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Maybe She's Born with It: Analyzing theories of Beauty From Biology, Society and the Media

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**MAYBE SHE'S BORN WITH IT:
ANALYZING THEORIES OF BEAUTY FROM BIOLOGY, SOCIETY
AND THE MEDIA**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

**by
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Preface & Acknowledgements

On the first day of our junior seminar for honors, when prompted with the question from a classmate, “What’s your personal mantra?” I answered cheerfully, “Everyday is a new opportunity to look cute.” No joke. True, this thesis is a result of my quirky, ridiculous worldview on the importance of appearance, but it’s also much more than that. It’s a look at the revealing nature of human behavior: we’re behaving even when we think we’re not. This thesis made me reflect upon my scientific mindset; oftentimes, answers are more complex than we think. It changed my paradigm as a woman and member of society: it made me think about how society influences our actions, thoughts, and appearance. And it’s about sparkles. Let’s not forget the sparkles.

I owe so many thanks. This thesis has connected me with so many amazing people whom I feel lucky to know. Firstly, to my advisors, Dr. Karen Adkins and Dr. Michael Ghedotti, thank you so much for your guidance and advice. I would never have thought such a daunting process could be so enjoyable. To Dr. Tom Bowie, thank you for your wisdom and devotion to the honors students. To Connie Gates, for your constant support and cheer. To my friends and family, thank you for putting up with my annoying commentary while watching shampoo commercials. And finally, to my dancers, who inspire me with their dedication and hard work: you are beautiful.

INTRODUCTION: “There she is, your ideal”

How does one define physical beauty? Artists, poets, photographers, authors, and directors are constantly trying to capture it. Modeling agents, when asked to define it, were unable to answer – after some thought, their final conclusion was “you know it when you see it.” Beauty, it seems, is an experience more than an object. Nancy Etcoff in *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999) suggested “like truth and justice, [beauty] is a platonic pure form, of which things of this world may offer us glimpses but never truly incarnate.” In our individual minds, we may envision specific characteristics that we envision and understand as beautiful. But to put beauty into concrete terms is difficult.

Instead of imagining and describing beauty as something concrete, we understand beauty through comparison. By ‘sizing up’ individuals by comparing them to others, we make conclusions about their attractiveness and beauty. By placing two individuals next to one another, judgment is passed to decide on the ‘winning’ beauty. Unfortunately, as Dürer describes it, “there lives on Earth no one beautiful person who could not be more beautiful.” Even the most attractive person, it seems, cannot truly envelop true beauty¹. Yet this ideal is what millions of people strive and hope to achieve.

¹ In 2011, Jennifer Lopez was deemed “The Most Beautiful Woman” by *People Magazine*. Googling “Jennifer Lopez Body” results in nearly 200 million hits ranging from “JLo Body Diet” to “The Perfect Female Would Have Jennifer Lopez’s Butt” to

And what exactly is the goal? If we were to take away all the cosmetics, hair dyes, gym memberships, plastic surgeons, fashion malls and salons in the world, surely we would still understand that beauty exists. Strip all human beings down to the basics – food, water, and other humans – would we still find some individuals more attractive than others?

Beauty is an everyday part of our lives. It's been a part of the human story for a long time, and like it or not, beauty is not going anywhere. My quest in writing this thesis is to discover the origins of beauty. What is beauty? What characteristics do we find attractive? Why? Do our definitions of beauty stem from our primal instinct to reproduce? Like our animal relatives, do we showcase specific characteristics to encourage and enhance our mate selection and reproductive capabilities? Are beauty standards simply characteristics of sexual selection, subconsciously chosen to preserve the reproductive potential of our species? Or conversely, did society invent these beauty ideals? Is the beauty industry simply a means to generate capital? Do beauty ideals force women into positions of lower power? Could it be a combination of theories? And what is up with those child beauty pageants? What are they contributing to the conversation regarding beauty?

Why the focus on women?

“Brazilian Butt Lift Procedure” to “Jennifer’s flabby belly after babies”. Clearly, being ‘most beautiful’ does not mean being without perceived flaws.

It should come as no surprise that the vast majority of research with regard to beauty has focused on women. But doesn't beauty matter for men? There are, of course, similarities between standards regarding men and women. For long-term monogamous relationships, both genders attempt to find mates who will commit to them for extended temporal durations – so seeking signs of love and commitment are largely similar for men and women (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). With regard to physical attractiveness, however, the standards often differ. In nature, sexual selection most often presents ornamentation and behavioral show in males; the male peacock is adorned with colorful feathers, the stag carries large antlers, males initiate mating songs and dances (Zuk, 2002). Male beauty standards surround us every day: masculine features, like a strong jaw line, dark eyebrows, and broad shoulders are included in the male beauty ideal (Etcoff, 1999). However, it is difficult to argue that males are the target audience – simply turn on the television and watch commercials or flip through the latest issue of *People* – it's clear that women are the focus of 'beauty culture'.

In biological terms, women are under pressure to find a mate. A woman's peak fertility is between 20 and 24 years of age; fertility declines by 33% by age 30, and menopause begins, on average, by the age of 50. Women must endure pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, dedicating time and health to raise a child. The average woman has the potential to carry 11 offspring during their lifetime. Once pregnant, the woman must wait at least until the child is born to carry another. Women, after childbirth, exhibit signs of their experiences: stretch marks, sagging

breasts, etc² (Etcoff, 1999). Men, on the other hand, have substantially less time restraint – physiologically, it is possible for a man to father a child at 94³. Men are able to father many children, have constant replenishment of sperm, and have the capacity to father multiple children, from different mothers, at the same time (Etcoff, 1999).

Feminists would argue that the focus is on women for completely different reasons. Women are the target of beauty campaigns because they are conditioned to believe they are inadequate without it – while women are kept busy attempting to push themselves toward the beauty ideal, men keep busy by climbing power hierarchies and gaining more control in the professional, economic, political and domestic world (Wolf, 2002).

An interdisciplinary subject

It may already be clear that the resources and experts with regards to beauty standards come from a variety of different fields including: biology, physiology, evolutionary biology, genetics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, feminist theory, gender studies and even pop culture and the media. Experts from social and scientific sides contribute to the conversation, and often the line between

² In cultural terms, this may translate in a disturbing way: Naomi Wolf (2002) argues that the pressure to “live hungry, die young, leave a pretty corpse” is common among women. If women are only seen as beneficial during their childbearing years, there is no benefit to living a long life.

