it actually changed my life. It really changed how I felt about myself, and instead of being introverted in public…I became very outgoing from almost that moment on, and totally changed my high school experience.

In this way, Ginny associated her changed appearance with social confidence. However, she did not draw a strong connection between this experience and changes in her attractiveness. Although Ginny had felt badly about the appearance of her eye, she described her concern mostly in terms of the unwanted attention people gave her, rather than as a matter of her eye’s
In contrast to Ginny’s childhood experience, Molly’s disability (or disabilities), which she did not name but described as involving fatigue and spine problems, began in adulthood and was ongoing at the time of the study. To help manage her condition, she had undergone breast reduction surgery. However, she reported she had not been concerned with the aesthetics of the reduction and in fact had been very laissez-faire when deciding what size to reduce her breasts to. Molly also reported that her husband felt similarly unconcerned about the size of her breasts. She noted, however, that other people cared more about breast size. She recalled an acquaintance who had bragged about the size of her breasts, whereas Molly’s response to her own breast size was to say “who cares? They’re boobs!”

Fatigue was a greater concern for Molly, and her bouts of tiredness impacted her grooming choices. She described herself as being sometimes unable to shower or manage putting on certain kinds of clothing. Before her disability, she had dealt with depression and with a string of caretaking responsibilities, for her younger siblings and for both of her grandmothers. These experiences, she said, had helped her to have more understanding for other people and not to judge them for looking less than put-together. She said:

I got arm strength today, okay, [whooshing noises] do my hair for five minutes and we’re good. It all depends for me on how am I feeling today, how much can I handle, and so I’ve kind of...applied that kind to everybody...maybe she [a stranger] was having a day like I had Thursday, or whatever.

Molly’s comment indicates that because disability impacted her ability to meet grooming expectations, she was less judgmental of other women’s appearances.

Robin also had a disability at the time of the interview and used a walker. She spoke at length about the ways in which class, disability, age, and weight impacted her attractiveness in the eyes of others. She said:
If you’re the aging white female disabled, who’s not attractive, you don’t fit into the gay-
lesbian, you don’t fit into all the different cultural things, you don’t fit in to your white
group, you don’t fit anywhere, you’re not attractive to anything. Or I mean at least that’s
what it feels like…

She therefore felt excluded from other marginalized groups. Robin strongly associated
attractiveness with social acceptance, often treating them as synonymous. She also spoke of the
difficulties she had experienced attracting romantic partners, and said:

When you go on that dating site…these guys in their fifties are saying they want
somebody 35-50 and I’m saying I want someone 50-70, but I want the education…. The
few that are from [local college towns], I’m not attractive to them because I’m retired and
I have a leg disability and I’m overweight….

In this way, Robin felt her disability, as well as her age and weight, made her unattractive to
others and negatively impacted her ability to find romantic partners. She said her sister had been
“the pretty one” growing up until she also experienced disability and the loss of her career.

Robin said of her sister:

She ended up partially visually blind and was unable to do her profession because it’s all
based now on computers, lots of computer work. She’s complained about loss of career,
not attractive to men, same kinds of issues I’ve been bringing up.

Once again, Robin related lack of employment and disability to perceived rejection from men. In
this way, Molly and Robin both discussed the indirect relationship between disability and
attractiveness, Molly through grooming behaviors and Robin through social stigma and the
economic consequences of disability. Clearly, then, disability and class are potentially important
axes of intersectionality in women’s experiences of beauty standards.

Weight. Weight-related concerns were common, echoing the findings of previous
literature (Gitimu et al., 2016), and were oftentimes highly emotional. Although some
participants were content with their weight, only Daphne, who was underweight and attributed
this to an unspecified medical issue, wanted to gain weight. However, she also described her
thinness as the aspect of her appearance people might find attractive.
Florence shared the narrative of her significant weight loss that included both positive and negative self-evaluations. She spoke of having been unattractive, but attributed this in part to psychological features, and said, “When I was really fat and I used to weigh 300 lbs…in my opinion I was unattractive, because I was unattractive in my mind and my body.” Thus, Florence paired psychological definitions of attractiveness with the thin ideal. She described herself as being more spiritually and mentally healthy now, but said “I still look in the mirror and I see that fat girl.” Florence also identified that a prominent theme of childhood was “I have a pretty face, but,” meaning her face was perceived as pretty but her body was not. However, when I asked how she would respond to suddenly gaining all of her lost weight back, she said, “I would hope to have the same thoughts and acceptance of whatever I look like, however I see myself.” After her weight loss, she had struggled with body shame over excess skin and eventually had some of this skin surgically removed, a decision which she expressed some ambivalence about having made. Altogether, Florence did seem to value the aesthetics of thinness, at least for herself, and may have used the language of self-care in part as a more socially acceptable way of expressing this preference. However, her narrative also highlights the distinctions between body size and attractiveness: she identified (not unrealistically) that she could have been a plus-sized model, thus recognizing her attractiveness even without fully rejecting the thin ideal.

Other participants expressed having gone through similar periods of disliking their weight or shape. Annie termed her weight a “huge obstacle related to attractiveness.” Ivona said she had matured past her body shape concerns, but that in the past:

I used to look at that [media imagery] and think, ‘Why can’t I have a flat stomach? That is the impossible goal. I’m never gonna get a flat stomach and I’m lesser than because of that,’ you know, ‘I don’t wanna be out in public in a bikini because of that…’

Thus, Ivona had continued to apply the thin ideal to herself even as she recognized that the ideal was unrealistic. Violet wanted to lose weight and reported she looked more attractive at a lesser
weight, but not to be especially thin. She said:

I’ve never been that size [size 0]. I’ve never wanted to be that size. All I want to be is to be healthy, and I know 70 kilos for my height is considered on the overweight size, but that was the time I felt healthy and was healthiest.…

Violet’s comment indicates that weight concern, for her, does not necessarily entail embracing a thin or moderate-sized body as defined by the BMI and can co-occur with rejection of the thin ideal. Conversely, personally rejecting the thin ideal does not necessarily alleviate one’s weight concerns or sizism, as individuals may feel forced to contend with others’ sizist attitudes.

**Challenges in Evaluating One’s Own Appearance**

Research suggests that emotional investment in appearance and drive to manage how one looks predicts unstable self-perceptions of one’s appearance (Melnyk, Cash, & Janda, 2004). However, beauty is ultimately subjective, and individuals’ appearances can change from day to day and year to year. The following section discusses the challenges or considerations participants faced when evaluating their looks, including subjectivity, the stability or instability of their body image, controllability of body image, and fear of vanity.

Participants struggled with the subjectivity of attractiveness. For example, Tess said she had her own standard of attractiveness which was based on psychological features, but she felt that others might apply more conventional, physical standards when they evaluated her attractiveness. In this way, society did not empower her to escape the social implications of the dominant beauty schema. Similarly, April said she did know how those close to her evaluate her appearance because of the multitude of beauty standards that could be applied, including Western or Vietnamese standards. This comment suggests the presence of multiple beauty schemas may lead to an ambiguous or ambivalent body image. Violet was not sure where to rank her attractiveness because “I know I’m not ugly, and I also know that I’m not where I could be or
want to be.” This comment implies that the aspirational possibilities of attractiveness made it difficult for her to evaluate her current attractiveness.

Some participants appeared to find rating their own attractiveness out loud an awkward or uncomfortable experience. For example, Emma said she was unsure how strangers perceive her attractiveness, even though elsewhere in the interview she alluded to benefitting from being seen by others as attractive. She said she was unsure of the extent to which people responded to her psychological versus physical features, in that:

I think my friends do think I’m attractive, but I don’t if the general mass of the public does. People will look at me and I can’t tell like if they think it’s attractive or just ‘cause I look nice, so…there’s no real clear line there.

Here, Emma distinguished between physical attractiveness and niceness, rather than asserting the latter affected the former. However, elsewhere in her interview, Emma described receiving preferential treatment from strangers because of her physical appearance. Thus, it is possible that Emma felt ambivalent about how attractive she was to strangers, or that she felt physically attractive to strangers but did not wish to say so in such a direct way. Holly admitted to feeling uncomfortable rating her attractiveness to friends or coworkers. She felt the attractiveness question was “really awkward” to answer with respect to more socially distant people, and said:

It’s actually very easy to answer with how my mom and my kids and my husband feel because they’re very vocal about it, and I know that they love me for who I am…they have different views of beauty. But as for friend and what they would think or my coworkers, that would be very awkward, just because I’m me and I don’t know what they necessarily think.

In this way, Holly too separated psychological attractiveness from physical attractiveness, and seemed embarrassed to discuss the latter.

Taken together, participants’ comments suggest others’ perceptions of one’s physical appearance can be difficult to assess, or, perhaps, uncomfortable to articulate. Such ambiguities may imply that body image is unstable, and thus more likely to be affected by media,
interpersonal comments, or other potential influences on body image. Several participants who
did not express ambiguity about their attractiveness described having a body image that was
fairly consistent from day to day. For example, Helena explained that although her body image
had fluctuated over the years with her weight, “in the more immediate it’s pretty status quo, I
think it’s pretty much the same, I’d say every day.” Similarly, Dawn said:

“I’m pretty consistent. If I have lows, it’s typically ‘cause we’ve had a busy stretch where
I haven’t slept well, and I’ll notice that I look run-down and tired, and that that will make
me not feel as good, but I’m pretty even-keeled most of the time.”

Thus, Dawn associated dips in her body image with actual changes in her appearance (due to
sleep loss) rather than to emotional fluctuations or interpersonal interactions.

Other participants, however, reported unstable feelings about their attractiveness. For
example, Ginny said, “You know you have those really pretty days? Some days I think I’m
pretty and some days I have ugly days where I’m like oh my gosh….” In this way, Ginny
experienced feeling both attractive and unattractive. In contrast, the changes in Pippa’s body
image tended to move to a high or low level, rather than oscillating around a baseline. She said,

“it’s either like feast or famine, I think it’s either at a decent level or just kind of tanks. Maybe a
little blip of a wave here and there, but then I can usually catch those.” Emma suggested it was
difficult for her even to determine how positive or negative her body image typically was, and
said:

“I have this really isolated emotional memory, so when I’m thinking that way it seems like
that’s the way it’s always been. When I feel ugly it’s like I’ve always been ugly, and then
when I feel nice I’m just like I’ve always looked nice.

Emma’s comment has implications for how she understands not only attractiveness, but also the
role of attractiveness in her life and the ways in which people respond to her appearance. Her
unstable understanding of her own body image and attractiveness may obscure or distort the real
relationship between her appearance and any associated outcomes. If so, the stability of one’s
body image may impact their understanding of the importance of attractiveness or the nature of beautyism. If individuals are uncomfortable or unable to estimate their attractiveness to others, they may not be able to recognize or challenge beautyist discrimination or stereotyping against themselves.

Several participants suggested they could, through their attitude or activities, impact their own sense of their own attractiveness. Because of this, objective evaluations could potentially be viewed as irrelevant, unwanted, or less accessible. For example, Ivona said, “If I’m out in my yard, working in my yard, that makes me feel beautiful, ‘cause I’m out in the sun and the air and the dirt and I’m grubby and I feel completely beautiful then.” In this quote, Ivona based her body image on the experience of gardening and associated positive affect, not her actual appearance. Similarly, Bonnie linked her positive body image with her sense of self and anticipated this would continue into the future. She said of her body image:

I think it’s just gonna be the same, smooth sailing…I have a good strong sense of self…I probably think I look better than I really do, and maybe that will change, I don’t know. Maybe at some point it will click in…but if not I’m just happily, blissfully unaware, marching through life.

In this way, Bonnie seemed to value appearance satisfaction over objective self-perception. Further, she associated her sense of attractiveness with her sense of self, perhaps indicating that to view oneself but not one’s appearance positively would be difficult or create cognitive dissonance. Frances rated her attractiveness an 8 out of ten because she had an “aspirational level” to attain, and then said:

But that’s comparing me to me. If I were to say how I think I’m an eight, I’m an eight, ‘cause it’s my judgmentt’s my scale, and I am a scale of one, so I’m an n of one, sample size of one.”

Therefore, Frances had control over how she viewed her attractiveness, choosing to use her own judgment and scale to formulate an attainable beauty ideal (looking her personal best).
Comments such as these suggest one’s perceptions of attractiveness may be related to one’s mood, activities, or idiosyncratic frames of reference and thus may not correlate with the views of outside observers. In this way, women may be able to resist strict and objectifying societal beauty standards while still valuing physical attractiveness.

Some participants expressed or demonstrated concern about overstating their attractiveness, potentially for fear of being seen as boastful. For example, Holly felt compelled to qualify her attractiveness self-rating. She said:

On a scale of one to ten I would say I’m a solid five, maybe six, and I say that with the caveat that (and I tell myself this which is why I’m sharing) I look pretty good for a mom of two. It’s not just ‘I feel attractive,’ it’s ‘but I have to justify that.’

Here, Holly linked her body image to motherhood in a negative way (something she did repeatedly in her interview) and used this link to diffuse whatever negative response may have been incurred by deeming herself attractive. Her statement “I tell myself this” indicates she felt a need to “justify” her feelings of attractiveness not just to others, but also to herself. This impulse is opposite of participants who expressed control over their body image and could conceivably reduce, rather than support, Holly’s body satisfaction. Her need for caveats may also be a recognition of the semi-objective nature of attractiveness and its implications. However, her belief that her attractiveness was at the midpoint of a ten-point scale was a modest assertion to begin with.

Participants like Bonnie, Frances, and Ivona felt they had some level of control over their body image—they could choose to feel good about their appearance, based on their activities, the appearance-related goals they aspired to, and their ability to set personalized beauty standards. This ability appeared to be protective against body image difficulties. However, it is also possible that some women may chose not to feel good about their appearance, even if outside observers find
them attractive. For example, it is conceivable that women with depression (which Helena said she experienced), perfectionism, or social anxiety would be predisposed to search out flaws in their appearance generally, similar to the association between eating disorders and perfectionism (Boone, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Braet, 2012) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Buckner, Silgado, & Lewinsohn, 2010). It may also be the case that some individuals strive to internalize an objective view of their attractiveness, rather than a positive one. Further research is needed to address the role of affect, personality, and mental disorders on individual’s willingness to purposefully define attractiveness for themselves in a positively biased way.

Social pressures may also play into women’s discomfort with overestimating their attractiveness. Women in the study may have felt embarrassed to praise their own appearances or felt pressured to downplay them. For example, Lucy denigrated her “lack of looks,” but then announced she felt “totally comfortable in my skin and I think I’m beautiful,” partly because of her psychological features. She then confessed, “That’s funny, I can’t believe I just said that to a complete stranger.” Thus, Lucy expressed embarrassment about praising her own appearance. Dawn used the phrase “not to sound vain” after evaluating her attractiveness, and spoke several times about stereotypes of attractive people as vain. When I asked what it was about vanity that was negative or something she didn’t want to be associated with, Dawn said:

Attractiveness in some people can be scary, in that I think there’s a fear that attractive people will use that attractiveness to take advantage of other people, and somebody who knows they’re attractive knows they have that power and may be inspired to use it in a way that harms other people or takes advantage of other people.

In this way, Dawn suggested that some women are stereotyped as manipulative not on the basis of attractiveness alone, but because these women acknowledge their attractiveness. Such stereotyping may impede women’s ability to embrace a positive body image and could conceivably motivate women to be openly critical of their appearance. If so, observers may learn
to model this self-critical behavior or include these criticisms in their understanding of the dominant beauty schema.

Similarly, when I asked Carrie to rate her attractiveness, she said “slightly above average.” However, she had already discussed at length how being viewed as highly attractive had impacted her life and identity, and the comments she reported hearing about looking like a model or celebrity did in fact seem realistic for her. When I asked how she felt, Carrie admitted the attractiveness rating question was difficult to answer because “I am an LDS [Latter-Day Saints] female…we try not to boast or like say anything, and I think most people feel, most women feel uncomfortable like rating their own attractiveness.” Carrie therefore viewed boasting in general as against her values. She also gendered women’s reluctance to boast about their appearance, which perhaps suggests society values attractiveness more highly for women than for men and that attractiveness is therefore a more significant boast. Alternatively, she may have perceived general modesty as more important to women than to men. Similarly, Autumn said answering the question was “weird” in part because she was concerned about “being too full of myself, you know, if I say something.” In this way, Autumn was concerned others would see her as overestimating her attractiveness. I myself felt awkward asking the question, although I attempted to diffuse this awkwardness by keeping my tone casual. However, no participant declined to answer the question or appeared distressed when answering.

