

## Beauty

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### The Power Of Beauty – Discuss

‘Beauty’ is rarely used in relation to anything male, therefore issues relating to the power of beauty almost exclusively describe issues relating to women. In our western culture, an ideal woman is beautiful. A beautiful woman’s attributes include definitions of body size and shape, skin tone and condition, hairstyle, facial features, symmetry and the observable care she takes of her body. Breasts should be on the large size and pert; there should be a tiny waist; average sized hips; long legs; no hair anywhere apart from on her head (10), where hair should be worn long, straight and blonde; full lips; large eyes and a small nose - these are the desirable traits for a woman.

“The stereotypes... program into young people an image of the dominant male and the subservient female that becomes second nature”. (8i)

Girls are taught that they must act subordinate and that beauty is the key to getting what they want, which is men with power, because men only see them as objects. In this way, girls are taught from an early age that they begin as a second class citizen, and beauty is the tool to be used to gain recognition, to be seen. Boys are taught in the same way to objectify women and that their only useful feature is their beauty.

In the past, a beautiful appearance varied from the image we have today. A much fuller figure indicated health and wealth so it was this image that women were encouraged to strive for. Cultural variations of beautiful traits in women suggests that images of beauty are controlled more by society than evolution. Looking at the requirements for beauty in our culture, it is evident that beauty is used to discriminate, ‘looks-ism’ covering up racism, ageism, classism and sexism.

The accepted attitude within our culture is that vanity and superficiality should be hidden and denied. In order for women to permanently focus so much on achieving beauty, women need to have a low opinion of themselves. Indeed, the mindset that society demands is that you can never be too beautiful, social pressure telling each woman that every woman automatically feels ugly. (13i)

There is however a double standard at work here. Women in particular are targeted by marketing companies to be conscious of their appearances and of the image ‘naturally’ desired by men. This is a double standard that women are expected to assume. Being desired by men is assumed to be every woman’s goal in life, and rarely is a life without reliance on a man portrayed as a positive choice for a woman.

Men are trained by the same system to desire a woman of beauty, with a certain ‘perfect’ image.

“[Advertising has] also taught men how to look at, assess, and treat women, so this media imagery comes back at us in our own interpersonal relationships”. (7i)

As men are punished by feminists for being attracted to the image they have been taught to find attractive their whole life, they are also taught along the way about their gender roles and dominance over women. Men should not be blamed so ruthlessly for succumbing to their prescribed behaviour any more than should women for being the victims in the system. Men are encouraged to objectify women to display their status. The fact that men are not required to put as much effort into 'keeping up appearances' as women serves as a constant reminder to men and women alike that "men are worth more and need not try as hard". (13ii)

Consider the following: The successful man with a beautiful (be it natural or high-maintenance beauty) woman on his arm displays her as a subordinate object to his peers. Her beauty tells others that this man has enough power to attract such a woman, and he is well off enough to keep her in 'well-groomed, well-dressed idleness' (8ii). The fact that beauty traits are often signs of high maintenance (of the body) and idleness (of the career) shows the kind of life women are encouraged to lead. For example, we are told that long, manicured nails are pretty. They also show that the woman does no physical labour, probably because she has used her beauty to gain a man who supports her financially.

Images of beauty are far from the way a natural woman would appear (9). The appearance of femininity and womanliness is distorted from nature by society, not men. It is however men, not women, who control society. For example, women naturally have hair on their legs and in their armpits, yet are expected in most western cultures to remove this in order to appear more 'feminine'. Women naturally have a layer of fat on their tummies, to protect any potential developing foetus, yet are expected to starve themselves to lose it, but not so much that they lose their breasts. Aging is a natural process yet is equated to a loss of beauty.

A woman is only seen as a success on attaining a husband. Attractiveness is denoted by society as the only way to get one. The fact that physical 'beauty' and sexual attraction are seen as the same thing causes problems in interpersonal relationships. "Society has conflated beauty and attraction, enmeshing them so closely together that we become utterly alienated from our full experiencing of the latter because of the supposed power of the former". (5)

Women who do not conform to the physical standards of beauty feel unattractive and men in turn may find that they only find 'beautiful' women attractive. Men are expected to behave in a certain manner, less sensitive and emotional etc., but I believe their appearance is less under scrutiny and control. An ugly man may have a life accepted as successful with or without a partner as his career is seen as his priority, even today.

The feminist movements aimed to remove the restrictions on women of the beauty ideal. In the same way as it is impossible to live a communist lifestyle in a capitalist society, it is also impossible to live a true feminist lifestyle in a patriarchal society. Parts of the feminist movements have encouraged women to reject the set standards of appearance and go for the natural look. A good feminist would not wear a miniskirt and makeup, surely? However, since we do live in a patriarchal society, others have decided to play men at their own game. Women, being taught that beauty is power, can find empowerment in their beauty, be it natural or high maintenance. It is a clear

fact that a woman who conforms to set beauty standards is able to attain a certain level of success in her career which would be less likely if she had the stereotyped appearance of a 'butch lesbian'. However, once at this level in a company, perhaps a PA who actually makes all the managerial decisions, it is unlikely she will be taken seriously enough to make it to manager, or be paid as much as a man of equal position.

As women are confronted with images of an ideal beauty, their self comparisons degrade them and control their priorities in their lives.