³ Nanu Ram Jogi fathered his 21st child in 2007 at 90 years of age; he currently holds the world record for oldest man to father a child (World Record Academy, 2010)

subjects is blurred. According to anthropologist Jonathan Gottschall, “Nothing in physical attractiveness research makes sense except in the light of evolutionary biology *and* culture” (2008). Culture obviously has tremendous power in the influence of attractiveness preferences; to a large extent, the topic of the origins of beauty brings up the familiar topic of nature/nurture. For these reasons, writing a thesis with such a diverse background of material proves slightly challenging: the tone of the chapter about biological beauty, which uses articles from scientific experiments and medical research, will clearly be different from the section that uses cultural and anthropological research, much of which comes from interviews, case studies, and observational experiences. And of course these will each largely differ from the chapter surrounding childhood beauty pageants! What is important to remember is these resources are meant to be put in conversation with one another – the dialogue that evolves allows experts from different backgrounds to synthesize a more complete, interdisciplinary explanation of beauty standards and their origins.

So what? Why does beauty matter to me?

Importantly, we judge books by their covers. Obviously not every individual is trying to become the next Miss America. But beauty reaches far beyond pageants and commercials. “It is almost as difficult for a physical-attraction-challenged person to win a local election as it would be to enter a beauty contest”, says Gordon Patzer, psychologist and author of *Looks: Why they matter more than you ever*

imagined (2008). Physiognomy, or the assessment of a person's character by looking at their face and/or body, is pertinent and prevalent in our society today (Highfield, Wiseman & Jenkins, 2009). Despite the age-old euphemism "don't judge a book by its cover", first impressions – those based solely on outward appearance – are highly influential. Lookism, or treating people in ways biased by their perceived individual level of physical attractiveness, is an unavoidable part of our everyday lives (Patzner, 2008). In the words of Nancy Etcoff, "we are put into a beauty contest with every other person" (1999). Beautiful people are treated more favorably and are regarded in a more positive light: they make about 10% more money, are more apt to receive better grades in school (Patzner, 2008), have more sex, and are more readily promoted in professional settings (Etcoff, 2000). Soldiers deemed to look dominant are more likely to rise faster through the ranks, while those characterized as "baby-faced" tend to be weeded out early (Highfield, Wiseman & Jenkins, 2009). Although our behaviors are ultimately under our control, our reactions to beauty are subconscious and automatic. Within a tenth of a second of being introduced to a new face, we have already made a judgment about their owner's character – whether they appear to be caring, trustworthy, aggressive, competent, caring, and so on (Highfield, Wiseman & Jenkins, 2009). And the way idealistic images affect us is equally as important and subconscious: women who viewed slides of fashion models had increased feelings of anger and depression in comparison to those who viewed slides neutral in content (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005). In order to live in a world where snap judgments about our exterior characteristics are made

and where subconscious signals affect us enough to change our moods, we must understand where the concepts of beauty are coming from.

Regardless of its origins, beauty has permeated into our everyday lives. No one is impervious. To analyze beauty contributes to our understanding of reality. Every day, we are surrounded by a sea of beauty standards: television, magazines, movies, books, the internet, Facebook, advertisements, billboards –even our parents and friends teach us about what is or isn't beautiful. Sometimes we have to stop, take a step back, and look at exactly what is going on.

CHAPTER 1: BIOLOGICAL BEAUTY

So where do we beautifully begin? The opening of a newborn baby's eyes: in 1998, Slater *et al.* published a study where photographs of attractive and unattractive adults were shown to newborn infants. Although the babies were at most four days old, the newborns looked longer at the attractive faces (Grammer 2003). It seems that even from near birth, our brains are somehow wired towards beauty. How is it that infants are drawn towards the same people that adults regard as beautiful?

As it is, beauty reaches far beyond personal history and dives into the realm of evolutionary history. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, which gained widespread fame throughout the world. For the first time, Darwin proposed and supported (with substantial evidence) a natural mechanistic evolutionary process, namely natural selection: a nonrandom process by which organisms better adapted to their environment tend to survive and produce better offspring (Veille 2010). Over twenty years later, in 1871, Charles Darwin published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, where he introduced the concept of sexual selection. Sexual selection concentrates not on the survival of individuals, which is the focus of Darwin's natural selection, but rather is concerned with "the advantages that certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction" (Darwin 1871). Sexual selection arises from

competition between individuals concerning access and advantage when seeking a mate: this leads to ornamentation, decoration, mating calls, etc (Grammer 2003).

Darwin concluded that embellishments and ornamentation evolved for an important purpose: to attract mates. Those with the most flamboyant courtship displays, he reasons, attracted mates of greater numbers and qualities, which in turn passed on these decorations to offspring (Fisher 2004).

There are two mechanisms utilized in sexual selection. The first is direct competition between mates, where two individuals of the same sex, usually males, compete for access to females. In the animal kingdom, this has resulted in evolved weaponry, larger size, and strength (Grammer 2003); a well-known example is the use of the horns of bighorn sheep, which are used in sparring between two males (Darwin 1874).

The second mechanism is choosiness. Biologically, mate choice by both sexes is considered important. Most commonly, females are referred to as “the choosey sex”⁴; this term refers to the female’s preference for males with certain characteristics (Grammer 2003). In animals, the mating calls, colorful plumage, odor glands and mating dances used in the courtship of birds are common examples of characteristics associated with female preference (Darwin 1874). For this reason, males are often the colorful, decorated and adorned sex. However, females still encounter male ‘choosiness’; for example, males often prefer females with

⁴ Interestingly enough, modern women strive to be ‘chosen’, but are still considered to be the ‘choosey’ sex (Etcoff, 1999).

characteristics indicative of ability to successfully bear and raise offspring. Darwin, in his 1874 *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* suggests, “In the converse and much rarer case of males selecting particular females...they would select vigorous [fertile] as well as attractive females.” Symons (1979) suggested that human female attractiveness is reflective of the high variability of fertility differences, especially with regard to the physical characteristics of age. In his words, “men place great value on female attractiveness because it is a trustworthy indicator of relative fertility”.

The relative effect of this choosiness is largely dependent on the rearing process and mating system of the species. In monogamous systems, choosiness of both sexes is relatively equal; physical characteristics of both sexes are usually similar. In strongly polygamous systems, dimorphic traits are more commonly seen – it is situations with polygamy that the colorful secondary sexual characteristics are more frequent.