Although fears of appearing vain or arrogant when assessing one’s attractiveness may be valid, they may also make open and honest discussion of beautyism more difficult. Additionally, the fear of vanity could conceivably stem from or contribute to the negative stereotypes associated with attractive women, for example sexual manipulativeness. Finally, it seems possible that fears of vanity could function as a barrier to developing a positive body image.
Further research is necessary to determine the relationship, if any, between reluctance to overestimate oneself or appear vain and women’s actual body image.

**Emotional Experiences of Evaluating One’s Attractiveness**

Participants varied considerably in the emotional valence of their interviews and the extent to which trauma or other difficulties emerged in their narratives. Personal experiences that participants shared and connected to their body image and attractiveness included suicide attempts, sexual assaults, eating and over-exercise disorders, divorce, bullying, parental rejection, and depression. Thus, it is unsurprising some participants had strong feelings associated with their appearance.

**Negative emotions.** Several participants expressed feelings, past or present, of guilt, shame, or lack of acceptance of their bodies. For example, Florence discussed in detail her journey toward self-acceptance and the challenges she had faced in tolerating her body. She said, “I lost all of that weight there was a lot of extra skin and stuff, so one of the things my friend had suggested I do is to stare in the mirror naked for two minutes, until I could accept myself.” In this way, Florence used deliberate and focused exposure to her perceived flaws in an effort to come to terms with them. Annie spoke of her mother’s appearance-related “guilt and hate and fear” and suggested such feelings were common for women. She viewed body dissatisfaction as a form of self-hatred, and said:

> It’s like we think we are one thing and that our body is this thing attached to that, as opposed to we *are* actually that. We are the body. It’s all part of us. So if you hate your body you hate yourself, and that’s really sad and messed up.

In this quote, Annie took a position of embodiment rather than self-objectification and placed a high value on self-acceptance.

However, self-acceptance was not necessarily sufficient to avoid negative affect, and
even participants who appeared to accept themselves could struggle with attractiveness concerns in a highly emotional way. Ivona, who was generally positive throughout the interview, responded to the question “do you think that anything in your life would change if you had been more conventionally pretty?” by saying:

    Wow, that makes me get a little teary [eyes watering]. I don’t know why, you know, sometimes these emotions just fly up. [Whitney: I actually should start bringing Kleenex] Yeah, I can see how that would be a really triggering thing. Of course I’ve wanted to be prettier.

Thus, the question about the personal implications of her appearance sparked powerful negative emotions that simply describing her appearance did not. This tearful response speaks to the perceived importance of women’s attractiveness in their lives. Helena, who was highly critical of her appearance, said “sometimes I feel like ignored in a crowd, I feel people don’t see me, so, yeah, that kind of makes me sad.” She further described herself as “anxious” and “nervous” about her appearance and felt better when she wore makeup because she looked like “a completely different person” without it. She also had a strong empathetic response to a thirteen-year-old niece who was at risk for developing a poor body image. Helena teared up and said, “It’s [appearance-focused comments] usually negative, and that really really upsets me because I know that she’s impressionable, I know she’s gonna carry that stuff with her, and it just breaks my heart.” In this way, Helena expressed anxiety and sadness over not just her appearance, but others’ reactions to women’s and girls’ appearances.

Other participants discussed weight-related concerns as well. Carrie said of her post-partum period of weight gain, which was accompanied by strict dieting, “that was extremely hard, to feel horrible about the way I looked.” Thus, Carrie had not only evaluated her appearance very negatively, but also had cared deeply about this evaluation. In addition to discussing her history of disordered eating and over-exercising, Emma repeatedly described
avoiding looking in mirrors when she felt dissatisfied with her appearance. Although she had a more positive body image at the time of the interview, she explained that in the past “I was worried about my appearance, and I was like oh my God I’m not pretty enough, I’m not thin enough, I’m not this enough, I’m not that enough.” She also described the illusory connection between appearance and self-worth and suggested that because attractiveness was used as a “measuring stick” to categorize people, which may explain why body dissatisfaction was so impactful for her. At the same time, Emma felt appearance dissatisfaction is a “luxury commodity” less privileged people do not even have time to consider, and that attractiveness ultimately has “no value”. Her self-blame for her appearance dissatisfaction was evident in her description of the experience of looking at her nose. She said, “It definitely stresses me out when I think about it, I’m just like Oh I’m gonna think about this, why am I doing this to myself, no, just--you know, that being silly kind of thing.”

Emma’s guilt over feeling disturbed by her appearance, together with participants’ feelings of self-consciousness when praising their appearance, suggests a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario in which society expects women to simultaneously maintain an attractive appearance, care little about their appearance, embrace a positive body image, and remain objective about their attractiveness. In this way, attitudes about body image—what one’s body image should be and how one should express it—may be impactful on women, in addition to the impact of their body image alone.

In addition to the feelings participants had about their own perceived attractiveness and their body image, they also expressed feelings about others’ perceptions. In other words, participants were aware of the gaze of others, as well as their own self-gaze. Some participants described strong emotions when considering others’ reactions to the participants’ appearance.
For example, Robin described intense emotions related less to her appearance directly and more to how others’ respond to her appearance. She shared feelings of isolation, hurt, and pessimism or hopelessness when she considered the impact of her appearance on her life. She said, “It is important for me to be attractive because…I wanna give and receive love again, I wanna have sex again.” In general, Robin’s emotional reactions seemed to be tied less to what she saw in the mirror and more to the external consequences of that image, which were not entirely within her control. Concerns about sexual appeal and relationships had profound implications for other participants as well. Molly attempted suicide twice in response to bullying and criticism about her weight, in part because her father told her she was not attractive enough to find a romantic partner. Conversely, Isobel had felt distressed by people’s approval of her appearance. Specifically, she described having gone through a pattern of gaining weight in response to sexual interest from men. She said:

I did not like being physically attractive. I was date raped when I was 26, and I started gaining weight then...every time somebody looked at me, a guy looked at me, with interest, I would tend to gain some more weight.

In this way, a positive appraisal of one’s own appearance could be associated with threatening and unwanted appraisals by others. These comments serve as a reminder that body image is not self-contained. Participants consider not only their own evaluations of their appearance, but also the evaluations other make of them and the types of behaviors they can expect to receive based on their attractiveness or thinness. Given these considerations, women do not necessarily have full control over their body satisfaction.

However, not all negative emotional experiences were deeply distressful, and not every perceived flaw was met with emotional pain. Participants oftentimes laughed out loud over their own complaints, expressed warmth and acceptance toward themselves, shared optimism for their future, and appeared to enjoy the experience of celebrating their looks. Some participants felt
their appearance flaws were emotionally irrelevant. For example, Molly cited her crooked teeth as a potential appearance flaw but added that “it doesn’t matter,” and Blair reported that her training in a healthcare field had affected how she responded to her appearance. She said:

I’m trained to look at it just objectively like it’s a body… I have less feelings about that I guess. Well, there has been a time or two where maybe I’ve been like ‘Oh, this is probably what my back looks like now versus what it looked like before,’ like that sort of thing…but more objective than feelings.

In this quote, Blair described her body as an object rather than an intrinsic part of her selfhood. However, she did not view her body as an aesthetic object, but instead as a biological one. This view appeared to protect her from negative emotional responses to her perceived flaws.

Others expressed some negative feelings that were mild or fleeting. For example, Nina said, “The odd thing is a little bit frustrating in moments but I don’t let it really ruin my day or something.” Violet expressed dissatisfaction mixed with acceptance, and said, “I’m not that harsh on myself now because I know what my body’s gone through, doesn’t mean I’m happy with how it looks, just means I’m not punishing myself for it.” Thus, Violet minimized guilt she might otherwise have experienced by acknowledging the biological reasons for her weight gain (such as pregnancy). Daphne felt her thin hair did not meet beauty standards but she valued it because it dried easily. April spoke of her appearance concerns with some frustration and self-blame, but at multiple points in her interview pointed out that her concerns were not intense enough to be motivating. She said:

I have some skin issues and sometimes that bothers me, like I’m not taking care of my skin the right way but I don’t know how to take care of it the right way. Or I’ll have a breakout and…then I’ll just be frustrated and be like ‘Oh I have these, I could have prevented these.’ Then sometimes you know I go “Okay well I’ll go try and buy this thing’ but it just seems like an investment of a lot of money. So I guess I don’t invest in it as much as maybe I could.

Thus, April’s body dissatisfaction, though well-articulated in her interview, was outweighed by her desire for convenience and saving money. In this way, participants expressed a range of
reactions to their perceived appearance flaws, from sadness and anxiety to nonchalance and acceptance.

Some participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to talk about aspects of their appearance they liked. For example, Ivona said “I love my legs” and suggested being willing to praise her appearance in such a way was valuable. She said, “It’s funny ‘cause we don’t embrace what it good about us, that’s a really good question that I wish people would ask more often, like what do you love about yourself?” She went on to describe the fear of bragging she felt many people are conditioned into, and how this fear is “kind of sad, ‘cause I think we should [talk ourselves up], and we should talk our kids up and we should talk our partners up and it’s not bragging.” In this way, Ivona criticized the pressure on women to suppress a positive body image and rejected the notion that praising oneself or one’s family members is bragging. Some participants made teasing remarks about their own appearance, such as Annie’s quip about her “rude” cowlick, and seemed to find amusement in their minor flaws. Participants also reported compliments they had felt flattered by, elaborated on their loved ones’ appreciation for their beauty, or described repeatedly or with energy their favorite features. Taken together, their comments suggest body evaluations can be a source of pleasure, humor, and self-acceptance rather than pain.

Summary

Most participants reported feeling more or less satisfied with their appearance, although many wanted to lose weight. They evaluated many aspects of their appearance besides weight, for example the perceived femininity of their facial features or the quality of their skin or hair. They also shared a range of emotional responses to these evaluations, from significant distress to self-acceptance to positive reactions. They described the experience of evaluating themselves
from the perspective of a stranger as challenging, partly because of the subjectivity of beauty and partly because of fears of being perceived as vain. Women’s perceptions of their attractiveness was itself a source of emotion, but so was their attitude about body image positivity and negativity and their perceptions of others’ evaluations of the participants’ attractiveness. These findings suggest weight dissatisfaction alone does not encompass the myriad ways in which women understand their appearance. Further, they suggest while body dissatisfaction was common, it was not the only emotional response women had to their appearance.
Attractiveness itself appears to have social ramifications in both childhood and adulthood. For example, physical attractiveness is positively related to social popularity (Borch, Hyde, & Cillessen, 2011; Boyatzis, Baloff, & Durieux, 1998; Eder, 1985) and negatively associated with bullying (Rosen, Underwood, & Beron, 2011). Other-rated attractiveness was found to be moderately associated with popularity among fifth but not third-grade children, perhaps suggesting a trajectory of increasingly beautyist social behavior during development (Krantz, Friedberg, & Andrews, 2001). Among adolescents, other-rated attractiveness was negatively associated with peer victimization and internalizing problems. Furthermore, peer victimization partially mediated the relationship between unattractiveness and internalizing problems (Rosen, Underwood, & Beron, 2011). This finding suggests beautyism, rather than unattractiveness itself, explains the relationship between appearance and internalizing problems. Beautyism refers to discrimination or oppression based on physical attractiveness, such that physical attractiveness confers privilege over less-attractive others (Rhodes, 2010).

In adulthood, the impacts of beauty biases on employment discrimination and the workplace have garnered particular attention. Beautyism appears to be widespread within corporations, as reported by both employees and employers (Warhurst, Van den Broek, Hall, & Nickson, 2009; Waring, 2011). Male and female non-academics stereotype academics (male and female alike) as less attractive than business professionals (Granleese & Sayer, 2006). Conversely, attractive pharmaceutical salespersons are evaluated more positively by doctors (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999), and Hong Kong human resource managers have demonstrated an attractiveness bias when evaluating male and female job candidates (Chiu & Babcock, 2002).
Such discrimination does not appear to be limited to salespeople. Data from the 1970s and 1980s that involved more than 7,000 participants found other-rated physical attractiveness was positively associated with income, particularly for unattractive individuals and across occupations. More recent studies have replicated the finding that attractiveness is associated with financial benefits (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009; Scholz & Sicinski, 2015). Beautyism, then, appears to be a widespread social problem with economic consequences. Among women, less attractive individuals had less-educated spouses and were less involved in the workforce than were their more attractive female counterparts (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994). However, attractive women are discriminated against in male-dominated professions where attractiveness is considered unimportant, perhaps because beliefs that beautiful women are feminine and therefore inappropriate for a traditionally masculine job (Lee, Pitesa, Pillutla, & Thau, 2015).

In the present study, I asked participants, “How do you think society treats women who are attractive / unattractive?” Their responses fell primarily into two categories: (1) implications for social interactions and (2) privilege and discrimination. Their responses suggested that women are placed in an unwinnable situation where they are expected to maintain an attractive appearance but are targeted with harassment or sexist stereotypes for doing so.

**Social Interactions and Attractiveness Biases**

The notion that attractive women receive greater attention and unattractive women receive less attention, from both men and women, emerged as a prominent theme. Winn recounted her personal experience of valuing her attractiveness more when it led to greater attention. She said that on the Vegas strip, women are “looked at differently” and receive attention and validation from strangers if they are dressed up. This attention in turn increased her sense of self-worth at the time. In this way, the attention Winn received for her appearance
reinforced her adherence to beauty standards, in the form of “dressing up.”

Carrie also reported that receiving attention for her appearance led her to value her attractiveness. She said, “I have had such a strong experience with getting a lot of attention for my looks and then realizing that this is not right, we shouldn’t be placing this emphasis on how we look.” When speculating about how her life might have been different if she were more attractive, Emma spoke of attention as one of the possible outcomes of attractiveness that gives attractiveness its value. She said,

If I had *believed* that I were more attractive, if I had more confidence because I was attractive and because other people gave me that feedback, they gave me the attention, they gave me the resources because I am attractive, then that definitely would have made a difference.

Emma’s comment illustrates the intersection of body image and beautyism, wherein confidence in one’s attractiveness is linked to receiving attention and other privileges for being attractive, which in turn increases the value of attractiveness to oneself. In this view, a positive body image may be associated with a stronger appearance investment, which suggests a positive body image is not necessarily protective against self-objectification or preoccupation with appearance. Body dissatisfaction has been correlated with greater appearance investment (Cash & Labarge, 1996; Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004). However, the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and appearance investment has received little research attention.

Conversely, participants reported that less attractive women are generally ignored. Violet said, “I feel like people who are considered less attractive don’t always get as much attention as they deserve.” In this view, society not only privileges attractive women, but also mistreats less-attractive women. Helena, who was critical of her appearance, said, “Sometimes I feel like ignored in a crowd, I feel people don’t see me, so yeah, that kind of makes me sad.” Florence, who associated her weight loss with an increase in her attractiveness, compared the amount of
attention she received: “...like being helped at a department store or something, I feel like people are more, not on me but they’re more attentive to me, versus when I felt more unattractive.” However, some participants felt that though they were not physically attractive, they received attention or were approached by others because of their personality. For example, Lucy said, “I won’t go unnoticed just because I’m a people person and I have a big mouth...I don’t think that when I walk by people are like whoa baby, but I don’t think I’m ignored.” Lucy’s comment suggests that although she associated attractiveness with attention, there are other avenues to gaining attention as well. In this way, Lucy saw her psychological features (being a “people person,” in her words) as helping to compensate for attractiveness biases related to attention.

Participants also suggested people admire attractive women more than unattractive women. For example, Tess said, “the thing with physical attractiveness is that you are more admired...it comes with respect.” Jillian recounted the way in which townspeople responded to child beauty pageant winners during her childhood in the Southern United States. She said, “Everybody was admiring them and it’s like you could hear the crowd like ‘Oh, it’s [name]’...‘Here they come.’” Similarly, Winn felt attractive women receive more compliments and support. She said, “I think the women who are more attractive are the ones everybody’s cheering for at the beer pong table, they are the ones...are going to be [receiving] more praise....” Thus, participants thought attractive women and children receive more admiration and respect.