“Research has found that young women’s self-esteem scored measurably lower after they were shown fashion and beauty images than before.” (13iii)

In this way, I see intelligent, beautiful women around me constantly dissatisfied with themselves and their lives as they strive to attain that which society has told them will make them successful. Although not so many admit it, most women feel uncomfortable without a boyfriend as a symbol of their success. Most women want to change their bodies to become something that nature did not intend. When gathered together, women often resort to describing their physical dissatisfactions in turn, like a competition to put themselves down. Any acceptance or even pride in self appearance is seen as terrible vanity and not self confidence. If a person accepts themselves and their appearance as one and the same, it is demeaning to brainwash them into hating their appearance and in turn hating themselves.

By focusing on unnatural physical traits and teaching women how they should want to look, the media knock women’s self esteem, making them feel they have failed, believing that a good woman would be able to keep up with tricking the world into believing she is beautiful, even if she was not born that way.

“Thin thighs and dimple-free buttocks became instant, automatic evidence of discipline, self-denial and control”. (7ii)

If she cannot control her appearance to conform to the set standards, what hope has she of having control or power over anything else in her life? If her body won’t listen to what she wants, who will? In this way, the media uses the exaggerated power of beauty to subordinate women. Although there is a widespread trend of self-body-hatred amongst women, they are also encouraged to compete against each other for beauty, therefore men, therefore men’s resources.

“Solidarity is hardest to find when women learn to see each other as beauties first”. (13iv)

An important result of this division is between generations. Mothers find themselves envious of their daughters as they are looked at less and their daughters blossom into beauties. The degrading of aging in the media not only divides generations of women, but reduces the power older women would naturally gain over a lifetime, based on experience and knowledge (13v). This envy that is stirred up by the media amongst women prevents them finding solidarity with one another, as this would be a danger to society as it stands as it would encourage movements of women finding power in each other to change society. (4)

By dividing women and keeping their self esteem low, revolutions are prevented. Indeed, the fact that women provide such a massive cheap labour force in comparison to men, who demand better pay and working conditions, is directly related to the power of beauty.

“Western economies are absolutely dependent now on the continued underpayment of women. An ideology that makes women feel ‘worth less’ was urgently needed to counteract [feminism] (13vi).

Beauty issues have become increasingly important to women in the last few decades. Interestingly, this increase has coincided with feminist movements liberating women from the confines of the housewife. As women began to question their equality in all areas of their lives, their abilities in the workplace were displaying their equality and society foresaw a loss of their slave workforce. The ‘beauty myth’ began to serve its purpose of social control. (13vii) A new image was needed for women to identify with – to redefine their subservience to men.

“The display of women’s bodies in ads was defined by submission, passivity, incompetence, and deference to male authority.” (7).

The massive increase in media advertising of this type came hand in hand with an explosion of new types of cosmetic products, all promising to make women more beautiful, directly profiting from women’s created insecurities and keeping their work force subordinate.

Commonly, traits of beauty have been explained as evolutionary preferences by men. A well rounded figure is perceived as being attractive in most cultures (Most cultures not being subjected to western media influence). Wide hips may be seen as attractive to men and this could be related to ease of childbirth, giving a higher ‘fitness’ of the woman, along with large breasts showing a higher fat content, i.e. health. Pertness of breasts showing youth and relative thinness showing fertility, in the sense that thinness displays that the woman is not already pregnant are also factors of beauty. Age seems to be an important factor in human mate choice. Men seem to choose women in the early stages of fertility, e.g. 15-25 preferentially. This could be so that the woman has many more years of child-bearing ability left.

In the evolution of human mate choice behaviour, mating has been more costly to women because of their limited number of gametes, so choosing the best available male in terms of what he has to offer in genes or parental ability was important. Men are inclined to maximise their mating opportunities as their parental effort was less important in the survival of their offspring than the parental effort of the woman.

In terms of evolutionary theory, who is most attractive to the opposite sex is based on the idea of fitness. This includes fertility (genetic factors) and ability to bring offspring to reproductive age (parental, social factors). If sexual attraction has an evolutionary basis, beauty should give an indication of fitness. Vague theories such as the fact that trait symmetry can give an impression of genetic quality and a healthy condition because genetic defects or illness can cause one side of the body to develop differently from the other (2) are contrasted with arguments that a physically beautiful woman is not particularly likely to be a good mother (3).

Because males have so many gametes, mating is a less costly affair for them, they are prone to be less choosy and more likely to take up any available mating opportunity. However, if his parental efforts are important in the survival of his offspring, he is more likely to have less mating partners so he can focus his efforts of fewer families and increase his fitness. In this case, he is more likely to be choosy. However, I

propose that the extent to which beauty plays a role in modern human mating behaviour has been greatly exaggerated by the media, as “[Beauty’s] ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of a species”. (13viii). As can be seen from fashion magazines, Images of beauty change too often to be evolutionarily based.

On this basis I conclude that the media, as a tool of society, is used against women by exaggerating the importance of beauty and creating the power of beauty that we see today. Evolutionary explanations for images of beauty are not conclusively proven in humans but this theory is used as propaganda as a reasonable and scientific cause for discrimination. Even if these theories hold some truth, the way they are currently interpreted and applied is unnecessary and damaging to men and women. Women are hereby kept in subordination for the purposes of being used as ignorant slaves in industry in order to support capitalist economics.

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