Of course, neither competition nor ornamentation are guaranteed to win over the affection of a potential mate – but the idea is that alluring and exciting a possible mate will give one organism possible advantage in the mating game (Darwin 1874). For females, a limited number of eggs, large time and health investments in reproduction and care for offspring contribute to their decision when choosing a mate (Etcoff 1999). Females choose mates who have qualities they would wish their offspring will display, but they also seek a mate that will support

their offspring throughout their lives; for this reason, females evaluate males slowly. On the other hand, men have virtually limitless sperm supplies with no time or quantity restraints – males can potentially fertilize more eggs than one female can produce (Etcoff 1999). This results in quick evaluation of potential mates. This notion, defined as “paternal investment”, extends and applies even to humans: women seek protection, support and stability, whereas men seek variety (Patzer 2008). Eileen Fisher, author of *Why We Love* concludes, “As many scientists sum this up, men look for sex objects and women look for success objects” (pg 114).

In the biological world, organisms of most species display some kind of sexual characteristics specifically evolved for mate selection. Ornamented with colorful, shiny feathers of green and blue, male peacocks are able to entice females during mating season (Zuk 2002). Humans too could be said to possess similar ornamentation; our muscular build, breast size, broad or narrow hips, etc. contribute to what we call secondary sexual characteristics. While primary sexual characteristics refer to the actual organs that are necessary to produce sperm and eggs and complete fertilization (Zuk 2002) as well as those necessary for care of offspring (Darwin 1871), secondary sexual characteristics are the ornamental characters that are, strictly speaking, not necessary to reproduce (Zuk 2002). Some of these characteristics may overlap; at times it is impossible to distinguish between primary and secondary characters. However, sexual characters do not necessarily contribute to survival in an individual, but rather are connected directly to reproduction and copulation (Darwin 1871). In fact, sexual characteristics can

actually be detrimental to the survival of an individual but beneficial to their reproduction; for example, the brightly colored, ornamental feathers of male birds of paradise (compared to the brownish color of the female feathers) make them easier for predators to spot (Zuk 2002).

In evolutionary terms, beauty matters. Secondary sexual characters are important factors in sexual selection⁵. According to many scientists, there is a reason why we consider some things to be extravagantly beautiful: particular attributes are considered to be beautiful because our ancestors with such preferences left more healthy offspring than the individuals in the population without the preferences (Grammer 2003). Art theorist Denis Dutton explains:

“The experience of beauty, with its emotional intensity and pleasure, belongs to our evolved human psychology. The experience of beauty is one component in a whole series of Darwinian adaptations...The experience of beauty is one of the ways that evolution has of arousing and sustaining interest of fascination in order to encourage us toward making the most adaptive decisions for survival and reproduction.” (2010)

Biological signals have become our automatic responses: automatically scanning everyone and making a snap judgment about their looks, in evolutionary terms, has been adaptive (Etcoff 2000). In a world where we eliminate 99% of our potential mates simply because we are never within proximity to meet them (Fisher 2004), beauty becomes an even more important factor in mate selection.

⁵ Gerrit Miller, an American Zoologist, proposed the humans are “courtship machines”, and that practically everything – including secondary sexual characteristics but also our jobs, friends, clothes, etc. – can be linked to mate selection.

Beauty is a universal part of human experience, and it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure the survival of our genes. Our extreme sensitivity to beauty is hard-wired, that is, governed by circuits in the brain shaped by natural selection...in the course of evolution the people who noticed these [beauty] signals and desired their possessors had more reproductive success. (Etcoff pg 24)

Of course, beauty is not absolutely essential for the continuation of reproduction⁶. In fact, today mating often has little to do with offspring. However, the act of seeking beautiful partners is reflective of the broader viewpoint, where behavior and characteristics contribute to fitness but do not have to result in offspring (Zuk 2002). In other words, our behavior with regard to mate choice is proximately independent of our ability/outcomes with regards to reproduction and offspring, but the overarching goal remains the evolutionary mechanism of sexual selection. In short, individual effects differ from, but also contribute to, the maintenance of beauty standards over generations. The idea is not that attraction will always lead us to offspring, but these ideas were selected, through evolution, and led us to

⁶ Some scholars would disagree. Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, believes that the sole goal of our lives is the continuation of our genes. For this reasons, making our bodies (aka the “vessels” that carry our genes) as attractive as possible encourages reproduction, which in turn, enables the continuation of our genes. In the words of Nancy Etcoff (1999), “Biologists would argue that at root, the quest for beauty is driven by the genes pressing to be passed on and making their current habitat as inviting as possible.” The disagreement with this argument, however, is that people are not simply vessels of their genes; although passing along genetics is important to the survival of our species, ultimately, genes do not care about human happiness. Humans, however, do. The individual who may best carry forth our genes may or may not be the same person we commit to spending our days with (Etcoff 1999). In addition to the perspective of the living entity, there is an interest for organs, cells, and systems of the body that would support the gamete’s success (Grosz, 2011). Critics of Dawkins argue that genes are not selfish in their particular survival, but rather, are concerned with the continuation of the human species and other groups (Holmes 2009).

conscious and unconscious decisions about mate selection. Our biological drive for reproduction will always be present, no matter what our given beauty standards may say. However, beauty helps in the mating game. There are certain traits that we have biologically evolved specifically for reproductive competition. Age-independent, class-independent, culture-independent, media-independent: these traits are universal (Etcoff 1999). What are these signals? What characteristics, from a sexual selection standpoint, are more adaptive in mate selection? Why do we prefer what we do? Where is beauty in the biological realm?

Beauty as the Norm/Average

Koinophilia (derived from the Greek roots *koinos* meaning “the usual” or “the common” and *philos* translated as “fondness” or “love”) was first introduced by Johan H. Koeslag to describe our attraction to averageness. Often, the average of a population reflects the “optimal design of physical traits”; evolution in a long, constant environment selects against extremes, so individuals with average features/behaviors have better chances of survival (Etcoff 2000). For example, women at weight extremes (obesity or emaciation) are less likely to mate and more likely to develop health problems, including issues with reproduction and childbirth (Zuk 2002). Similarly, women at the extremes of the height spectrum have higher incidents of poor health affecting fertility and childbearing (Patzner 2008). Donald Symons said in 1979:

The average of a population is likely to reflect the optimal design of physical traits, so selection pressures have given us brains wired to calculate means and prefer them. (Etcoff 2000)

According to this theory, every individual we meet is analyzed and deposited in a collection of memories in our brain; from this compilation we are able to calculate a cumulative average. Ultimately we use this composite as a comparison and lean towards individuals with features closer towards the average (Etcoff 2000). This process is called 'norm-based coding' (Grammer 2003). The image ideal, constructed from averaging many individuals is referred to as the 'prototype'⁷ (Grammer 2003).