In contrast, Robin felt that less-attractive people have difficulty establishing rapport with others, perhaps because they are not seen as charming or superficially appealing. She said:

Me being a 53 aging white female, basically excluded from my profession at a certain age, that’s the other thing. They want young, attractive teachers and administrators who...have more of a rapport or a way of socially engaging people on a superficial level with their attractiveness....

In this way, Robin suggested not only that individuals engage more readily with attractive
people, but also that this bias was a significant barrier to employment for those who are less-attractive.

**Romantic and sexual relationships.** Several participants suggested that people respond to attractive women with romantic or sexual interest. For example, Carrie said she had come to know she was attractive in part through the amount of male attention she received. She said, “I would just get like stares from guys and a lot of attention, they’d try to talk to me.” She also said, “Before I had kids, I got tons of attention before I got married, tons of attention for the way I look, always. Like, from guys. I just remember it was a very powerful feeling.” Carrie’s comment that male sexual or romantic interest made her feel powerful suggests attractiveness can serve as a tool for gaining social or romantic status and obtaining partners, rather than as an end in itself. To this effect, she added, “Guys liked what they saw…I’d always had roommates and, I always got the guy.” In this way, Carrie did not passively receive male approval for her appearance, but actively pursued relationship goals and “got the guy.”

Other participants noted that attractive women receive more attention from potential partners as well. Bonnie observed attractive women “have more people approach them and talk or ask somebody to dance instead of a less attractive girl.” Isobel also suggested attractive women receive more attention and free drinks in bars, “at least at the beginning of the night,” and that “there is competition to find a more attractive mate.” In this description, less-attractive women gain more attention and drinks as the night goes on, presumably from men who were not successful in competing for more attractive women at the beginning of the night. Blair felt men’s preference for attractive women extended to men’s prosocial behaviors, and said, “guys have a tendency to go out of their way more to interact with and maybe help someone who’s attractive, versus those who aren’t.” By gendering this dynamic in this way, she linked sexual attention
with helping behaviors or friendliness. Rowan summarized the importance of attractiveness in social situations with “I feel like finding a life partner could be a challenge…jobs, friendships, anything social, anything where you’re gonna interact with another human, appearance is a piece of the puzzle.” In this way, Rowan conceptualized physical attractiveness as important for all social interactions, including both romantic and non-romantic relationships.

Nevertheless, participants did not necessarily feel their own romantic lives would be different if they were of a different attractiveness. For example, Jillian said, “I don’t know if it would affect my relationship with my husband. I think not. I mean we’ve been together for so long, we’ve been together 17 years.” Thus, Jillian viewed the longstanding nature of her marriage as rendering attractiveness unimportant. Similarly, Dawn said, “I’ve got my fantastic husband who he loves me regardless [of her appearance], he’s told me that many times.” Evidently, it was important to Dawn’s husband, or to Dawn herself, to make sure the unimportance of her appearance for their emotional bond was clear and articulated. Taken together, participants’ comments about beauty and dating or marriage suggest they viewed attractiveness as important to the formation but not maintenance of close romantic relationships. However, these comments could also indicate a lack of awareness or unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of physical attractiveness in long term relationships. For example, previous research does suggest that among heterosexual couples, physical attractiveness plays a larger role in men’s marital satisfaction than in women’s (Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014).

Several participants suggested attractive women benefit generally from their appearance when in social contexts. For example, Molly said, “In new situations, I tend to notice that people kind of gravitate towards people who are more attractive and look a little bit more refined.” Kim
argued that attractiveness is “important because that will help you probably have more success with friendships,” a sentiment which Annie shared when she said, “It’s important for getting friends.” This perception points to the importance of physical attractiveness outside of sexual contexts and outside of the male gaze. Beauty’s impact on friendships also has implications for mental health. Participants thought attractive women have an immediate advantage in terms of how people perceive them. For example, April and Frances both asserted that people give “the benefit of the doubt” to attractive women more than to less-attractive women. Additionally, Gwen and Autumn associated attractiveness with approachability. In fact, Autumn, who was not always comfortable in social situations, said she deliberately wore an unattractive coat to discourage strangers from talking to her. Taken together, these comments suggest that people may treat attractive women with greater friendliness, interest, or positivity.

Conversely, participants expected less-attractive girls and women might be bullied or mistreated. Molly said if she had been more attractive, “I think I would’ve had different experiences, because I wouldn’t have been, you know, the whole thing with going through teasing and bullying and all that other crap as a kid.” Molly did refer to herself as having been “cute” as a kid, and she attributed the bullying she endured to her weight rather than to facial attractiveness. However, her use of “attractive” here, despite her rejection of the thin ideal, suggests the intersection of sizism and beautyism. She described the source of the bullying as stemming from how people evaluated her attractiveness, rather than to how they evaluated her weight itself. Similarly, Violet thought that attractiveness mattered in non-sexual domains of interaction, and gave an example complicated by sizism. She recounted feeling that her friend was treated poorly compared to herself because of her looks. Violet said:

I know that I’ve been spoken to a lot more than my best friend who would be standing right next to me, who is of a different body type. I think she’s wonderful-looking, she’s
quite stunning and fun, but just because I look a certain way, I have been spoken to more than her.

Violet’s assertion that her friend was “stunning” implies that her social exclusion stemmed from others’ perception of her as less attractive, because she did not fit the thin ideal. According to this narrative, if these people had rejected the thin ideal, they might have seen her as stunning (the way Violet did) and therefore been more inclined to talk to her. Attractiveness, then, may play a role in even basic interactions like acknowledging and speaking to someone.

**Barriers to positive social interaction.** Some participants suggested attractive women might face social difficulties related to their attractiveness. They reported that attractive women may be the subject of envy, emotional distance, or mistrust, and that people might be too intimidated to socialize normally with them. In this way, the admiration they believed attractive women receive may have negative consequences.

Participants also discussed the role of attractiveness in competition between women. For example, Emma suggested that competition for attention influenced younger women’s desire to be attractive. She said, “I notice that a lot of women see other women who are attractive as a threat. I see that a lot. Not in older women, usually in younger women. They want to look nicer or have more…maybe they feel kind of shut out if someone outshines them.” She added that she had seen women dislike other women who were attractive, for no apparent reason, which she attributed to jealousy. In this view, some younger women may feel that they are in competition with attractive women, though Emma did not specify what these women are competing for. Competition among women for romantic partners may lead to jealousy, as suggested by Gwen’s report of having been accused of “stealing” crushes or boys when she was in middle school. Women may also respond to attractive women with hostility or immediate dislike. Pippa admitted she herself sometimes felt hostile toward attractive women and said that when “the real attractive
woman shows up and all the sudden I’m like ‘Oh, bitch,’ you know, I’m gonna hate everything about her because…she’s what I’m not, sort of thing.” Like Pippa, Blair sometimes disliked attractive women, and said of a hypothetical attractive woman, “maybe I kind of hate her a little.” However, recognizing attractiveness is not necessarily associated with happiness can disrupt this response. For example, Isobel said she responded to attractive women with “maybe a little jealousy, but not much, I have kind of realized prettiness doesn’t bring you happiness….” This realization helped Isobel minimize her feelings of jealousy.

Pippa, Jillian, and Helena also suggested attractive women might be intimidating. For example, Jillian said of her highly attractive friend, “I think it’s hard for her sometimes because she is judged for her physical appearance, and sometimes intimidates people…I don’t think it’s easier.” She suggested the way in which people idealized her friend for her beauty led to isolation. In this view, the admiration of attractive women, and perhaps the stereotypes associated with them as well, can impede rather than facilitate social interaction. Jillian described this dynamic as a form of dehumanization, said, “Anytime somebody puts someone on a pedestal, you create a distance, and you’re no longer relating to them as fully human, and I think [Jillian’s friend] feels that sometimes….” In contrast, Blair felt her negative reaction to attractive women was the source of her potential difficulties interacting with attractive women. She said:

I think that probably those that are more attractive are those that I am maybe a little bit more guarded with, at first…I think I make effort not to be, but I’m sure that that’s kind of there because I expect that them maybe to be more exclusionary or judgmental of me.

Here, Blair problematized the assumption attractive women will be unfriendly, and expressed her concern about her own potential bias. Nevertheless, the only participant to suggest that her own attractiveness had inspired mistreatment or jealousy was Gwen, whose story of being accused of stealing boyfriends in middle school centered on her participation in sports activities with boys, rather than on her appearance. Thus, there was no clear indication participants felt their own
physical attractiveness had led to difficulties in their friendships or same-sex interactions, even among participants who thought they were generally perceived as attractive.

This discrepancy may suggest participants did not experience being isolated or viewed negatively because of their high attractiveness. Alternatively, it could indicate that they attributed such difficulties to other causes, or that fears of appearing vain or prone to complaint prevented them from articulating these experiences. If individuals do in fact experience negative consequences of beautyism in social interactions and fail to recognize this, it is conceivable that their self-esteem could be impacted. For example, they may attribute their experiences of social isolation or bullying to social ineptitude, or even to unattractiveness, rather than to attractiveness. If they do recognize that they are experiencing bullying or isolation because of attractiveness, they may be too concerned about modesty to ask for help in dealing with this issue and may in fact be criticized if they do. Further, if and when an individual’s social isolation is due to a “flattering” cause such as being intimidatingly beautiful, their concerns may not be taken seriously or recognized as hurtful.

Weight, Unattractiveness, and Bullying

Some participants suggested less attractive women face social difficulties because of their lower social status. For example, Molly and Annie described extensive and relentless bullying, which they attributed to their weight. Molly reported being nicknamed “Shamu” [the name of a famous orca] by her classmates. She said she developed depression because her parents and classmates were “constantly harping on how I look.” Thus, Molly had continually received negative feedback about her appearance from those she presumably spent most of her day around. Annie said of her school experiences, “I’d had so few friends, because people pretty much just exclusively bullied me.” She elaborated, “I was bullied pretty much from kindergarten
through high school, and most of it was like, ‘You’re fat, you’re ugly, you’re stupid, you’re worthless,’ so ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’ were their favorites….’” Annie’s comment illustrates how labels like “fat” and “ugly” were used not only as insults about one’s appearance, but as indicative of one’s general worthlessness. These insults and ostracism profoundly impacted both Molly and Annie’s emotional and social wellbeing. At the same time, Annie did not think conventionally attractive women were exempt from appearance-based bullying. She said:

Conventionally attractive women are still going to be bullied and called fat and ugly….We’ve decided as a society that those are the worst you can be, so we throw those as insults if we’re mad at someone or we hate someone and so they’re still gonna face that regardless.

In other words, bullies may employ sizism and beautyism against any woman. Further, Annie’s comment about society’s selection of “fat” and “ugly” as the worst insults indicates the level of demonization of heaviness and physical unattractiveness. This demonization may have profound implications for the self-esteem of women who identify as physically less-attractive or believe that others view them this way. The idea that being ugly is the worst thing one can be adds to the pressure not only to look attractive to others, but also to feel attractive to oneself. If ugliness is unacceptable, feeling unattractive could be viewed as an act of self-hatred. In other words, body dissatisfaction may be doubly negative: one may feel dissatisfied with their appearance and also feel critical of themselves for experiencing dissatisfaction and not having a sufficiently positive mindset. Similarly, Annie said, “I do need external reinforcement [of her appearance] sometimes, which is frustrating because I want it to not be…I know that sounds not [trails off]...I need to get past that.”

Robin’s narrative of the impacts of attractiveness on social functioning and well-being centered not on overt bullying, but on exclusion and isolation. For example, she spoke wistfully of seeing other people with lasting marriages and close-knit families and felt that if she had been
less attractive than she was, she would be even more “marginalized and isolated.” She said:

I’m sick and tired of people telling people...who have been isolated or socially rejected based on this attractiveness issue that we’re supposed to love God more than ourselves. We’re not gonna get in this lifetime a thirty-year love. We’re not gonna get a partner. We’re gonna have to live day in and day out solely being consoled by our relationship with God.

Additionally, Robin suggested unattractive women lack the social resources other women have, including in contexts people might turn to for social support, such as church and therapy. She thought physical and spiritual health are worthy goals but said, “It’s not gonna bring you the community of care around you that these other attractive women have, because some of it is beyond your reach.” This comment is in stark contrast to the idea of spiritual health or confidence compensating for less attractive physical features. Further, Isobel’s sense of disenfranchisement raises the possibility that women who are considered overweight or less-attractive may have less access to health services, including mental health services. If women do not feel that they are accepted or taken seriously in church, therapy, or other ostensibly supportive contexts, they may avoid such spaces or may not receive the full benefits of these supports and services. Thus, beautyism may contribute to physical and mental health disparities. Because societal beauty standards exclude marginalized groups such as elderly people and people of color, the additional burden of beautyism may be particularly impactful for those who are already burdened with stigma and discrimination. For example, people with disabilities face many challenges accessing quality healthcare in the United States healthcare (Kobzar, Kallman, & Stefani, 2016) and beautyism may further complicate their experiences in medical spaces.

Gender Dynamics

Participants felt that although beautyism may confer advantages to some women, the intersection of sexism and beautyism could result in the oppression of attractive women as well. For example, some participants discussed interactions between men and attractive women may
be aversive or risky. The gender-based problems some participants perceived attractive women to face included negative attention, harassment, and assault. For example, Annie thought conventionally attractive women “get cat-called more, probably, and that’s based on my own experience, as a fat woman I don’t get cat-called, pretty much ever,” though she did report receiving harassing comments from strangers about her weight. For example, a stranger had once leaned out of his truck to yell “You’re fat!” at her while she was on a walk. Thus, beauty may be a lose-lose situation for women, wherein women who are not viewed as attractive feel ignored or invisible, but women who are attractive receive unwanted attention. Similarly, Daphne described the attention attractive women receive as potentially negative. Her identical twin sister was heavier than Daphne and thus had larger breasts, which Daphne said resulted in greater attention that Daphne found superficial and unappealing. She said her twin:

[W]as bigger chested and so she automatically got a lot more attention, especially from men, and I was like ‘Oh, I don’t want that attention. I’m jealous that you get to talk to some people that won’t give me the time of day, but if the trade-off is I have to have big boobs to do it, I’m not interested.’

Thus, while participants generally viewed the greater attention paid to attractive women as a privilege, such attention could be perceived as negative as well. In this way, beautyism may intersect with sexism so that women who are considered attractive and therefore rewarded through beautyism are simultaneously punished through sexism. Beautyism is therefore a form of privilege with the potential to also put women at increased risk of sexist oppression.

Previous literature suggests that women may receive attention that is objectifying, that is, focused on their physical appearance and sexuality (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). Objectification did not emerge as an overt theme in participants’ descriptions of the ways in which people treat attractive women but was implicit in discussions of attractiveness as a barrier to personal connection. Attractiveness also took attention away from people’s other attributes or
activities. For example, Pippa said of the student evaluations an attractive colleague received:

Evaluations from the guys were like She’s really hot, you know. It had more to do with her physical attributes than ‘Did you learn something’…that never happened to me…and it didn’t happen to any of the rest of us.

In this way, Pippa saw students as objectifying her colleague by focusing on her attractiveness rather than her work performance. Similarly, Daphne was dissatisfied with student evaluations she’d received that complimented her attractiveness rather than her teaching ability.

A minority of participants described attractiveness as a safety concern. Isobel had been raped in her mid-twenties and speculated she might not have been raped if she had been less attractive at the time. She also said she had disliked being attractive because of the sexual harassment she experienced. Additionally, she thought some men might have similar experiences, and recalled reading about a man who “was so attractive that he had men hitting on him and I think he was abused as a young or older teen…..” Tess recounted a similar story, this time involving a beautiful female teen who committed suicide after being sexually harassed by her stepfather and others. Tess recounted:

She was saying something like ‘Oh I’m sorry for having been so beautiful and having sent the wrong messages of me telling you that I wanted to have sex with you.’ She was 14 years old, and she was making all this analysis of what her beauty represented.

Through these stories, Tess and Isobel identified attractive people as targets for predators. Isobel focused on attractiveness itself as the factor leading to abuse, as did the teen in Tess’s story. Tess described how situations like the teen girl’s illustrate the fear attractive women may feel more greatly than other women. In response to this story, Tess realized that beautiful can be burdensome for extremely attractive women who face sexual harassment and fear for their safety.

However, Tess, who denied being physically attractive, alluded to having experienced sexual violence in her home country of Colombia and described facing sexual harassment in the
United States. She attributed the sexual harassment, which included requests for sexual favors, to American men who viewed her as exotic and sexual because of her ethnicity. Daphne also rated her attractiveness as average but recounted having received sexually harassing comments, such as a crude comment about her body made by a man at a hotel pool. In this way, participants associated attractiveness with harassment and assault, but women who experienced harassment or assault did not necessarily view themselves as attractive. Indeed, sexual harassment and assault are pervasive and related to gendered power dynamics (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004), and it is not the case that harassers and assailants only target young, thin, beautiful women (Davis & Sekula, 2018; Murphy, & Winder, 2016). Conceivably, greater attractiveness is a risk factor for harassment or assault, but it is not a precondition, nor is it the only risk factor or necessarily the most important risk factor. Nonetheless, it is clear from these comments that some women view physical attractiveness as an added danger in a society in which some men sexually harass and assault women. Further, Tess’s experience of being sexualized and harassed because of her “exotic” ethnicity suggests an intersection of race and attractiveness, wherein American men project sexual meanings onto “exotic” women’s appearances (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Guzmán, & Valdivia, 2004). Individuals’ internalization of sexualized stereotypes of women of color could in turn place women of color at particular risk of harassment and assault (Leung, 2017).

**Attractiveness and Discrimination**

In addition to attractiveness biases in social interactions, many participants described discrimination and privilege related to beautyism. Specifically, participants discussed beautyism with respect to general opportunity and access, employment, helping behavior, and material benefits or “perks.” In this way, participants described appearance and beauty standards as
having implications for women’s daily activities, careers, and economic status.

Some participants spoke of attractiveness as a route to opportunity in general. For example, Bonnie and Lucy thought women might pursue or wish for attractiveness out of a belief that being attractive will give them access to greater opportunities. Rowan argued the association between attractiveness and opportunity is in fact real, and said, “Who lead me to believe that I don’t know, but I’m sure there’s evidence of it.” Kim also suggested being attractive provides women with greater opportunity, though not without limitation. She said:

   Because this culture that we live in is so tuned to beauty, being attractive can give you so much more opportunities...If you can’t follow through that’s not gonna work for long, but in that sense it’s very valuable.

Kim’s association between attractiveness and opportunity suggests attractiveness has an instrumental value beyond simply enjoying the attention and approval of others.

These opportunities may be relevant even to women whose self-esteem is not contingent on beauty. Most participants suggested attractiveness was relevant in hiring decisions, salaries, or promotions. Molly thought many women pursue attractiveness because they feel it is necessary in order to “get the jobs they want,” and Tess spoke of attractiveness conferring advantages “in the labor market.” April had personal experience with these advantages, and believed that when she worked as a cashier, people might have been more likely to use her line than a less attractive coworker’s line. Similarly, Violet said she had been favored over certain other women in a previous workplace because of her greater attractiveness. She said,

   This is something which I am not proud of and also eventually quit that company because of it, is I know that in my job interview there were other girls who were smarter than me…but because of the way I looked and another friend of mine looked, I know that we got the squeeze in easier than those girls had to.

Thus, Violet saw attractiveness as having real consequences for women and their careers.

Participants also referred to news media coverage of beautyism. For example, Daphne alluded to
studies or other forms of evidence to assert the existence of beautyism. She said, “we know from job interview context that people who are more visually appealing are more likely to get hired.”

Robin suggested attractive women “probably earn more money” than “comparable” workers who are less attractive. She repeatedly mentioned statistics she had seen confirming this. For example, she said attractive people:

[161% above the median income, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. People who earn 161% above the median income is all based on this attractiveness, social affiliation, education, and being connected in the first place. Usually those connections are superficial, based on attractiveness, and if you’re not attractive you’re not in the social group…

Thus, according to Robin, attractiveness affects not only with hiring or pay decisions, but also overall socioeconomic status and social capital. Taken together, these comments suggest some participants were aware of beautyism’s influence on women’s career paths, financial success, and overall SES.

Some participants described making appearance-related decisions based on the importance of attractiveness in work environments. For example, Emma conducted an experiment in which she compared the tips she made as a server when she wore makeup and dressed up to when she did not. She found that on average, engaging in these beauty practices increased her tips by 12 to 14%. In response to this situation, she decided to wear makeup and thereby make more money, but she was “a little irritated” to confirm the existence of beautyism.

Whereas Emma’s decision to wear makeup was based on her own experiment, Violet referred to others’ research. Both participants were critical of these appearance-related biases but were willing to work strategically within this system to avoid the financial cost of being discriminated against. Similarly, Violet had resolved to lose weight to avoid negative weight stereotypes and increase her chances of being hired. She explained that she had selected the latest possible month for graduation that academic year because she wanted more time to lose weight before attending
job interviews. “I don’t want to take the risk of being underpaid just because I’m on the heavier
side than a lot of other people who might apply,” she said.

Over a third of participants reported that people are more likely to help attractive women
compared to less attractive women. For example, Pippa said she had read that attractive people
are given special treatment, such as being seated more quickly in restaurants. She also said she
thought more attractive people are treated better partly based on her personal experience of better
treatment when she was carefully dressed. She explained that she was treated better in stores
when she was well-dressed versus when she was more casually dressed, and said, “Whether it’s
conscious or not, they’re making assumptions about you. The challenge is to treat everyone the
same, but they don’t.”

Pippa’s criticism suggests tension between a societal ideal of treating everyone the same
and a potentially unconscious tendency to stereotype people based on clothing, and to act on
these assumptions. Similarly, Violet recalled being ignored at an airport while another woman
with the same amount of luggage but “fancier” dress “had three people running to help her, and
I’m like, are you kidding?” The ability to manipulate one’s attractiveness through clothing,
personal grooming, weight loss, or other measures may allow people to reduce discrimination
against them or obtain greater beautyist privileges. However, the ability to affect beautyist
responses in this way may also constitute a burden for women, forcing them to diet, buy beauty
products, and engage in other potentially unwanted practices in order to avoid discrimination. In
this way, beautyism intersects with sexism and essentially coerces women into adhering to
gender roles, wherein women must appear youthful, feminine, thin, and decorative. Furthermore,
not all women have the same ability to lose weight, purchase fashionable clothing, or simply be
viewed as physically attractive. Thus, some women able to exert more agency within beautyist
Illness could also affect people’s ability to manage their appearance and be attractive. For example, Carrie recounted how for a few months of her pregnancy she had been too ill to maintain her appearance or even brush her teeth. She did not experience any “mean” behaviors during this time, but once her appearance improved, she found that a clerk at the grocery store went out of his way to offer her help. She had, thought to herself, “’It’s because I actually look good.’ I don’t know if it’s true or not but that thought came into my mind, ‘this is because of the way I look.’” In this way, Carrie thought she did not experience mistreatment when looking less attractive but did experience more helping behavior when she looked more attractive.

Carrie’s quote also highlights the ambiguity of interpreting causes and motivations for individuals’ behavior. This ambiguity, paired with the pressures participants experienced to both accept or celebrate their appearance and avoid “bragging” about their attractiveness, may make identification and awareness of beautyism difficult. Such difficulties may apply to identifying beautyism’s impacts on others as well, if individuals are reluctant to label friends, loved ones, or others as physically less-attractive. Additionally, Bonnie, pointed out that stereotypes of attractive women as being treated better could be exaggerated. She described some people as assuming a hypothetical attractive person “must have a really easy life because you’re attractive and every door must open for you and champagne falling from the sky and people bending over, which I’m sure is not accurate.” Nonetheless, Bonnie acknowledged, “I’ve seen attractive people get better service.” Clearly, then, many participants believed greater attractiveness is associated with receiving more offers of help.

Helena illustrated the possible role of benevolent sexism, or ostensibly favorable but paternalistic attitudes towards women which serve to define gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001),
in bestowing “perks” (in this case, helping behaviors and pay). For example, she argued that men engage in more “traditional habits like holding the door open” for attractive women. She then followed this example with the observation that because of the pay gap, attractive men likely earn more than attractive women. In this view, “perks” such as helping behaviors and displays of deference “reward” women who meet the female gender role of attractiveness, but do not elevate women’s status above that of men. Helena’s statement “I think they’re probably getting a few more perks” embodies a sentiment about attractive women shared by several of the participants. In fact, Nina also used the word “perks” to describe behaviors such as door-holding.

Others discussed material rewards or “perks” that might be conferred on attractive women. Winn recounted that when she was dressed up on the Las Vegas strip, she “would get club offers, sometimes I would get these great promotional gigs, like just by walking down the street and looking more attractive than if I were to just walk out of bed.” Daphne described hypothetical environments in which attractive women “have been lavished with fancy gifts and things,” and this special treatment could lead them to value attractiveness. Ophelia said, “I’ve had family members and friends that they’re just stunning, you know…they’re just stunning, and it’s got them things.” Florence thought car rentals were more likely to give her upgrades since she had lost weight.

Violet recounted using her attractiveness “shameless” to drive bargains, though she confessed that she felt “miserable” admitting to this behavior in the interview. Thus, participants like Violet reported observing or experiencing beautyism associated with gift-giving and other perks and could even use this to their advantage. However, such privilege could also lead to feelings of self-consciousness or guilt, as in the case of Violet. She also noticed receiving “special treatment” when traveling and using hotels during a period where she felt attractive. In
contrast, when Violet gained weight and no longer felt attractive by societal standards, she did not receive such preferential treatment. Altogether, many participants thought that attractiveness confers benefits related to employment and the workplace, helping behaviors, perks or material rewards, and greater opportunity in general.

**Participants’ Evaluations of Beautyism**

**Denial, minimization, or self-empowerment and beautyism.** Some participants suggested that attractiveness does not significantly affect how people treat women or described limitations to the impacts of attractiveness. For example, Lucy said, “Maybe being an attractive person if you’re outgoing might open up more doors for you, but then you can be unattractive and be outgoing and the same door might open.” In this view, psychological features can overcome or circumvent the impact of beautyism. Charlotte was explicit in her denial of privileges or disadvantages related to attractiveness, and said, “I think there’s just disadvantages and advantages with physical ability but not physical appearance, does that make sense?” Violet suggested the effects of beautyism on the experiences of female professors were negligible because sexism against women washed out differences based on attractiveness. Jillian voiced some uncertainty about the importance of conventional attractiveness in general. She said, “For most people in the world, it’s not necessarily an advantage to be hugely attractive…in that sort of stereotypical standard way. I could be totally wrong, I have no idea.” Jillian’s comment illustrates the potential tension between disavowing beauty stereotypes (that attractive people have easier or better lives) and identifying actual beauty-related privileges. For this reason, raising awareness about beautyism without perpetuating stereotypes that may in turn bolster women’s motivations to be attractive is an important challenge for anti-beautyism efforts.

Some participants also expressed that their own lives would not have been affected by
greater or lesser attractiveness. For example, Rowan replied to the question “Do you think that there are any advantages that would come with being less attractive?” by saying she did not think there were, since she was treated the same on days when she felt less confident as she was on days when she felt more confident. When asked if her life might be different in any way if she was more attractive, Jillian replied, “I don’t know if that would be advantageous for me in any way.” Gwen thought her appearance had played no role in her career, but that her qualities such as a strong work ethic were the ones employers were “looking for.” Additionally, some participants associated excessive appearance concerns and biases with youth. For example, Ophelia speculated that her childhood and adolescence might have been different if she had been less attractive, but that by the time she entered college people would have “matured” beyond such concerns.

These comments contrast with empirical research, which suggests notable impacts of attractiveness in the workplace (Lee, Pitesa, & Pillutla, & Thau, 2015; Warhurst, Van den Broek, Hall, & Nickson, 2009; Waring, 2011), school (Rosen, Underwood, & Beron, 2011), university (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016), and even the quality of parental care of infants (Langlois, Ritter, Casey, & Sawin, 1995). These and numerous other studies suggest attractiveness does matter. Furthermore, the present study elicited many examples of beautyism, such as Emma’s finding of a 14% increase in tips when wearing makeup, Robin’s social isolation, Molly’s weight-related suicide attempts, and Violet’s sense of being favored in her workplace. However, it is unsurprising some participants were unaware of beautyism or minimized its impacts. Minimization may be seen as empowering, while emphasizing the importance of attractiveness may feel like a pessimistic or harmful message. Further, attractiveness is subjective and ambiguous, and is not associated with group membership or group identity in the way gender or
race typically are. Beautyism, ironically, is hard to see. Intersectional feminist research may help in revealing and demystifying this axis of bias and discrimination.

The fact that participants were reluctant to identify instances of beautyist privilege or discrimination in their own lives may also relate to the individual, rather than affiliative, nature of one’s beauty status. Identification with a group can help promote activism (Cronin, Levin, Branscombe, van Laar, & Tropp, 2012; Duncan, 1999). If individuals do not have a sense of community or group membership with other people experiencing beautyism in a manner similar to themselves, they may not be aware of beautyism or feel motivated to speak out against it. Because beautyism is a nascent area for activism, communities of people who openly identify as being oppressed by beautyism may not be prominent or accessible. Furthermore, the oftentimes deeply personal nature of social interactions where beauty is salient may affect individuals’ ability to detect beautyism. It may be difficult to recognize or acknowledge that one’s friendships or romantic relationships have been helped or hurt by physical attractiveness stereotypes.

**Criticism.** Some participants did voice criticisms of beautyism. For example, Violet expressed anger over being treated both favorably and unfavorably based on her attractiveness. She said:

I think that way I’ve tried to intentionally keep myself away from people as much as I can…I am very afraid of being judged, and I feel extremely hurt when I am explicitly judged or prejudiced against or in favor. I think over the years I’ve just used those to kind of shrink my social circle.

In this way, Violet’s beautyism narrative parallels Robin’s. Both women felt that the presence of beauty biases lead them to reject others. In fact, Robin reported that for a period of time, she had rejected white Western culture altogether in favor of her then-husband’s Indian culture, where she had felt her appearance was less important. Other participants distanced themselves from
beautyism as well. Ginny thought that differences in how employees are treated based on attractiveness would not “be fair at all.” Lucy initially said she took attractiveness into consideration when hiring receptionists but was quick to state that this was not the overriding concern and that it sounded “horrible” to say. Thus, she recognized that beautyism was problematic, though it still influenced her hiring practices. Dawn felt she had influenced her husband toward being willing to hire less attractive servers for his restaurant. Taken together, these comments and beliefs show that among the participants in this study, the greatest barrier toward assuming an anti-beautyism stance was not endorsement of beautyism, but lack of awareness or denial of its existence.

Summary

Participants tended to report that people treat attractive women differently from unattractive women. These differences in treatment generally although not exclusively benefited attractive women and fell under two general categories: biases in social interactions, and privileging or discriminatory behaviors. Some women shared personal experiences of benefiting or suffering from attractiveness biases and beautyist discrimination. However, not all participants believed in the existence of beautyism, which suggests a need for advocacy in this area. These findings are significant for acknowledging women’s personal experiences of beautyism and the emotional and financial impacts of these experiences, and for providing insight into the current state of anti-beautyist sentiment among women.
CHAPTER NINE

DISCUSSION

The present study used interviews to investigate how a sample of 30 women, aged 25-60, made sense of the role of physical attractiveness in women’s lives. Participants discussed their perceptions of beauty standards for women and how they came to recognize these standards. They also described how they evaluated their own attractiveness and what meanings or outcomes they believed women’s attractiveness to have. The results provide insight into women’s experiences with media and interpersonal communication of messages about physical attractiveness. These messages included information about what a physically attractive woman looks like, stereotypes about physically attractive or unattractive women, and the importance or value of attractiveness for women. The findings also suggest that the participants had developed strategies for responding to beauty standards and appearance-related pressures in society. These strategies including redefining beauty in psychological terms, critiquing media messages or societal norms about beauty, and in some cases endorsing an anti-beautyist perspective. However, participants’ resistance against beauty standards and expectations were not uncomplicated or entirely successful.

Literature on body image suggests that women feel pressure to adhere to beauty standards, including, but not limited to, thinness (Anthony, Okorie, & Norman, 2016; Bedford & Johnson, 2006; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). However, women may also resist internalizing these pressures or feeling dissatisfied with themselves for not meeting these standards. In the present study, some participants resisted or rejected the dominant beauty schema by adhering to alternative beauty ideals or by being skeptical of media messages about beauty. Participants also practiced self-acceptance even when they did not meet societal beauty standards, often the help
of supportive friends or family members. Some participants felt empowered to reject dominant beauty standards because of their feminist, religious, or spiritual values. However, the extent to which women accept or reject beauty standards which they do not feel physically capable of meeting is underexplored, particularly with respect to aspects of the body aside from weight.