One of the most common ways we view things as average is through symmetry. Symmetry refers to the exact correspondence of form on opposite sides of a dividing line or plane or central axis (Etcoff 2000). Symmetry is found everywhere in nature: the petals of a flower, the reflective axis of the body, etc. Frequently, symmetry is adaptive. Analyses of pre-historic bones in India have shown that individuals with symmetric bones died at an older age than those individuals with asymmetrical bones (Ruff & Jones 1981). In general, asymmetrical individuals of a species have lower survival and growth rates (Etcoff 1999). Often,

⁷ Some researchers believe that prototyping has changed drastically in recent years due to the increase in media exposure: people are now exposed to many more individuals further toward trait extremes. This causes our prototypes to reflect a biased norm (Grammer 2003). For example, although the average weight of an American woman is nearly 25% higher than that of the average actress (Aarabi 2010), American women are constantly exposed to actresses on television, in commercials, in magazines, etc. Their composite prototype, then, is markedly thinner than the actual average. Thus, if this 'norm based coding' occurs, then the influence of media can create unreal standards (Grammer 2003).

asymmetry occurs as a result of a genetic or environmental influence, resulting in upset during developmental processes (Grammer 2003). Disease, accidents, prenatal care, nutrition, and other factors contribute to symmetry or deviance away from symmetry. Asymmetrical features have been observed in dental and dermatoglyphic (fingerprints) in humans with Down's syndrome and schizophrenia (Weeden & Sabini, 2005). Since the optimal phenotype is symmetrical and because symmetry promotes performance, deviating away from the norm and displaying asymmetry is seen as sub-optimal (Grammer 2003). Moller, Sanotra and Vestergaard (1999) showed that symmetric chickens walked more efficiently. In this regard, symmetry is not only an indicator of developmental stability, but also has implications with regards to bodily efficiency (Grammer 2003).

In the mating game, asymmetry significantly influences judgments with regards to mate quality. Developmental stability and sexual selection have been studied in various organisms including plants, flies, grasshoppers, fish, birds, and mammals (Grammer 2003). In addition, many studies have also demonstrated the importance of symmetry (as a result of developmental stability) within the human species with regard to sexual selection. For example, men with skeletal asymmetry have been shown to have fewer sexual partners (Grammer 2003). Clear skin is the most universally desired trait (Etcoff 2000); individuals with blemishes and boils (which cause the face to have flawed symmetry) are often described as 'unsightly' and 'ugly' (Wolf 2002). But why? Why is it that symmetrical individuals are seen as more attractive? The answer is this: symmetry is the physical reflection of inward

health. Symmetry, to our subconscious mind, is reflective of a “normal” being.

Envisioning a “prototype” is a problem however, as a “normal” person is not often considered beautiful:

As the great anatomist Bichat long ago said, if everyone were cast in the same mould, there would be no such thing as beauty. IF all women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de’Medici, we should or a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characters a little exaggerated beyond the then-existing common standard.” (Darwin, 1874).

The average doesn’t often indicate the beautiful. While it may be true that a symmetrical organism reflects health, beauty includes an element of magnetism and exotic intrigue. A truly beautiful person exudes an aura of allure; they are anything but ‘normal’ – beauties ‘stand out in a crowd’. So if being symmetrically or quantitatively average isn’t the key to beauty, what is?

Measuring beauty?

As is common among scientists, one of the reactions with regards to beauty was to try and quantify it. If there is such a thing as beauty, scientists should be able to precisely measure it. Phi, or a ratio of 1:1.618, was first introduced as the “golden section” – a title that described the uncanny ability of beautiful, natural elements to fit into an exact number. For example, the distance between the first and second knuckles, respectively, on human fingers have been shown to generate numbers close to phi (Etcoff 1999). Robert Picketts, an orthodontist, found phi in measurements of models faces in various forms (including the space between eyes, distance from nose to mouth, etc.). It must be noted, however, that during his study

Picketts did not measure average faces; thus, phi may not be a sign of beauty, but rather a human standard in facial characteristics (Etcoff, 1999). In any case, the debate continues on whether phi (or any numerical value for that matter) can conclude absolutes regarding beauty – either phi is a numerological fantasy or, at most, a fragile rule (Etcoff 1999).

Beauty is a healthy, reproductively successful individual

Pathogens and detrimental environmental effects during development can cause asymmetrical characteristics. Additionally, the opposite is also true: healthy individuals who developed in wholesome environments are benefitted by presenting more symmetrical characteristics after maturation. This correlation between the characteristics that we attribute toward beauty and the implications regarding health, fertility, and strength, reach far beyond the idea of symmetry. Inward health is reflected in outward, physical characteristics in organisms in many different ways, all of which contribute to our notion of beauty.

Humans take cues from nature to decide whether something is healthy or unhealthy. Looks can tell us about what is good and bad: take for example the brown spots on overripe fruit: our brains, over time, noticed the trend that fruit with brown spots are often undesirable for eating; for this reason, we avoid them. In the same way we decide whether a bruised peach is suitable for eating, we observe outward, physical signals in potential mates and analyze them as telling cues of inward health and mate quality. By choosing individuals that they would describe

as 'the most beautiful', humans may, with little to no conscious choice, select partners that are best equipped for survival and reproduction.

Possibly the most discussed theory with regards to the notion of beauty is the idea that the most beautiful people are those with the best likelihood for reproductive success. Evolutionary theory with regards to mate selection maintains that there are some underlying, ineradicable traits of the human body which communicate information about health and fertility, which are then interpreted by humans as attractive (Singh, 2011). A key adaptive problem ancestral males faced was finding a fertile, reproductively-valuable mate; because females show no explicit fertility indicator (in comparison, say, with chimpanzee females, who release visible and olfactory cues during ovulation), males evolved to be attuned to observable indicators correlated with fertility. For this reason, waist-height ratios, skin clarity, etc. became reflective of reproductive hormones, and became connected with fertility (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). In short, the most beautiful people are the most fertile.