In the present study, participants’ descriptions of the culturally dominant beauty schema were generally consistent with previous literature. For example, participants emphasized the importance of thinness in societal definitions, facial features such as large eyes, and a general sense of “flawlessness.” Nonetheless, participants in the present study did not uncritically endorse this culturally dominant beauty schema. They adapted the dominant schema to be more inclusive, including accommodating a wider range of body sizes, ethnic backgrounds, and ages, for example. Women also identified an alternative beauty schema in which beauty was defined in psychological terms and they preferred this schema to the dominant beauty schema. For example, the participants noted that confidence and kindness were viewed as attractive, and they acknowledged flawlessness or extreme thinness was unnecessary. Elements of this beauty-is-psychological schema were widely held among the participants, as all participants included at least one psychological feature in their personal definitions of attractiveness. Even so, participants had still internalized elements of the dominant schema even when they found the alternative schema to be healthier or more consistent with their personal values. For example, some individuals found themselves evaluating attractiveness based on thinness or other physical features, or they made comments about women’s appearances that contradicted their professed rejection of the dominant schema.

**Internalization of the Dominant Beauty Schema**

Much media effects research related to body image focuses on social comparison theory.
Social comparison theory suggests that individuals feel motivated to evaluate subjective or ambiguous aspects of themselves, such as their talents, performance in some area, or personal qualities. The theory also argues that individuals make these evaluations by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Similarly, research suggests that women compare themselves to the idealized images of highly attractive women presented in media (Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015).

In addition to social comparison theory, in the present study, participants’ discussions of media content suggest that social cognitive theory is highly applicable to their experiences of consuming media and may serve as important theoretical framework for understanding when and how media influences women’s appearance concerns. Social cognitive theory focuses not on how individuals evaluate themselves, but rather on how individuals learn from behaviors and attitudes they see modeled in media (Bandura, 2001). In the present study, celebrities or favorite characters appeared to be particularly important to some participants because of their perceived likability and relevance. For example, participants described wanting to emulate celebrities like Audrey Hepburn or characters like Disney princesses. Women also related to celebrities and characters, such as Jessica Day from the television show New Girl or the actresses in classic Indian films. Previous social comparison research with experimental designs in laboratory settings has tended to use advertisements as primes, and magazine images of models in particular (Frederick, Sandhu, Scott, & Akbari, 2016; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013). However, it is reasonable to assume that individuals spend more time-consuming media with characters, artists, or celebrities they recognize, rather than images of anonymous models. Media narrative structures provide ample opportunity to model the
importance of attractiveness for women, for example by associating beauty with likability, romance, or career success. Social cognitive theory may therefore be particularly relevant to individuals’ media consumption outside of the laboratory context and is well-suited to explain how women respond to entertainment media and narrative-based advertising.

Consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), women in the present study perceived historical and, to a lesser extent, current media influences on their understanding of beauty. Participants perceived that being featured in media is an indication that a woman is considered attractive by society. This finding is particularly important for understanding media effects because it raises the possibility that some women or girls might feel as if any comparison they make to a female media figure’s beauty is an upward comparison, even in cases where the viewer and media figure would generally be considered similar in attractiveness. Additionally, women’s belief that media reflects or defines societal beauty norms highlights the importance of assessing vicarious learning in media effects research. Participants’ media literacy or rejection of societal beauty standards may not fully predict media effects on their appearance concerns or beauty practices if they believe that others evaluate them using media beauty standards. Supporting this view, previous research has found that White girls who were skeptical of media imagery and beauty standards still felt they were impacted by media imagery because they believed that others endorsed media beauty standards (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). Thus, individuals can reject beauty standards or be skeptical of media imagery and still find this imagery salient to their lives.

**Contributions to Rejection of the Dominant Beauty Schema**

Previous research suggests that individuals do not always endorse or adhere to the dominant beauty schema. For example, ethnic and racial identity may contribute to rejection of
the beauty schema dominant in the United States. Ogden and Russell (2012) found that some Black women, including darker-skinned women, reported adhering to the dominant beauty norm that lighter skin is attractive and dark skin is unattractive. They also reported a preference for European-like long, flowing hair. Other participants in Odgen and Russell’s (2012) study rejected White beauty norms and argued that this definition of beauty is dictated by White people. Instead, these women reported valuing all skin colors and hair textures. Black women have also reported the beauty and fashion orientation of White fashion magazines as irrelevant to their identity as Black women (Ogden & Russell, 2012). Moreover, Black women have reported rejecting the notion that beauty is determined by physical features at all, instead focusing on psychological qualities such as confidence and self-acceptance (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Thus, many Black women appear to endorse a more inclusive, anti-racist, and less objectifying understanding of women’s physical attractiveness. This perspective was similar to the understanding of attractiveness that White participants described in the present study. Specifically, women in the present study critiqued beauty standards as ethnocentric and preferred to focus on psychological traits.

Feminism or other ideologies may also facilitate rejection of the dominant beauty schema, although findings are mixed. Choate (2005) argued that critical thinking can help women to develop flexible and inclusive understandings of beauty that can accommodate any and all individuals. Some female participants have suggested that to promote healthy body image, society should stop comparing women to each other (McLean, 2016). McLean’s (2016) participants also suggested that women should base their self-esteem on whatever dimensions of the self they are strong in, rather than in their appearance. This is similar to the present study’s finding of an alternative beauty schema emphasizing one’s character and abilities over one’s
physical features. However, some participants in McLean’s (2016) study were pessimistic about rejecting beauty standards or avoiding body dissatisfaction and argued that appearance is indeed important and that body dissatisfaction will always be present for women, at all times. Swami and Tovee (2006), meanwhile, have found no effect of feminist orientation on either Lesbian or heterosexual women’s perceived ideal BMI. Peterson, Grippo, and Tantleff-Dunn (2008) advocate focusing on empowerment (sense of agency and efficacy, for example, to participate in political action or alternative discourses) rather than feminist attitudes as a whole. In their sample of female college students, greater empowerment was negatively associated with eating disturbances and positively with body image. In the present study, some participants used feminist discourse to critique the sexualization and objectification of women, as well as to critique beautyism. Participants’ discourse about striving toward self-acceptance and choosing to define beauty for themselves may also suggest that a sense of empowerment, conceptualized either in feminist terms or in a mental health and wellness context, may be important in rejecting the dominant beauty schema.

Some women may also view adherence to the dominant beauty schema as part of their feminism. For example, there is evidence that young feminist women assume a neoliberalist frame to explain or justify their adherence to beauty standards (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Previous research has found that some young feminist women emphasize their ability to choose to engage in specific beauty practices and refrain from others as evidence that these practices are not associated with oppression. Young feminists in Stuart and Donaghue’s (2011) study also emphasized the role of the female gaze in these practices and deemphasize the role of the male gaze. Similarly, young feminist women have been found to focus on the enjoyment that they derive from engaging in beauty practices, rather than on the toll or cost. Thus, women may use
rhetoric of self-expression and self-determination to minimize the role of objectification and sexist oppression in adherence to beauty standards (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011).

In contrast to Stuart and Donaghue’s (2011) participants, in the present study, rhetoric of personal choice related to beauty practices, though not absent, was less prominent than rhetoric of health or self-care. For example, women framed their use of weight loss techniques as a health practice, even if they expressed dissatisfaction with their appearance because of their weight. It is conceivable that a sample of younger women would have focused less on health and more on personal choice when explaining their motivations for adhering to the dominant beauty schema. This is not to suggest that personal choice or health are not valid motivations for weight loss or other behaviors consistent with the dominant beauty schema. However, because participants did express tension between the internalized dominant beauty schema and the alternative schemas they preferred to endorse, reframing their motivations in a manner consistent with the alternative schema may help them to reduce cognitive dissonance. Such rhetoric may also help to alleviate concerns about appearing “vain” or superficial.

Some researchers and other professionals have attempted to encourage women to reject messages about the dominant beauty schema through education, particularly related to media. Media sends messages about how women should look (Lin, 1998; Stern & Mastro, 2004; Yan & Bissell, 2014). Previous research suggests that although some individuals may attempt to adhere to beauty standards perpetuated in media, others may resist or reject these standards via media literacy. One of the most well-known definitions of media literacy, by Aufderheide (1993), states that media literacy is the movement that “helps people understand, produce and negotiate meanings in a culture made up of powerful images, words and sounds” via literacy of informational sources. Individuals’ skepticism regarding media images of highly attractive
women has received particular research attention, given the role of these images in social comparison processes (McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2016a; McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2016b). Media literacy interventions have been used to inform viewers of the use of image editing techniques such as airbrushing in creating idealized beauty imagery generally and thus reduce body dissatisfaction or disordered eating (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012; Harmon & Rudd, 2016; McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2013). In the present study, participants were generally critical of media messages about beauty.

They were also aware of the impact of media on their own understanding of attractiveness in their own childhood and on children in general. Even so, participants tended to be less aware of potential ongoing media influences on themselves and may have exhibited a third person effect. They also appeared more aware of beauty messages in social media, advertising, television, and film than in other channels. This finding suggests that media literacy programs targeting adults should address messages about beauty in the books and music they consume, as well as in film and advertising. Such programs should also be developmentally appropriate, for example by being relevant to the media consumed by different age groups and to pregnancy, menopause, or other life stages women may experience as they age. Media literacy programs should target men as well as women, as both genders consume media with beauty messages and as both are part of the social and professional environments in which women experience beautyism.

**Problematic Aspects of the Alternative Beauty Schema**

Participants framed the alternative schema as less superficial, objectifying, and restrictive or exclusionary than the dominant schema. Nevertheless, the focus on confidence and self-acceptance in their definitions of beauty are also potentially exclusionary, as people who have
depression or anxiety may not appear beautiful by these definitions. Further, the alternative
beauty schema may favor individuals who are perceived as having better social skills over those
who are viewed as awkward, withdrawn, or otherwise less socially skillful. Additionally, the
alternative beauty schema may not fully resolve the critiques leveled against the objectifying
nature of the dominant beauty schema, because some participants objectified their own internal
traits by viewing kindness and health as aesthetic qualities. To the extent that women value
prosocial or positive traits as aspects of their “inner beauty,” they may evaluate their intelligence,
kindness, or other ostensibly non-visible traits from the point of view of the male gaze. Further
research is needed to understand how framing one’s beauty as the product of their personality,
values, or other internal traits relates to outcomes associated with self-objectification, such as
disordered eating, depressed mood and sexual dysfunction (Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Thus,
the alternative beauty schema may not be fully successful in solving the problems that
participants identified with dominant beauty schema.

The alternative beauty schema also risks reinforcing gender roles for women. Previous
research examining gender roles in relation to beauty standards has suggested that women’s
sexual orientation may facilitate resistance to dominant beauty standards, including through
gender nonconformity. For example, Lesbians have been found to prefer a higher BMI for
women than do heterosexual women (Swami & Tovee, 2006). Gay and bisexual women may
conform to a more androgynous, boyish, or masculine style of dress than is typical in
heterosexual women, although this functions primarily to signal their sexual orientation rather
than to conform to a beauty standard per se (Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014). Similarly, there
is evidence that Lesbians who identify more with masculinity prefer to have smaller breasts
themselves but associate large breasts with ideal beauty for feminine Lesbians (Henrichs-Beck,
Szymanski, Feltman, & Batchelor, 2015). Thus, while some Lesbian women may not feel it necessary to adhere to heterosexual beauty standards themselves, they may still hold other women to these standards. Similarly, the psychological features that women in the present study identified as attractive in women were generally consistent with gender stereotypes for women, such as friendliness and warmth. Thus, the alternative beauty schema may privilege women who conform to gendered expectations, for example that women be affectionate, sympathetic, warm, and childlike (Otterbacher, Bates, & Clough, 2017).

The alternative beauty schema may also mystify beautyism, because one’s favorable treatment of an attractive woman could be attributed to the inner qualities that ostensibly make her attractive. Such ambiguities could be particularly problematic if individuals stereotype attractive women as having positive qualities and then attribute her attractiveness to those qualities. In this way, the alternative beauty schema may not preclude discrimination against less-attractive women or necessarily be associated with an anti-beautyist stance.

**Self-Evaluations of Attractiveness**

In addition to women’s perceptions of attractiveness and its value, the present study investigated women’s evaluations of their current physical appearance. Participants were sometimes critical of their own appearance, including characteristics unrelated to weight (for example, facial features and hair), which underscores the importance of using measures of appearance dissatisfaction that allow individuals to assess aspects of their appearance aside from weight. They also showed resilience against negative affect, which suggests that body satisfaction may not be necessary for body acceptance. Some participants did express strong negative reactions to their appearance. Women also discussed having moments of insecurity that led them to ask for external validation, oftentimes from husbands or partners. However, lighthearted reactions to one’s
perceived flaws were also common, including laughing about their complaints and gently teasing themselves, expressing acceptance for their flaws, or simply ignoring the aspects of their looks they didn’t like.

Social acceptance may help women avoid or cope with body dissatisfaction, as participants tended to assume their friends and loved ones saw them more favorably than strangers did. Other research has found that supportive families are protective against body dissatisfaction (Crespon, Kielpakowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010; Kenny, O’Malley-Keighran, Molcho, & Kelly, 2016; Pelican et al., 2005; Taniguchi & Aune, 2013). In the present study, participants were generally able to recall appearance-related compliments that they’d enjoyed and discussed people with whom they had conversations about body image. Future body satisfaction research should investigate the extent to which mediated interactions with friends or family and face-to-face interactions are similarly protective. Such research could compare the effect of face-to-face interactions with friends to interactions with friends on social media, where visual representations of the participant may be absent or may be idealized through flattering photography.

Participants also described difficult interpersonal interactions related to beauty, including critical comments and bulling. These experiences could be painful, even traumatic, as when negative comments led Molly to attempt suicide, Annie to feel she was being abused by her peers, and Emma to experience a dangerous eating disorder. However, participants also received compliments about their appearance and had friends and family with whom they could discuss body image concerns. Further, women in the present study tried to impact others’ attitudes about attractiveness by discussing body image or by avoiding appearance-based compliments. Their comments revealed women’s body image conversations with friends and family as an important site for challenging the dominant beauty schema and the importance of attractiveness.
Additionally, participants shared in their interviews their concerns about how to engage in these conversations successfully, particularly with their children. Future research should seek to develop and evaluate programs or interventions that attempt to promote women’s body satisfaction by teaching skills for discussing body image and attractiveness in healthy ways, particularly in a parenting context.

Popular discourse about beauty often emphasizes the importance of feeling beautiful (Lynch, 2011 Nov). This viewpoint could serve as a counterpoint to anti-beautyism, in that it suggests beauty should be redefined to include all women and that women should not embrace an identity as physically less attractive. However, this perspective arguably stigmatizes physical unattractiveness as unacceptable or harmful to women’s wellbeing. Further, this perspective assumes that all women can feel beautiful if they choose. In contrast, the present study illustrates the distinction between feeling attractive to others and feeling comfortable with oneself. In fact, it may be important to allow women to acknowledge their feelings and perspectives on the aesthetics of their appearance, rather than uncritically interpreting all negative appearance evaluations as evidence of low self-esteem. Further research should investigate the relationship between self-evaluated attractiveness, beliefs about the importance of beauty, and body acceptance or body dissatisfaction.

**Readiness for Anti-Beautyism**

Some women reported awareness of beautyism, including personal experiences of privilege or discrimination and witnessing or suspecting such behavior. For example, they described receiving more tips when they wore makeup, receiving more help and attention when they looked attractive, or being excluded socially when they were less-attractive. These experiences contributed to the pressure participants felt to maintain their appearance, for example
by losing weight before applying jobs (Violet) or wearing makeup at work (Emma). In this way, beautyism constrained some participants’ in areas of life that might otherwise be considered deeply personal. Anti-beautyism does not imply that women should not choose to adhere to beauty practices that interest them or attempt to “look their best.” Instead, beautyism critiques the biases and cultural expectations that coerce women into engaging in beauty practices, not for their own enjoyment, but to avoid financial or social consequences. Attractive people are by definition compelling to others. Women in the present study spoke of enjoying others’ physical beauty. They also acknowledged that physical attractiveness can be connected to sexual feelings and relationships. Although societal definitions of and attitudes toward beauty have a cultural component (Furnham & Baguma, 1994; Jackson & Aiken, 2000; Romo, Mireles-Rios, & Hurtado, 2016), they also have biological origins and have helped the human species to survive (Nedelec & Beaver, 2014). Anti-beautyism does not entail rejecting the value of physical attractiveness as a source of enjoyment or as a factor in sexual or other interpersonal relationships. Rather, anti-beautyism suggests that stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization related to appearance are harmful and unnecessary.

The present study suggests that beautyism may be particularly detrimental to women who are unable to meet beauty standards, either because they cannot engage in certain beauty practices or because they do not look physically attractive to others even with these efforts in place. Participants’ narratives of times when they felt less attractive revealed that women felt they needed to be thin, or at least fall within a certain range of weight, to be viewed as attractive by others, and that losing weight was often difficult. They also associated weight gain with pregnancy and with poverty, the latter of which made it difficult to access exercise facilities and healthy foods. Motherhood, apart from pregnancy, was also cited as a barrier to being attractive, as participants
like Holly pointed out that mothers have less time to devote to their appearance. Additionally, women differ in the extent to which they’re able to meet beauty standards and avoid anti-beautyist discrimination, or benefit from such discrimination, because of differences in their facial features or other aspects of their appearance. For example, Ivona felt that even when she was wearing a dress and feeling beautiful, her androgynous facial features prevented others from seeing her as attractive. Thus, the present study suggests that just as women cannot necessarily “opt out” of beautyism and abstain from beauty practices without facing negative consequences, women cannot necessarily “opt in” and receive beautyist privilege. Participants also viewed physically attractive women as facing negative consequences for their appearance, such as being treated with envy or mistrust, being targeted for sexual harassment or assault, having their accomplishments unfairly attributed to their sexuality, or being stereotyped as unintelligent or vain. In this view, although physical attractiveness does confer limited privileges to women, it can also entail punishment or oppression because of its intersection with sexism.

In the present study, participants articulated their vision for a more ideal world, one in which society treated women and beauty in a healthier way. For example, they rejected societal beauty standards and discussed the need for a more inclusive definition of beauty. Some participants also embraced the idea of a hypothetical non-beautyist media that featured women at all levels of attractiveness. They spoke of their desire for a society where women were respected and valued as people regardless of their appearance, and where women accepted and appreciated their own bodies and appearance. Some participants envisioned a world where all women felt beautiful, while others envisioned a world where feeling beautiful was not important. Both visions would require changes in the role of the culturally dominant beauty schema in society in order to become a reality. Participants also communicated their personal needs in light of the pressures they
felt to meet beauty standards. From Helena’s wish that her mother would not comment on her weight to Robin’s desire to hear people acknowledge the impact of beautyism on her social life, from Annie’s wish to transcend her need for external validation to Ginny’s ambition to overcome the thin ideal, participants shared a need for an accepting and supportive environment or for resiliency against appearance-related pressures. Anti-beautyism, with its focus on inclusion and respect for others regardless of attractiveness, is well-suited to help meet these needs.

Participants appeared to vary in their readiness to reject beautyism or to engage in anti-beautyism as a social justice effort. One potential barrier to anti-beautyism is the difficulty or reluctance to acknowledge the existence or importance of beautyism. It may be cognitively or emotionally difficult to recognize the role of one’s own physical attractiveness in one’s social successes or struggles, career development, or family life. Such difficulties are evident in other areas of oppression, such was when Whites attempt to deny their White privilege (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005) or when women encounter ambiguous sexist discrimination (Cihangir, Barreto, & Ellemers, 2010). There is also evidence that people are reluctant to identify prejudice against themselves, as a self-protective measure (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Because unattractiveness is both subjective and stigmatized, it may be difficult to apply this label to oneself or others and thus to label this form of oppression when it occurs. Additionally, as participants in the present study expressed, it can be uncomfortable to acknowledge our own beautyist thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They also described how inner states such as confidence or mental health can make someone appear beautiful. Potentially, this association allows individuals to attribute their biased perceptions or behaviors about attractive or less-attractive others to those others’ supposed “inner beauty.” Thus, efforts to redefine beauty in less objectifying, more inclusive ways can have the unintended consequence providing “cover” beautyism. Efforts to challenge narrow
beauty standards are appropriate and are rightfully an important component of the intersectional feminist project. By raising awareness of and problematizing beautyism, feminists can expand the scope of their critiques of the dominant beauty standard and avoid applying alternative beauty standards in ways that perpetuate beauty biases.

**Implications for Objectification Theory**

Although objectification of women is a key aspect of women’s oppression and a vital part of body image research (Bartky, 1990), the present study also serves to caution against over-reliance on objectification theory to explain all aspects of women’s appearance-related concerns or feelings. Women and girls may seek attractiveness because they believe it will enrich their inner life or experiences, not supersede those experiences. Objectification theory does not address the associations women make between external attractiveness and internal qualities or experiences. Participants associated attractiveness not just with male approval or observing gazes, but also with success, competence, happiness, niceness, and other feelings or traits.

The social context of beauty is important for media effects researchers to consider. A potential pitfall for body image research would be to misattribute media effects on women to women’s superficiality, impressionable personalities, or narcissism. Feminist body dissatisfaction researchers should be careful to avoid perpetuating victim-blaming or paternalism. For example, self-objectification research tends to render men as hypothetical constructs producing a “male gaze” that women actively employ against themselves (Gay & Castano, 2010). This approach has great utility in explaining women’s experiences of negative affect and appearance concern. However, it does not often explicate the role of real-life men in rewarding or punishing women based on their ability to match media beauty ideals. Instead, media effects studies tend to look at the aspirational, affective aspects of making social comparisons. For
example, such research is often based on the idea that women want to look like women they see in media to facilitate their self-esteem or decrease their body shame (Monro & Huon, 2005). This view focuses on the individual woman, without reference to the other people in her social environment who are also consuming media or evaluating the woman’s appearance. She interacts only with a mediated image and with a hypothetical observer whose perspective she imagines and adopts in an act of self-objectification.

In contrast, women in the present study discussed beauty in a wider context where their male peers, friendship groups, and communities adopted media definitions of beauty and objectifying gazes. Women were then expected to meet this ideal or face negative stereotyping, workplace discrimination, social isolation, or other consequences. Thus, the negative impacts of objectification need not be mediated through self-objectification to be felt. This is not to deny that women have agency in their consumption or attitudes about attractiveness, nor to suggest that media literacy is unimportant. Rather, it is to suggest that the social context in which media defines attractiveness constrains women’s ability to ignore beauty norms and provides an instrumental, rational motivation for self-objectification.

Additionally, objectification theory does not address how stereotypes about attractive women influence women’s appearance concerns. Media messages that associate attractiveness with personal importance, success, or other stereotypes may promote self-objectification or body dissatisfaction even in the absence of overtly objectified imagery. Supporting this view, participants reported having wanted to emulate media characters’ lifestyles and other qualities, not just appearance. Future research should develop and test media literacy programs that challenge attractiveness stereotypes. By highlighting alternative pathways to the success, social approval, and other positive qualities that people associate with attractiveness, media literacy
programs may be able to reduce women’s motivation to adhere to the thin ideal or other beauty standards. Men should be included in media literacy programs, given the role of the “male gaze” and interactions with men in defining beauty and perpetuating beautyism.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study explored the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of thirty women, and their interviews were grounded in their own positionality, identity, and individual histories. Women of color were underrepresented in the sample, particularly among participants raised in the United States, and Black women were entirely unrepresented. Participants’ discussions of racism, cultural differences in beauty standards, and the sexualization of “exotic” women strongly suggest a need for further exploration of the perceptions and experiences of women of color in these areas. Further, the present sample was highly educated. Their educational background may have facilitated the emergence of themes about professionalism, science, and feminist theory related to physical attractiveness. It is unknown from this study how women who have not attended college perceive physical attractiveness and beautyism. Participants in the present study also tended to be married or divorced, and so less is known about how women who have never married understand the role of physical attractiveness in their lives. Emergent themes from the present study also suggest that disability and class are particularly relevant to attractiveness and would be fruitful areas for future inquiry. Such a research focus can also help marginalized women share their experiences, concerns, and wishes, consistent with the ethic of care outlined by Gilligan (1982). Research is also needed to further investigate how beautyism intersects with other forms of oppression, for example heterosexism and classism.

Because of the exploratory nature of the present study and the focus on ethic of care, I used semi-structured interviews as my data collection method. This allowed women to share their
stories, emotions, and criticisms related to the role of female beauty in society and provided rich data. As an interviewer, I also influenced the content of their narratives, for example by the questions that I asked or did not ask, by the quality of the rapport I established with individuals, and by my own appearance, dress and demographic characteristics. I speculate that my age may have influenced the interviews such that older women assumed a mentoring posture and focused on communicating their values and beliefs to me. This posture may have in turn led them to focus on positives in their present feelings about their appearance and ways in which they overcame negative experiences, rather than focusing on difficulties that they had not yet resolved. Social desirability bias may also have affected the content of the interviews, such that participants attempted to “say the right things” and avoid embarrassing or controversial statements. However, the ethic of care that I practiced in the interview and my nonjudgmental stance may also have allowed for participants to acclimatize to the interview and feel more comfortable. Further, the fact that the interviews were conducted as research with the ultimate intention of helping others may also have helped participants feel more positively about revealing sensitive or potentially embarrassing information.

Future research should investigate the extent to which anti-beautyist ideology correlates with women’s body image, self-acceptance, and affect. It is conceivable that if women think critically about what stereotypes or beliefs underly their drive to be attractive, they may become more comfortable with their own negative self-evaluations. They could also feel more empowered to confront or navigate beautyist discrimination in their own lives. To assess these possibilities, media literacy programs with anti-beautyist curricula could be developed and evaluated. Non-beautyist media can also be identified or developed and evaluated for possible protective effects on viewer’s appearance concerns and attitudes about beauty. Finally, men’s experiences with and
attitudes about beautyism is also an important arena for research, both for understanding beautyism against less-attractive men and for understanding the impact of men’s beautyist attitudes on women.

Absent from participants’ discussions of beautyism was any notion of mobilizing beauty privilege for prosocial aims. However, the potential utility to society of physical attractiveness should be a topic of consideration for anti-beautyism scholars. Participants described attractive women as receiving greater attention and admiration. They also suggested that people want to affiliate or interact with attractive women. In other words, attractiveness lends greater social status to some women, at least in some contexts. In her nonfiction book on aging and appearance anxiety, *Look at My Ugly Face!: Myths and musings on beauty and other perilous obsessions with women's appearance*, therapist Sara Halprin provides a reimagining of Snow White as a feminist fairy tale, in which the Queen’s legendary beauty gives her a special ability to inspire her people. As she ages, her beauty fades, and the increasingly beautiful Snow White becomes the fairest in the land. However, the Queen is not disappointed by this transition. Rather, she is relieved by the opportunity to retire from being a figurehead and to guide Snow White in her new role as a highly visible leader (Halprin, 1995). Anti-beautyism argues that women should not be expected to be beautiful in order to be influential, powerful, or noteworthy. Similarly, the present study’s findings about objectification, sexualization, and societal pressures to maintain one’s appearance suggests that women’s sexual appeal should not be construed as a compensatory form of power in a sexist society. However, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that beauty will not continue to be a component of how individuals and their communication is perceived. Future research and scholarship is needed to critically examine the role of physical attractiveness in the ways in which women and girls communicate with and impact others. Through these research efforts, we can help build an
anti-beautyist feminism that empowers all women, promotes self-acceptance, and breaks down stereotypes about attractive and unattractive women alike.
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Annie

Annie was a 31-year-old married White woman with no children. She had a degree in anthropology. Her knowledge of and interest in feminist philosophies and social justice was evident throughout the interview. In childhood, she had experienced traumatic bullying over her weight and felt that her mother, a dietician, had contributed to her weight concern as a child. In college, she had developed an eating disorder and lost a significant amount of weight but had since recovered. Despite her eating disorder, her college experience was in many ways positive, as she made friends and began to develop social skills and recover from her bullying trauma. At the time of the interview, she reported feeling generally satisfied with her appearance and comfortable identifying as “fat.” Annie portrayed her body image experience as a journey toward self-acceptance and felt that she was now in a place to help others accept themselves as well. She had a strong interest in cultural criticism or activism and seemed interested in beautyism as a topic.

April

April was a 27-year-old Asian woman with a boyfriend and no children. She was Vietnamese-American. She described having conversations with her boyfriends about the role of photoshop in perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards for women. She felt that she cared less about her appearance once she moved out of her family home for college. Previous to college, she had not worked and had been responsible only for family-related chores and responsibilities. Once out on her own, she had developed a sense of confidence in other areas. However, she still had concerns about her appearance. Major themes of April’s interview included professionalism or maturity,
and she repeatedly tied both to attractiveness and wearing makeup. She worried about being viewed as less mature or professional because of her decision not to wear makeup, but her concerns were not intense enough to motivate her to wear makeup. Similarly, she felt bothered by her occasional acne breakouts and was frustrated by her inability to control them but acknowledged that she had not done more to cover up or prevent her acne. April also felt ambivalent about beauty imagery in media, viewing it as creating unrealistic beauty standards but also being an enjoyable fantasy.

**Autumn**

Autumn was a 26-year-old divorced White Hispanic woman with no children. Her responses to questions tended to be brief and succinct. She described herself as socially awkward and shy and felt she looked “weird,” but recognized that other people did not think so. Because of her shyness, she tended to “ignore people” and tried to avoid conversations with strangers. However, she did have friends and a boyfriend. She also appeared to have kept in touch with her ex-husband’s sister on social media. Her ex-husband’s family was Vietnamese and Autumn reported that she had learned about Vietnamese beauty standards through her former sister-in-law’s social media posts. In high school, she became active in martial arts and felt this helped her gain confidence. She felt that her mother had done her best to instill confidence in her and her boyfriend was complimentary as well. Autumn did not provide much detail about attractiveness stereotypes or the impacts of attractiveness in women’s lives. Instead, she tended to focus on attractiveness as it related to body dissatisfaction or acceptance.

**Blair**

Blair was a 33-year-old married White woman with two children in her household. She was divorced from a man she had married at 19. Her father had struggled with his weight throughout
Blair’s life, eventually undergoing bariatric surgery, and seeing his struggle had motivated her to attempt to control her own weight in a long-term way and avoid his “yo-yoing.” She framed her weight loss concerns as a health issue rather than an attractiveness concern. Over the past year, Blair had taken on more projects as work and therefore had less time for sleep and eating well, which she felt had contributed to her difficulty losing weight. She taught massage to students and because of this had occasion to discuss body image and critique “fat talk” with students, who might otherwise make their clients feel uncomfortable. Blair was critical of pressures on women to wear makeup and be thin, and the role of media in perpetuating stereotypes about weight. She was aware of attractiveness biases but focused more on critiques of weight and gender stereotypes and on the sexualization of women. She also viewed the desire to be beautiful as potentially stemming from self-love and the desire to be one’s best self.

**Bonnie**

Bonnie was a 49-year-old married White woman with an adult son and daughter. She was talkative, laughed frequently, and appeared to enjoy the interview. She had a group of friends with whom she would sometimes discuss body image and parenting. Much of her discussion centered around her own weight concern, her empathy for others with weight concern, and critiques of the thin ideal. Bonnie described herself as average attractiveness, feeling confident on some days and less so on others. However, she felt that she had come to focus on attractiveness less as she’d aged. Although Bonnie did discuss bias or judgment against people who are not viewed as attractive, the bulk of her interview focused on body positivity, self-acceptance, and individual agency in choosing not to overvalue attractiveness. Conversations with others also figured prominently into her narrative, as she attempted to promote body positivity for others and received similar support from friends.
Carrie

Carrie was a 34-year-old married White woman with three children in her household. She spoke slowly, frequently lost her train of thought, and had a reserved demeanor. However, she nonetheless provided detailed answers and seemed comfortable with the interview. Carrie identified as highly attractive, although she was embarrassed to admit this. She said that until her pregnancy and weight gain, she had received a lot of attention for her looks, for example being pursued by men and told she should complete in the Miss America pageant. Carrie felt she had experienced privilege because of her attractiveness and was critical of this beautyism. Despite her acknowledgement of her attractiveness, she was also critical of several aspects of her appearance, particularly her weight. For example, she had found her pregnancy-related weight gain very distressing and had gone on a restrictive diet after her pregnancy. Her parents had not emphasized appearance when she was growing up. For example, her mother was 300lbs and seemed comfortable with this. However, Carrie’s grandmother was very image-conscious and had undergone cosmetic procedures. Carrie was a member of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and spoke of the influence of her religious beliefs on her attitude toward attractiveness.