This theory shows up in many different ways. In the biological realm, hormones have a great influence on our perceptions of beauty. Testosterone and estrogen are two well-known hormones that are linked to reproductive success. An example: testosterone has been linked to stereotypical male features: strong chins, thick, well-defined brows and heavy brow ridges, large faces, facial hair, etc. Estrogen, on the other hand, has been linked to full lips, prominent cheeks and other

features associated with femininity (Etcoff 1999). Outward reflections due to the presence of these hormones offer a quick assessment of mate potential. One of the ways hormones influence our outward appearance (as many of us know) is skin. For example, an overabundance of testosterone is one of the leading causes of acne in females (which is also a cause of facial asymmetry); heightened levels of testosterone have also been linked to decreased fertility in women (Etcoff 1999). Thus, one of the reasons women may unconsciously desire clear skin is to simulate fertility potential and attract a mate. During ovulation, women have lighter, clearer skin (which becomes darker when on oral contraceptives or while pregnant); during menstruation, women have higher amounts of testosterone and thus decreased fertility (Fisher 2004). Another example is the connection between waist-height ratio (WHR) and fertility hormones. Increases in testosterone have been linked to accumulated fat in the waist (but not hips) of women (Etcoff, 1999) and estrogen inhibits fat deposition in the abdominal region and distributes fat to the gluteofemoral region – hips, buttocks, and thighs (Singh, 2011). Individuals with an hourglass shape, with a ratio of about 0.8, have been twice as likely to become pregnant as those with a ratio above 0.8⁸ (Etcoff 1999), and females with an optimal WHR are more often and more quickly pregnant through artificial insemination (Grammer 2003). In other words, a well-defined hourglass shape is an accurate predictor of fertility in women.

⁸ Barbie© has a WHR of 0.54, which according to the study indicates an extreme level of estrogen, very low amounts of testosterone, and incredible fertility. MG Lord described Barbie© as “a space age fertility icon”.

Some of our judgments surrounding beauty may also have importance with regard to health – for example, belly fat is associated with heightened risk of heart attack, diabetes, stroke, hypertension, gallbladder disease and some cancers (Etcoff 1999). It is clear that when selecting a mate, whether consciously or unconsciously, we select mates, in part, for their health and the associated increased life expectancy. In evolutionary terms, not only will individuals less likely of disease be pass on genes with similar characteristics, but they are also better partners in providing for young (Darwin, 1874). For this reason, belly-fat is not often seen as a positive attribute.⁹

And while some characteristics are associated with increased fertility, some of the characteristics of beauty are even more directly linked to reproduction: some desired physical signs are imitations of sexual excitement and arousal. Desmond Morris suggested that human lips (which are unique to other primates in their constant exposure), evolved as “labial mimicry” – swelling and flushing due to arousal (Morris 1999). And while the direct connection between redness of human lips and genitalia is questionable, there are clear correlations between signals of arousal and notions of beauty. As described by Nancy Etcoff (1999):

Red, the color of blood, of blushes and flushes, of nipples, lips and genitals awash in sexual excitement, is visible from afar and emotionally arousing.

⁹ Although in some countries where food is scarce, extra body fat helps bring on menstruation, so heavier women are, reproductively speaking, more successful. Additionally, extra fat can also signify extra money spent on food – sometimes status is of greater importance than health, making fat more beautiful.

For the same reasons, red is the color of stop signs, railway signals, and fire trucks.

The makeup industry in the United States (which last year generated over \$300 million) has clearly incorporated this trend in powders, blushes, lipsticks and nail polishes (all of which have the constant most popular color of red) (Wolf 2002).

Flexed muscles, which are also a signal of sexual excitement, are forced when placed into high-heeled shoes; dilated pupils (which accompany arousal) are mimicked with liners, pencils, and mascara (Etcoff 1999).

Primping, pulling, brushing, smoothing, puffing, clearing, cleansing; women constantly try to uphold their youthful looks. This, again, may be due to fertility. A woman's fertility potential is limited – the years between ovulation and menopause are temporally restrictive. The valuable years of reproductive success for women thus occur in the early twenties, as opposed to men, who are capable to fathering children even at the age 94 (Etcoff 1999). It is for this reasons, then, that women attempt to look as young and healthy as possible.¹⁰

And while signals of fertility and youth are important in the short-term for mate attraction, they also have enduring implications. General health, in addition to reproductive health, is an important factor in both mate decision and our concepts of beauty. In the short-term, an unhealthy individual is most likely not a suitable mate – in the mating game, usually a mate with a short life is not especially

¹⁰ Men too are under clear pressures as well. Men, while able to father children into old age, are sought after for strength, reliability, support, and caretaking. Thus aging is an important pressure for men as well.

appealing. In the long run, mates are chosen, in part, for the genetic material they will be passing on to their offspring; it is assumed that unhealthy individuals will pass on undesirable genes to their progeny. However, there are always exceptions.

Handicapping

When a trait is seen as beautiful, often the tendency is to take the aforementioned trait and run with it - to go the most extreme version of the beautiful characteristic. In the animal kingdom, beautiful traits do not come without a cost: this is called handicapping. According to Nancy Etcoff (1999):

[Handicapping is an] innate resistance to disease and parasites, or an advertisement of its ability to gain sufficient resources to be able to afford a flamboyant lifestyle. (pg 150)

Sex-specific hormones are thought to suppress immune functioning in both sexes, so individuals with high amounts of sex-specific hormones must have particularly good immune systems (Weeden & Sabini, 2005). Among barn swallows, longer tail feathers in males are attractive. In one study, the length of the tail of barn swallows directly correlated with life span; in this way, decorative handicaps were honest signals, advertising immunity and survival capacity in addition to beauty (Etcoff 1999). In the human world, we also see handicapping taking form in many different forms. One example is the appeal of smoking cigarettes: although the links between smoking and cancers, heart disease, and respiratory diseases are clearly established (National Cancer Institute), over 360 million cigarettes are consumed every year (USDA). Why? Because by demonstrating that the effects of dangerous

activities are not detrimental to their health/looks, individuals (especially young people) are seen as appealing.