Charlotte

Charlotte was a 42-year-old married White woman with two children. As a child, Charlotte had been repeatedly, regularly hospitalized and had to wear a back brace. She had also had surgery to correct a “lazy eye” in high school. Her parents had not discussed body image with her, but she reported having such conversations with her own children. Of all the participants in the study, she had the greatest difficulty defining physical attractiveness, speculating about how others might think or feel about physical attractiveness, or describing her own attractiveness. For example, she said that she had never thought about her own attractiveness and was unable to
provide any sort of rating for it. Charlotte also said she did not do anything to look more attractive, but then listed four types of makeup that she wore daily. When asked, she could not describe her motivation for wearing eye makeup. Additionally, she reported that she did not compare her appearance to others or notice their physical attractiveness. In other words, Charlotte’s responses to questions pertaining to physical attractiveness were often vague, uncertain, or indicated that the question was irrelevant to her. However, she was aware of media discourse about attractiveness discrimination, described several stereotypes that people might have about attractive or unattractive others, was aware of the thin ideal. She was also opposed to the sexualization of women and image-conscious media.

**Daphne**

Daphne was a 28-year-old unmarried White woman with no children. She appeared to enjoy the interview and spoke at length. Daphne was underweight, which she explained was due to a medical issue and to genetics. Because of her thinness, she was frequently accused of having an eating disorder and expressed irritation about this. She also had an identical twin sister who was heavier than she was, thus allowing her to compare her experience as a very thin woman to her twin’s experience as heavier and curvier woman. Her mother had encouraged her daughter to be active and introduced her to sports. Her grandmother, whom Daphne had a poor relationship with, placed a high value on appearance and had undergone multiple cosmetic procedures. Daphne viewed beauty standards and expectations of attractiveness as superficial and chose to ignore them. Criticisms of superficiality and vanity were prominent themes in her interview. She also discussed her disapproval of people who treat others poorly. For example, she ended a relationship with a boyfriend who criticized her friends for not being attractive enough. In this way, Daphne was sensitive to appearance-based injustices. She also expressed indignation at
unrealistic beauty standards and excessive pressures to engage in elaborate beauty practices, and sometimes felt judgmental of women who put too much emphasis on their looks.

**Dawn**

Dawn was a married White woman with three children. She declined to provide her age. Dawn grew up in a small, rural town. She and her husband both worked and were financially well-off. She described her relationship with her husband as mutually supportive with respect to body image concerns. Dawn was a self-described “gym rat” and admired muscula

rity and mentioned her appreciation for female muscula

rity several times in the interview. Dawn appeared comfortable discussing physical beauty and beautyism and was able to provide a detailed list physical features that are considered attractive. Although she did not want to endorse traditional beauty standards and did not believe women’s appearance should matter to society, she nonetheless found herself worrying about her appearance, particularly with respect to aging. In fact, she had considered using Botox, which she did not think her teenage self would have approved of. As a teenager she had stopped reading magazines because she found the beauty imagery “too fake.” Dawn had a nine-year-old daughter who called herself fat, which Dawn was concerned about. She avoided discussing weight around her daughter for this reason.

**Emma**

Emma was a 28-year-old woman who had been married for less than a year at the time of the interview. She identified her ethnicity as “other” but did not specify. She enjoyed entertainment media and the arts, and her interview was filled with references to music, books, and film. She had been considered a tomboy as a child, and as an adult appreciated muscula

rity in women, including herself. Throughout her life she had felt pressure to look and act more traditionally feminine. For example, she avoided having short hair because she did not want to risk being
mistaken for male. In college, Emma developed an eating disorder and began over-exercising, but recovered after these behaviors had caused her to faint. Emma still worried about her appearance and her weight at times. However, she felt she was generally viewed as attractive and recounted with disapproval incidences where attractiveness had conferred privilege on her.

**Florence**

Florence was a 39-year-old divorced White woman with a daughter and a long-distance girlfriend. She had short hair dyed bright red and dressed stylishly. She had struggled with her weight and food addiction and had previously weighed 300 lbs, but eventually joined a 12-step program related to food and had lost weight, being a size 6 at the time of the interview. Florence mentored others in this program and had also delivered talks on her weight loss journey and related issues. She was critical of her former weight and eating habits and felt more attractive now that she was thinner, though she also felt she had been attractive enough to be a plus-size model prior to her weight loss. Florence described her family of origin as alcoholic and negative, and recalled being criticized for her weight growing up. She had experienced a period of abusing drugs and alcohol but was now sober and felt a greater sense of well-being. Spirituality was a major focus of Florence’s interview, and she described engaging in practices such as connecting with her higher power, performing positive affirmations, meditation, gratitude lists, and serving others as a means of achieving positivity and well-being. She also described physical attractiveness as stemming from physical, spiritual, and emotional health. In fact, she did not articulate a clear role for physical attractiveness alone in society and did not appear to consider beautyism as a social justice concern distinct from body image concerns.

**Frances**

Frances was a married White woman with one child in her household. She grew up in a
conservative, religious community. She was interested in women’s bodybuilding and followed the careers of female bodybuilding celebrities and female Iron Man athletes. In fact, Frances herself had competed in triathlons. She had conceived through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and felt that because she was so happy to have been able to have her body “do what it was supposed to do,” she was accepting of her post-pregnancy changes in her body. Frances was in graduate school and used terminology from the social sciences in her interview, such as “deficit model” and “I’m an n of 1.” She went through a period of time she described as “utilitarian” where she did not wear makeup. She felt that because of this and because she had been unmarried at the time, people in her hometown had assumed she was gay. When she eventually decided to begin makeup, she asked a male friend who worked at a cosmetics department to teach her how to do it and had stuck with this way of wearing makeup ever since. Frances described her perceptions of attractiveness biases and gender roles in some detail.

Ginny

Ginny was a 52-year-old married White woman with one child in her household. She had an expressive demeanor and often spoke with urgency. She was Christian and her family attended church together. As a child, she’d had an intermittent problem with “lazy eye” or amblyopia and had surgery as a teen to correct this. As a result, she said, she had gone from introverted to extroverted. Additionally, when she was growing up, her father occasionally made comments comparing her body shape to her sister’s as a teen and this had influenced her body image. However, she was quick to say that his comments were not intended to be unkind or inappropriate. Ginny had internalized the thin ideal and felt guilty and embarrassed about this. In fact, guilt and embarrassment were reoccurring themes in her interview. For example, she felt guilty anytime she compared someone’s appearance unfavorably to her own. I had a subtle sense...
that Ginny was trying to anticipate the “correct” answers to questions. For this reason, I took particular pains to make clear that she was free to express herself in the interview. Ginny noted several areas in which she felt attractive people were likely to be viewed or treated differently from less-attractive people in society.

**Gwen**

Gwen was a married White woman with no children. She declined to provide her age but specified that she was in her sixties. She appeared to enjoy the interview process and provided detailed, thorough responses. Gwen had grown up on a farm, and now held a senior position in an office environment. Themes of authenticity and self-presentation dominated her interview. Gwen appeared to conceptualize attractiveness primarily in terms of fashion, hairstyle, and other grooming choices, although she did mention physical features as more or less attractive as well. Her primary concern was that people might try to look a certain way in order to “fit in” with others, rather than simply being themselves. She also felt that people project their values and personalities through their appearance, and risked being “fake” if they tried to modify their appearance just to gain approval. In college, she had tried to join in every extra-curricular activity she could as a way of forming friendships and had attempted to emulate others in order to fit in. However, she soon realized that authenticity was an important part of friendship. Her interview did not suggest awareness of beautyism, and she focused more on individuals’ agency in presenting a false or authentic self through clothing and personal grooming.

**Helena**

Helena was a 31-year-old married White woman with no children. She appeared to be invested in her role as an aunt to her nieces and nephews. Before moving to Washington state, she had lived in California and worked in a higher-paying job. During this period, she had been active in a
gym and had been thinner but had gained weight now that she could no longer afford this. Helena was dissatisfied with her appearance and had feelings of not doing enough to be healthy, lose weight, fix her hair, or otherwise manage her appearance. She was also upset about the hurtful comments she and her niece received about their weight. Sometimes, her mother made comments about Helena’s appearance and weight that made her feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. Helena was critical of her mother’s comments and had even confronted her about it, though the issue did not seem to be fully resolved. Helena placed a great deal of importance on her appearance but also felt that appearance should not matter. However, she did not show a detailed awareness of attractiveness biases outside of Hollywood and media. She also did not view appearance-related pressures to be a gendered issue and explained that her husband experienced similar concerns.

Holly

Holly was a 35-year-old married White woman with two children in her household. She was from a small town. Her mother had struggled with weight, and Holly felt that some of these concerns had been passed on to her. She felt that she had “developed” or gone through puberty earlier than her friends and began to have body image concerns. Holly described herself as “approaching middle age” and felt that this was a “new phase of life,” and one she was still navigating. She was open with her friends about the difficulties she encountered as she aged. Motherhood emerged as a prominent theme in her interview. For example, she shared anxieties about parenting and balancing her children’s needs with her own and appeared to have some internal conflict about what to think or feel about her identity as a mother. She identified beautyist stereotypes and behaviors in society.
Isobel

Isobel was a 60-year-old single White woman with no children. She appeared somewhat restless or bored during the interview and sometimes glanced at the clock behind me. Isobel had grown up in Texas with her parents and three younger sisters. As a child, Isobel had been the “thin one” in her family, but this position had since reversed, as two of her sisters had undergone weight loss surgery and Isobel had gained weight. She considered herself to have been attractive as a young woman and associated this with her experience of sexual harassment and assault. After her assault, she began to deflect male attention. She also expressed cynicism about marriage, speaking of her fear of the potential for abuse, divorce, and poverty to ensue. Isobel had strong opinions on media and grew visibly angry when critiquing fanbases of public figures like Madonna and the Kardashians. Isobel had used to tape 30 hours of television of week but after traveling and suffering a broken TV dish, she realized that she didn’t need or miss it and cancelled her satellite subscription. She did not have access to Internet at home.

Ivona

Ivona was a 48-year-old unmarried White woman. She identified as a “single mother by choice,” having used anonymous donation to conceive. Her hairstyle, clothing, and voice were conventionally feminine, although her facial features were androgynous. In fact, she reported having been mistaken for male on multiple occasions. She was expressive and at one point teared up during the interview, but her tone and demeanor were generally positive and humorous. Ivona was interested in body positivity media and in women’s empowerment. She was experiencing perimenopause, which she felt had caused her to center more on her values, health, and emotional thriving. She frequently referenced her daughter and her role as a parent, sharing her approach to helping her daughter navigate body dissatisfaction and female empowerment.
Jillian

Jillian was a 43-year-old married White woman with one child in her household. She was highly interested in the interview topic and participated enthusiastically. Jillian was originally from the American South and had also lived in South Korea for a year as an adult. She had grown up with five siblings. Her social circle as a child and college student appeared to have included some high-status families, as her friends included the daughter of a senator and the daughter of a judge. Her mother was a scientist and had not conformed to the gender roles or expectations for women. In fact, Jillian considered to her mother’s gender identity as “neither male or female” and felt that this was accepted for women scientists in the South. In college, Jillian had developed an interest in feminist literature, including books by Naomi Wolf and Gloria Steinem. Jillian’s interest in feminism and social justice, including confronting beauty biases, was evident. During college, she had rebelled against traditional gender roles and instead dressed only in plaid shirts and jeans with holes, listened to the Indigo Girls, and was intentionally celibate and single. After this three-year period of rejecting gender roles, she felt she had arrived at a place where she could feel agenic and authentic when choosing to engage in beauty practices. She had co-owned a business for ten years and it was clear that this accomplishment was very important to her.

Kim

Kim was a 55-year-old married White woman with an adult daughter. She was raised in a religious family, and her Christian faith was a key theme in her interview. For example, she linked her capacity for self-acceptance to her sense of being loved by a benevolent god. Kim had looked up to her father as a child and attributed her self-accepting attitude in part to his influence. She had lived in the Republic of Kiribati, a Pacific Island, for a “long term” period of time. Her adult daughter was heavily tattooed, including with a tattoo of a nude woman, and Kim
was making an effort to accept her daughter’s tattoos even though she did not appreciate them herself. Recently, Kim had taken a two-month trip to visit her son in New Zealand, which she had found spiritually fulfilling and enjoyable. She was also pleased to have lost weight during the trip. Although Kim had never had an eating disorder or considered herself obese, she did report some long-standing weight dissatisfaction. Kim appeared to problematize beautyism primarily in terms of acceptance or positivity for oneself and for others.

**Lucy**

Lucy was a 50-year-old married White woman with three children in her household. There was a 20-year age gap between her oldest and youngest children. Lucy had been a single parent to her two oldest. She repeatedly referenced the effect of pregnancy, postpartum depression and the “craziness of being a mom” on her appearance and body satisfaction. Her discussions of appearance tended to focus on weight. In general, however, Lucy felt comfortable with her appearance and identified herself as beautiful, though she felt self-conscious about saying so. She felt that attractiveness had been less important in her own life and attributed this to the sense of direction and empowerment that her spirituality and connection to God gave her. Lucy was concerned about the impact of sexualization on girls, the thin ideal, and the societal devaluation of inner beauty and values, but less aware of or interested in beautyism as a distinct axis of discrimination.

**Molly**

Molly was a 48-year-old married White woman with no children. Because of her disability, she did not have formal employment, but sold crafts on the Internet. She was heavy-set, had been so since childhood, and was comfortable identifying herself as such. After high school she had undergone bariatric surgery to appease her parents. However, she eventually had the procedure
reversed because of side effects. She had come to reject both the thin ideal and beauty standards generally, although she did appear to view these issues from a feminist or overt social justice lens, or to consider anti-beautyism per se. Molly was extremely talkative and often went off-topic during the interview. Her family members and relatives figured prominently in her narrative, and in the past she had taken a caretaker role for several of them. She often spoke of these people with concern, affection, or a sense of forgiveness, although there had been tensions or stressors in her relationships with some of them. Molly had survived extensive bullying, two suicide attempts, an abusive first marriage, and other significant life events, but appeared essentially content with her life and herself at the time of the interview.

**Nina**

Nina was a 43-year-old married White woman with two stepdaughters in her home and two adult daughters. She was from Canada and had lived briefly in Venezuela. Her religious views had influenced her beliefs about the value of inner beauty over physical beauty, which she felt were at odds with society. As a teenager, Nina had experienced an eating disorder. As an adult, she identified herself as an athlete and exercised daily. At the time of the interview she was sometimes displeased with her physical signs of aging but described herself as being “at peace” with her appearance. Nina identified her entire family as being physically attractive, including her grandmother, mother, and daughters. She was aware of beautisym and critiqued such discrimination and stereotyping. She also labeled and critiqued objectification and sexualization of women in media, saying she was “not a fan.” Throughout the interview, she described female family members and various other women as role-models and was active in trying to influence her own children’s body image and values related to inner beauty.
Ophelia

Ophelia was a 59-year-old married White woman with five children. She described herself as a post-menopausal “empty nester” and grandmother. She was deeply religious and had served on a mission trip in Germany. Ophelia attributed her understanding of beauty to her faith and to women in her church. She grew up in a large family maintained on a schoolteacher’s salary, and so her mother had made her clothes growing up. Her discussion of attractiveness often centered on fashion, personal grooming, and especially weight, although she did acknowledge that facial characteristics influence attractiveness as well. She had struggled with her weight throughout her life, and as a result had made a concerted effort to avoid passing the thin ideal onto her children. Ophelia viewed superficiality and body dissatisfaction as barriers to mental or spiritual health. However, she did not articulate beautyism as a social justice concern per se or discuss discrimination or oppression related to appearance in detail.

Pippa

Pippa was a 53-year-old divorced White woman with one adult child. Pippa was expressive and shared her opinions and experiences with confidence. She had short gray hair and multiple tattoos. She described herself as an avid motorcyclist and recounted once shaving her head in preparation for a three-week motorcycle trip. During her 20s, she was a single mother struggling to put food on the table. At the time of the interview, she worked in an administrative capacity at a local university and considered herself to be “moving up that ladder” professionally. Generally, Pippa seemed comfortable with herself and her appearance, although she did not consider herself especially attractive and occasionally had “blips” of worrying about her appearance. She was interested in dating but explained that it was more difficult at her present stage of life than when she had been in her 30s. This difficulty had inspired her to take better care of her skin and
physical health.

**Robin**

Robin was a 53-year-old divorced White woman with a son. She was heavy-set and had a permanent leg injury that necessitated the use of a walker. Of all the participants in the present study, Robin was the most vocal about beautyism, speaking at length and in detail about prejudice related to physical attractiveness. Furthermore, she linked beautyism to other forms of discrimination, including ageism and ableism. She had been forced into early retirement, which she attributed to multiple forms of discrimination, including beautyism. Robin’s ex-husband was from India. Although Robin was a White American woman, she had spent 25 years associating with the East Indian community and rejecting what she termed “American culture” and White people generally. She attributed this rejection to the greater acceptance she found in her husband’s culture, where her physical appearance seemed less important. However, she re-entered White American culture, with the help of therapy and personal growth. The overarching theme of Robin’s narrative was ostracism: she felt that others considered her physically unattractive and excluded her for this reason, as well as for her age and disability. This perceived ostracism was pervasive in her professional, religious, social, and romantic life. Although her demeanor was calm, the content of her interview was highly emotional. Robin also appeared to have considered beautyism prior to the interview to a greater extent than most participants, with highly detailed and well-articulated descriptions of the impact of physical attractiveness in her own life and the lives of others.

**Rowan**

Rowan was a 40-year-old married White woman with one child. She described her husband complimentary and supportive of her body image. She had grown up with a mother who had a
weight problem and frequently instituted diets in their home. Partly as a result of this, she struggled with weight concerns but not to the same extent as her mother, whom she considered an unhealthy role model in this regard. Rowan had noticed signs of aging in her appearance over the past five years and was sometimes bothered by this but tried to focus on her health rather than on her appearance. Additionally, Rowan had struggled somewhat with body image issues after pregnancy. She admitted that coming to terms with her body concerns was an ongoing process, and she did not have “all the answers.” She described her belief in the existence of appearance biases as a “core belief” and wished that there was more appreciation for appearance diversity.

Tess

Tess was a 36-year-old unmarried Mestiza woman no children. She was from Colombia. She did not view herself as attractive, although she did seem particularly dissatisfied with anything specific about her appearance. She felt that she was sexualized in America for her ethnicity and also implied that she had been sexually assaulted or harmed in Colombia and experienced victim-blaming based on her clothing. Further, she had survived Stage 4 cancer as an adult and speculated that this experience may have helped her de-prioritize physical attractiveness. Tess was very interested in social justice concerns and articulated her critiques of sexualization, sexual harassment and violence, and social justice. She frequently couched her discussion of physical attractiveness and beauty in terms of cultural attitudes and socialization, particularly with respect to the sexualization, the objectification of women, and bias against those who look different.

Violet

Violet was a 27-year-old graduate student and married Asian Indian woman with a three-year-
old daughter. She was originally from India, but had lived in five countries, including Kuwait, China, and British Hong Kong. At the time of the interview, Violet planned on losing weight prior to graduation so that she would be thinner in job interviews and thus less likely to be discriminated against. In her interview, Violet appeared to feel some ambivalence about her level of concern for her appearance, feeling “pathetic” for not taking greater care for her appearance while also viewing other aspects of her life, such as her academic progress, to be more important. Weight was a major theme in her interview, often eclipsing other aspects of attractiveness or beautyism. However, she did report that she had experienced beautyism. For example, she felt she had been hired for a job over other candidates because she was more attractive and being better able to drive bargains in marketplaces.

**Winn**

Winn was a 29-year-old single White woman with no children. She was college educated and familiar with some social scientific or philosophical discourse, for example using phrases such as “what makes a woman beautiful is socially constructed” and critiquing “gendered beauty [standards].” In her 20s, she had frequently gone on trips to Las Vegas, which she loved for the glamour, and would spend hours getting ready to go out for the evening in Vegas. Winn had also once been a high-caliber synchronized swimmer, a sport which she felt emphasized appearance. However, she felt that she had come to value attractiveness less as she had begun to focus more on her education, and this trend continued after college and into her late 20s. Winn had worked with refugees in Romania as part of her job with the UN, and this work had put her in contact with clients from far-flung regions and different continents. She felt that intergenerational conversation would help women gain new perspectives on beauty and wished that college students had more opportunities to talk with women 30-40 years older than themselves.
Additionally, she wished to see beauty standards become more inclusive. However, she was pessimistic about public readiness for media that did not prioritize beauty. In general, she focused more on promoting inclusivity within beauty standards, rejecting traditional gender roles, and promoting body positivity than on beautyism per se, but she did associate beauty with privileges such as greater access to opportunity.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How do women define physical beauty?

- In your opinion, what physical characteristics make a woman look beautiful or attractive?
- How do you think your idea compares to others’ idea of what a physically beautiful woman looks like?

What experiences or observations do women describe as contributing to their definition of physical beauty?

- Where do you think your idea of what a physically beautiful woman looks like comes from?
- What people do you think influenced your definition of a physically beautiful woman, if any?
  - What things that another person has done or said influenced your definition, if any?

What value do women believe society places on physical beauty?

- What sorts of thoughts or feelings do you think most people have about women who are attractive? Unattractive
  - If you asked a stranger, “What sort of personality traits do you think most attractive people have,” what do you guess they would say?
  - Do you think society stereotypes women based on how attractive or unattractive they are?
- How do you think that society treats women who are very attractive? Unattractive?
What value do women themselves place on physical beauty (i.e., how strong is their appearance orientation)?

- How important is it to you personally to be attractive?
- How do you think your life would be the same or different if you were more attractive?
  - Less attractive?

How attractive do women perceive themselves to be?

- How attractive do you see yourself as being?

How attractive do women perceive others to find them to be?

- How attractive do you think friends see you? Family members? Significant others?
  - Strangers?

In what ways do women talk about comparing their appearance to others?

- How often do you compare your appearance to others?
- To whom do you compare your appearance?

How does a woman’s awareness and interpretation of beauty standards change over time?

- Has there ever been a period in your life when you worried more about your appearance than you do now? Less?
- Has your attitude about women’s physical attractiveness been the same over time, or has it changed?
  - Importance of attractiveness?
  - What a person who is attractive or unattractive acts, thinks, or feels?
  - What caused this change?
  - Did you ever know someone who changed how you thought or felt about attractiveness?
Did you ever encounter something from the media--a TV show, magazine, celebrity, or something like that--that changed how you thought or felt about attractiveness?

In what ways do women identify that they have managed their appearance so as to adhere to beauty standards?

- What features do you have that you think are physically attractive?
- What things about your appearance do you wish you could change?
  - Do you think your [nose / hips / whatever] could ever change to be more like what you want? Why or why not?
- What sorts of things, if anything, do you do in order to make yourself look more attractive?

How do women identify that their use of such strategies has changed over time?

- Has this changed over time, or have you always acted the same way?

In what ways do women talk about rejecting beauty standards?

- When you see something about your appearance that you don’t like, how do you react?
  - Is there anything that you say or do to feel better?
- Is there anything that you find physically beautiful in women, that most other people don’t?
- If you could change what is considered physically beautiful by society, what changes would you make?
- How would you feel if the media featured fewer beautiful women and more unattractive women?
  - Would you like the change, or dislike the change?
• In your personal opinion: how important is it for a woman to be physically beautiful?

• In your personal opinion, how important is it for a woman to avoid being physically ugly?

• Do you think that the way you feel about yourself would change if you were more or less attractive?

• What is the value of physical attractiveness to you?
  
  o What makes being beautiful a good thing or a bad thing?
APPENDIX C

MEDIAOGRAPHY

2 Broke Girls: A sitcom about two waitresses, which ran from 2011-2017 (“2 Broke Girls,” n.d.). The show was criticized for jokes that were perceived as racist and sexist (Goodman, 2011 Oct 24).


Ani DiFranco: An independent singer-songwriter and activist. Many of her songs, such as “Not A Pretty Girl” (about benevolent sexism) and “Play God” (about reproductive rights) address feminist themes (“Ani Biography,” n.d.)

Audrey Hepburn: A ballerina and actress who rose to prominence in the 1950s. She is popularly viewed as a beauty icon and contrasted with Marylin Monroe because of Hepburn’s slender, straight figure and air of sophistication (Wills, 2017 Jan 19).

BBC America: A paid subscription television channel featuring original American and British television shows across a variety of genres (“FAQ,” n.d.)

Beautyredefined.org: A website run by Lindsay and Lexie Kite. The website focuses on challenging the objectification of women and decreasing women and girls’ body shame, using blogs, events, online courses, and other forms of education and outreach. The website’s tagline reads, “Redefine the meaning and value of beauty in our lives with Lindsay and Lexie Kite, PhD.”

Big Bang Theory: A popular sitcom about a group of nerdy friends and their romantic and personal lives. The show attracted controversy, particularly during early seasons when it
featured only one female lead, but was also praised for normalizing “geek” culture (Murray, 2018).


*Bogotá Humana*: A television channel in Bogotá, Colombia, which participant Tess described as featuring local cultural content and informative programming.

*The Brady Bunch*: A comedy show popular in the late 60s and early 70s, describing a blended family of two parents and seven children (“The Brady Bunch,” n.d.)

*Cameron Russell*: A fashion model and activist who has received attention from media outlets for her work raising awareness about sexual harassment within the fashion industry (“About,” n.d.)

*Cindy Crawford*: A supermodel and businesswoman, popular in the 1990s, who is known in par for for the mole above her lip (Nolen, n.d.)

*The Daily Mail*: A British tabloid known for its political conservatism and sensationalist content (Nuccitelli, 2017 Feb 13)

*David Bowie*: A British rock singer and songwriter popular in the 1970s and 80s who was known for his alter egos and theatrical style (“David Bowie,” n.d.)

*Descendants*: A live-action Disney made-for-TV film about the children of Belle and the prince from *Beauty and the Beast* (“Descendants,” n.d.)

*Disney Princesses*: The female leads of Disney animated movies who are either born princesses or become princesses through marriage. Some Disney princesses include Cinderella (*Cinderella*), Jasmine (*Aladdin*), and Tiana (*The Frog Princess*), among others (“Dream Big, Princess,” n.d.)
Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign: An ongoing, prosocial marketing campaign by the Dove skincare brand. The brand features “real women” instead of models in their advertising and engages in outreach to promote women and girl’s positive body image (“The ‘Dove Real Beauty’ pledge,” n.d.)

Facebook: A social media site where individuals can post photos and text to their profile pages, among other activities (Nations, 2019 Mar 29)

Glennon Doyle: Formerly known as Glennon Doyle Melton. A writer, activist, and public speaker who rose to prominence through her blog on motherhood, called “Momastery.” She has also written and spoken about relationships and mental health (Glennon Doyle Melton biography, n.d.)

Gilligan’s Island: A popular 1960s comedy television show about a bumbling sailor and six other castaways stranded on a tropical island (“Gilligan’s Island,” n.d.)

Heidi Montag: A reality TV show star from the series The Hills, which focused on the lives of young socialites (“Heidi Montag,” n.d.; Morn, 2019 Mar 20)

HelloGiggles.com: An online culture and lifestyle community, which publishes reader contributions and has a professional staff, focusing on topics such as beauty, careers, and women’s empowerment. The website was founded by Molly McAleer, Sophia Rossi, and celebrity actress and singer Zooey Deschanel. The website’s tagline is “A Positive Community for Women.”

HuffPost: Formerly known as The Huffington Post, the website features news, political commentary, and opinion pieces, and is generally liberal (Farhi, 2012 Apr 27; Reisinger, 2009 Jan 28)

Indigo Girls: A singer-songwriter duo who rose to prominence in the late 1980s and were
known for their political themes, including support for gay rights and environmentalism (“Indigo Girls,” n.d.)

Jessica Day (New Girl): Jessica Day, played by Zooey Deschanel, is the main character of the romantic comedy New Girl. A sweet, good-natured schoolteacher from Portland, Oregon, she is unembarrassed about her quirks and enjoys being herself (“Jessica Day,” n.d.).

Jodie Foster: An actress, director, and film producer who won her first Oscar in 1977, at the age of 12, playing a child prostitute in Taxi Driver. She has a reputation for intelligence, having graduated from Yale, and has come out as gay (“Jodie Foster biography, n.d)

Karen Carpenter: Lead vocalist for The Carpenters, a musical duo popular in the 1970s and 80s. She died of complications from anorexia in 1983 (Latson, 2015 Feb 4)

Kylie Jenner: A popular teen celebrity from the reality TV show Keeping Up With the Kardashians, know for her successful cosmetics line (“Kylie Jenner Biography, 2019 Apr 10).

The Lord of the Rings: An epic fantasy series by J.R.R. Tolkien, later adapted into a film trilogy by director and producer Peter Jackson. The story concerns themes such as the battle between good and evil, cooperation, and folkloric motifs (“Lord of the Rings,” n.d.)

Madonna: A pop singer and actress who was well-known in the 1980s for her sexually provocative music videos and other controversial projects (“Madonna,” n.d.)

Miley Cyrus: An actress and singer who rose to fame as a young teenager on Hannah Montana, a Disney channel sitcom, and later attracted controversy for her edgy music videos and on-stage behavior (“Miley Cyrus,” n.d.)

Miss America: A televised beauty pageant for women aged 17-25 in which the winners compete for the status of Miss America and associated scholarship. Winners are expected to serve
as spokeswomen for social causes. (“Become a Candidate,” n.d.).

**National Geographic Magazine**: A monthly magazine focusing on topics such as geography, wildlife, and anthropology. Known for its color photography (“National Geographic Magazine,” n.d.)

**New York Times**: A prominent American newspaper, available with both print or electronic subscriptions (nytimes.com)

**NPR (National Public Radio)**: A nonprofit media organization focused on news, culture, and public service journalism (“Our mission and vision,” n.d.)

**Oprah**: The first female Black billionaire in the United States, best known for her work as a talk show host, television and magazine producer, and actress (“Oprah Winfrey Biography, n.d.)

**Paul Simon**: A singer-songwriter in the folk duo Simon and Garfunkle and solo artist, Paul Simon rose to prominence in the 1960s. He is known for his poetic lyrics (“Paul Simon biography, n.d.)

**The Real Housewives of New York City**: A reality television show, begun in 2008, which follows the lives and careers of a cast of business women and socialites in New York (“The real housewives of New York City,” n.d.)

**“Roses”**: An song by the hip-hop duo Outkast, about a woman whose beauty does not make up for her shortcomings. The narrator of the song hopes that she will crash her car into a ditch and criticizes her for her vanity, narcissism and lack of intelligence (“Roses,” n.d.)

**Saved by the Bell**: A comedy television show about a group of high school students, which ran from 1989 to 1992 (“Saved by the Bell,” n.d.)

**Seinfeld**: A popular 1990s sitcom about a comedian and his dysfunctional friends in New York
City ("Seinfeld," n.d.)

**Seventeen:** A monthly teen magazine featuring topics such as fashion, beauty, and entertainment, among others ("seventeen," n.d.)

**Snow White:** The first Disney princess, who appeared in the animated film of the same name in 1937. She is a beautiful woman who falls into a death-like sleep after eating a poisoned apple given to her by her jealous stepmother, who envies her beauty.

However, Snow White is woken up by the kiss of a prince who happens to be passing by and admires her beauty from within her glass coffin ("Snow White," n.d.)

**Tangled:** A Disney animated film inspired by the story of Rapunzel. In the film, Rapunzel’s mother traps Rapunzel in a tower in order to use her magical hair to stay young forever, but Rapunzel takes a would-be male rescuer captive and escapes to go on adventures ("Tangled," n.d.)

**Tori Amos:** A singer-songwriter, popular in the 1990s, known for her introspective lyrics and feminist themes ("Tori Amos," n.d.)

**Yoda:** A popular alien character from the *Star Wars* franchise. He small, old, odd-looking, and wise, often taking a mentoring role to other characters ("Yoda," n.d.)
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