Cigarettes and tans say, "I'm so healthy I can do dangerous things and still be unlined, as yet unscathed, and beautiful. (Etcoff 1999, pg 112)

The same goes for tattoos, scars and piercings, which are popular both in Western culture and in many other countries. The lack of physical signs that show these problems advertise strength and resistance in individuals taking the risk of pain and infection from blood-born pathogens (Etcoff 1999). Eileen Fisher cites another example:

Masculine cheekbones and a rugged jaw line are built with testosterone – and testosterone suppresses the immune system. Only exceedingly healthy teenage boys can tolerate the effects of this and build a rugged face. (pg 115)

High levels of testosterone and a wider face correlate in men; subsequently, men with wide faces are actually perceived as more aggressive (Highfield, Wiseman & Jenkins, 2009). One of the problems with handicapping, however, is that it often produces dishonest signals, or those that seem to suggest affordance of a flamboyant lifestyle, but are actually extremely costly to the health of an individual. Sometimes, health is sacrificed for physical beauty. Citing the cigarette example, individuals who smoke may not immediately show signs of illness, but are causing detrimental effect inwardly.

Dishonest signals have never been as prevalent among humans as they are today. At some point along our evolutionary history, sex signals were necessary in the survival and reproduction of individuals of our species. The introductions of

make up, cosmetic surgery, hormonal treatments, and other procedures have created a modern world that makes signals easy to forge and enhance (Grammer 2003). Michel Veuille, a French biologist, suggests that for an individual that is weakly and has little chance of long-term survival, investing energy in attraction and reproduction, despite exposing their vulnerable immune system to possible pathogens, may be more rewarding and productive (Veuille 2010). As a last ditch effort to secure a mate, species may invest energy into attraction and reproduction. So despite deficiency of inward health, superficial beauty may continue to surround us.

Exaptation: Accidental Beauty

The final theory within the realm of biological beauty is that of beauty being an exaptation, that is, the evolution of a trait that was originally designed for one function, but ultimately came to serve another (Futuyma 2009). For example, biological anthropologists have many theories about the loss of fur in humans; Marvin Harris suggests that we lost fur and developed extensive sweat glands in order to keep cooler while running or walking in mid-day heat. So while the original purpose for hair was for warmth and protection, its purpose evolved and it is now one secondary sexual characteristic that potentially releases pheromones and reflects inward health (Etcoff 1999).

Furthermore, beauty standards may be arisen arbitrarily. Studies show, for example, that blue eyes are preferred in both men and women. No eye color,

however, has any significant health advantage over another. For this reason, the preference for blue eyes likely arose out of an arbitrary preference from our ancestors (Etcoff 1999). Ronald Fisher in 1930 defined this as “runaway” trait selection: at some point, a characteristic (say, a bushy, large-tail in male birds) was chosen arbitrarily by a potential mate. This preference gradually increased over generations and ultimately created the standards we have today (like preferences for large, bushy tails).

It is tempting to answer big questions with small answers. The question of beauty, where it comes from, how we perceive it, and what the consequences of it are cannot easily be explained. It’s often stereotyped that scientists attempt to answer tough questions with simple answers – the questions surrounding beauty are no exception. Clearly, there are strong connections between physical manifestations characterizing fertility and vitality and current beauty standards. However, scientists are not naïve and understand the complexities of such large issues – no scientist is trying to concretely define the standards of beauty in purely scientific forms. Charles Darwin, a biologist and founder of the ideas of natural and sexual selection stated in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*:

It is certainly not true that there is in the mind of man any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body...Hence, a perfect beauty, which implies many characters modified in a particular manner, will be in every race a prodigy.

Darwin is simply explaining what we likely already know is true: cultural influences play a large role in the definition of beauty standards. Exaptations and arbitrary

choice give fairly vague answers to large questions regarding beauty standards, but more importantly, they ask others: must there be a reason for why certain things are viewed as beautiful while others are attractive and still others merely mediocre?

Does there have to be a reason why we prefer what we do? Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, takes us into a realm where our idea of beauty is, in fact, invented – not by biological intuitions – but a product created by the influences of culture, oppression, power, media and society.

CHAPTER 2: CULTURE, SOCIETY & THE MEDIA

So now we move from the statistical to the sociological– from laboratory to Lancome.

Charles Darwin understood the power of cultural influence with regards to human notions of beauty. Cultural influence, he believed, greatly shapes individual and social ideas about beauty. Within different cultures, different standards of beauty apply. The standards in Europe are likely very different from those in Africa. But in today's society, where diverse arrays of individuals live and thrive together, the idea of "perfect beauty...in every race a prodigy" has evolved. In the melting pot of races¹¹ in the United States, beautiful people come in many colors, shapes and sizes. Standards of beauty have implications not only the fields of reproduction and health, but in status, economic wealth, and power.

Evolutionary theory has long been the topic of discussion among scholars in the fields of psychology, cultural anthropology, and most importantly, feminist theory. Feminists have long argued that biological arguments for the development of beauty standards are damaging toward women. Feminist perspectives tend to emphasize the manner in which feminine beauty is often portrayed that is oppressive to women, resulting in low self-esteem, negative self-image, gender

inequalities, the treatment of women as sex objects, and the perpetuation of under-appreciation for women's talents and abilities (Singh, 2011). The main dispute between anthropologists and natural scientists considers the origins of beauty standards. Evolutionary theory, with the fundamental belief that physical attractiveness is an important indicator of health and reproductive quality, suggests that beauty standards are universal and elemental. Sociologists (and feminists in particular) disagree – they believe that standards are invented or arbitrary.

The disconnect between biological relevance and societal invention is most apparent when theories of health and vitality conflict with cultural beauty standards. Radcliffe undergraduate student Anne E. Becker was enjoying her time abroad doing anthropology fieldwork in the South Pacific island of Fiji in 1982. At the time of her travel, electricity was rare in Fiji, and television would not be introduced for another thirteen years. Yet Anne appreciated the happiness of the people, despite their lack of material possessions: she was especially struck by the cultural importance of food. For the Fijians, family and social life revolved around meals. In a land where food was not constantly available – when it could not be determined when the next boat of fish would return, or how the next agricultural season was to go – a good meal was thoroughly enjoyed. In 1982, Fijian women in particular would enjoy a hearty meal, “unbutton, unzip, and just lie down where they are. That [was] a good meal in Fiji” (Ireland, 2009). In the South Pacific where a lavish meal was considered a prosperous indulgence, robust, full-figured women were “appreciated” and considered “beautiful” and “healthy”.

When Becker returned to Fiji in the late 1990s (after receiving her M.D./Ph.D. from Harvard), she was shocked to see the influences of Western beauty ideals on the island culture. During her first visit, virtually no one in Fiji had a diagnosable eating disorder (Ireland, 2009). By 1998, with the presence of soap operas and commercials with Western models and actresses – *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Seinfeld* and *Melrose Place* were the most popular shows after the introduction of television in Fiji (Chellel, 2011); 11.3% of girls had reported they had at least once purged to lose weight (Ireland, 2009). In an interview one girl said, “I want their body...I want their size.” By 2007, 45% of Fijian girls were purging monthly (Ireland, 2009).

Today, Becker is the vice chair for the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. She continues to research the consequences of exposure to television in Fijian girls. Her latest study, published in January of 2011, found that even without a television in the home, subjects had an increased risk of eating disorder symptoms. Instead, changing attitudes within social groups that had been exposed to television had the largest impact – larger even than viewing the actual television programs. In fact, peer media exposure was connected to a 60% increase in showing eating disorder symptoms. Becker (2011) summarizes her most recent research:

Our findings suggest that [media and entertainment] exposure is not just a minor influence of eating pathology here, but rather, IS the exposure of concern...If you are a parent and you are concerned about limiting cultural exposure, it simply isn't going to be enough to switch off the TV. If you are going to think about interventions, it would have to be at a community or peer-based level.

In only twenty-nine years, Fiji underwent an extreme cultural movement. Fijians once appreciated a full figure and a hearty meal; today, Fijian girls express a hatred of their bodies, nearly half the population of females express symptoms of an eating disorder, and idolization of the thin actresses of the West is nearly unavoidable¹².

Beauty standards are constantly changing. Exposure to new cultures largely influences beauty standards and helps them to evolve. For example, Asian, African and Hispanic lips are characteristically larger – the exposure to these larger features may fuel the desire for larger lips (Etcoff, 1999). Clearly, there is something unique going on in Western culture that drives the quest for unattainable, idyllic beauty. The study done by Becker is unique in that it illustrates the harmful effects of introducing American culture, via television, to the previous beauty standards in Fiji. The people in Fiji had a previous culture of appreciation for full-figured women, but once they were introduced to the thin models from America, their ideas of beauty changed drastically. Previous theories surrounding the importance of fertility and vitality suddenly diverged from cultural understandings of beauty: a plump woman was no longer healthy and attractive, but ugly and unpopular. Naomi Wolf offered the “Iron Maiden” as the incarnation of this new beauty ideal: the image of perfect beauty that we cannot picture, but we strive to embody (Wolf, 2002). This idea is transferrable across cultures, and the consequences of the

¹² This is in stark contrast to the trends seen elsewhere among the Polynesian islands, where an obesity health crisis is prevalent. The import of highly processed Western food, paired with the beauty standard that considered voluptuous people ‘beautiful’ resulted in an obesity epidemic.

unending battle for perfection arise as negative self-esteem, eating disorders and self-hatred.

So, why did these beauty standards arise? Where did the differences in cultural ideals of beauty originate? Is there an underlying universal standard of beauty? What does television and the media have to do with it?

The importance of beauty in culture

The beauty industry began thousands of years ago. In 2004, paleontologists discovered necklaces in the Blombos Caves of Africa that were found to be 75,000 years old. Fossils from 36,000 BCE suggest that men and women styled their hair in braids and curls (Patzner, 2008). 3,000 years ago, Egyptian women were buried with moisturizers and perfumes; men were buried with shaving kits (Etcoff, 1999).

Beauty and sex, although related, are not interchangeable. In nature, secondary sexual characteristics play an important role in the reproduction of animals; humans, however, are more complicated. Beauty is not specifically applied to reproductive, but is also relevant in non-breeding relationships.¹³ Physical beauty is often reflective of larger issues in society – like economic status, power position, importance in society, and social taboos. For this reason, beauty ideals are dependent on cultural contexts. For example, in countries affected by hunger and

¹³ “Reproduction is the side effect or by-product of sexuality, not its purpose, aim, or goal” says Elizabeth Grosz. Citing homosexual relations and infertile pairs, she states the importance of beauty for mate attraction – with bodily desires and *not* reproduction being the goal – instead of simply sexual selection.

poverty, extra body fat indicates extra money spent on food and is often reflective of health (as low amounts of body fat reversely indicate lack of menstrual cycle, low birth weight, poor immune system regulation, etc). In these societies, voluptuous bodies are idolized (Etcoff, 1999). One hundred years ago, citizens of the United States shared a similar mindset: the wealthier were able to purchase more exquisite food, and more of it, so they were fat. Today, that notion has completely turned around. Wealthy individuals are now expected to use extra money not to buy lavish treats and extra food, but rather are expected to purchase gym memberships, healthier organic foods, and personal trainers. In the US today, higher socioeconomic status is correlated with lower weight. As food has become more generally available, high caloric intake is no longer the determinant of health. In fact, in a country where processed sugars and hydrogenated oils are more prevalent and only a fraction of the cost of organic produce, fat means poor (Etcoff, 1999). In part, this results in the Western obsession with being skinny.¹⁴ In this way, physical beauty is reflective of socioeconomic status: outward appearance has immediate implications about the lifestyle of the individual concerned. Citing the example above, one might automatically conclude that an overweight individual is also of low socioeconomic status.

¹⁴ Biologists are concerned with the unprecedented 'slim ideal'. Evolution would suggest that selection should work against it – women with eating disorders suffer disruptions in fertility and reproduction. As one biologist put it, “starved animals don’t reproduce; they don’t even mate.” (Etcoff, 1999)

These concepts are complex. Cultural standards of beauty are constantly changing: as travel has allowed the world to become more integrated and accessible, beauty standards have collided. Often, beauty trends are shared and blended between cultures: clothes designers often take worldwide trips in order to get inspiration for new designs. However, conflicting standards may lead to confusion as well. Some individuals are at a healthy weight (as recommended by their physicians), but consider themselves too heavy due to influence from magazines and television. Although the contrast is between healthy physiological standards and culturally invented ones, it's not so easy to figure out which standard one should follow.

In the biological realm, outward beauty can be reflective of status and resources; but in the societal realm, beauty carries power beyond just attracting potential mates. Beauty standards are often revealing of other important characteristics, including status, power, and wealth. Across cultures, similar decorations may be interpreted in different ways; for example, tattoos and piercings are important tribal rituals in many African cultures, but in the United States and Western Europe they became popular accessories of the punk-rock lifestyle and later in mainstream culture (Etcoff, 1999). Cultural context clearly plays a large role when determining beauty ideals.

Beauty is important in culture for two reasons: it is reflective of status and mate attraction potential (Green, 2011). Let us take, for example, the use of makeup.

Some biologists would argue that the popularity of cosmetics like red lipstick and rouge are an attempt to mimic natural traits that appear for attracting a mate – blushing and flushing are indicative of fertility and vitality (Zuk, 2002). Cosmetics were once common only to stage actors to enhance emotive expressions or create physical character traits. However, the cosmetic industry alone encompasses 30% of the global market and is estimated to be worth \$45 billion worldwide (Etcoff, 1999), so it's clear that it has become more than just blush and lipstick. New beauty products come in thousands of forms: foundation, powder, moisturizer, cleanser, concealer, creams, glosses, shadows, pencils, wands, brushes, whiteners, bronzers, masks, etc. – and these products are designed for everyday use. Cosmetic producers are pushing beauty ideals farther and farther from any 'natural' state and are creating an ever-more unachievable ideal – we no longer perceive our natural state as 'pretty', but instead aim to achieve a created state of beauty that relies heavily on cosmetics, dieting, hair styling, etc. "It's a separate face of 'pretty' that we've created...but it's not what we actually are" (Green, 2011). Forgetting what naturally occurring features even look like, the beauty corporations create an ideal that relies on the ever-evolving, ever-continuous unnatural beauty standards – the Iron Maiden (Wolf, 2002). Globalization and capitalism further fuel the spread of the Iron Maiden. In the end, this pushes our ideas of beauty out of the realistic realm founded in sexual selection and into the created world of narcissism and myths.

We are conditioned to reach for a standard of beauty that generally doesn't happen naturally. Our faces are too pale, our eyes are too far apart, our cheekbones are too low. The more flaws we start to believe are real, the worse we feel about

ourselves. Once we feel bad about ourselves, [the cosmetic industry] offers a “solution” to the flaw that they created in the first place. (Green, 2011)

A vicious cycle is established: promoting low self-esteem allows the producers to offer costly ‘cures’ that ‘allow’ the consumers to become ‘more beautiful’. The impact of this creation is enormous. The dieting, makeup, hair product, cosmetic surgery, and porn industries all have influence on cultural ideas about beauty; accordingly, they are all multi-billion dollar industries. The beauty industry, including weight-loss prep, cosmetics, skin and hair care, perfumes, surgeries, health clubs and hormone injections, is estimated to be worth \$160 billion dollars a year (Patzner, 2008). In fact, the average American woman spends more money on beauty products than education during her lifetime (Patzner, 2008). In essence, the further these industries can push the image away from natural beauty, the more money they can accumulate. Dr. Paul Hamburg concludes: “the media markets desire”; the unrealistic ideals create a market of frustration and disappointment¹⁵ (Patzner, 2008). Gordon Patzner defined this phenomenon the “Supermodel Solution”.

An example of the unrealistic standards of beauty is demonstrated in the importance of beauty and professionalism. Individuals are to present themselves in a professional, mature manner – for most people, this somehow involves our notions of beauty. Returning to cosmetics, a woman without makeup is considered ‘unprofessional’ (Green, 2011). Beauty and professionalism make a double-edged

¹⁵ The introduction of these ideals must begin early in order to be effective. Children as young as 8 revealed in interviews: “I want to lose weight” (Patzner, 2008).

sword, however. Intelligent women are assumed to be unattractive and beautiful women are considered unintelligent. An intelligent woman in a position of power is frequently assumed to have deserved her status not because of her mental capabilities, but because of her attractiveness (Wolf, 2002). “Trophy wife syndrome” has become a commonality in the US – a common occurrence where attractive women, assumed to be of low intelligence, marry a man of high SES and power (Patzer, 2008). Again, the goal is to fuel the beauty industry while ensuring the status and self-esteem of women remain low (Wolf, 2002). This not only makes the beauty industry money, but it also prevents women from rising to positions of power.

One way that the unachievable nature of beauty standards is most clearly demonstrated in the underlying racism and white-focus depicted by the media. In a survey done in 2007, one blogger took to her local grocer and picked up nine fashion editorials including popular magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*; in nine magazines, she found a total of two black models (Holmes, 2007). Beyoncé was named *People Magazine*’s “Most Beautiful Woman” – the first black woman to receive the title in nine years. Jenifer Lopez – last years cover model – is the only Latina to be named. Denzel Washington is the only black man to grace the “Sexiest Man” cover in 26 years (Stewart, 2012).

Eurocentric standards pervade our notions of beauty – there seems to be a systematic bias in favor of individuals who more closely approximate traditional European standards of beauty (Herring, Keither & Horton, 2004). Skin, which

naturally exists in a spectrum of colors, serves as an example of one of the ways unachievable standards exist. In the United States, beauty is usually defined, in part, by white or light-colored skin. Although white women spend millions of dollars a year on beauty products, women of color are special targets for the media – products geared toward whitening skin, lightening hair color, straightening curls, etc. help women become more beautiful by making them “more white” (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004). The most popular beauty product in Japan is a skin-lightening crème (Etcoff, 1999). Michael Jackson, having undergone massive treatments and surgeries to alter his appearance by lightening skin color and reducing nose size – both characteristics of “ugly, non-white” individuals (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004), serves as a model for the unrealistic standards at work.

Another example, one of the most common examples of the creation and inflation of beauty standards today, is in the current mindset surrounding breast size and structure. One hundred years ago, individuals who wanted to alter their appearance surgically were prescribed psychiatric evaluation; today, appearance enhancement is seen as mainstream and acceptable (Etcoff, 1999). In 2010, 300,000 women in the United States had breast augmentation surgery – a 40% increase in the last ten years – making it the most popular cosmetic surgical procedure in the US (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2011). While once only common in adult film stars, saline implants became common among professional actresses and models and finally moved into middle-class America (Wolf, 2002).

Jennifer, a woman in her thirties, illustrates just how far these standards have become ingrained when she states: “[Plastic surgery] was the only way to correct my genetic flaws”. Individuals who undergo plastic surgery have become so accustomed to believing that their natural body is “wrong” or “imperfect”, they feel that only surgery will “fix” them (Gimlin, 2002). Advertisements attempt to highlight see in their natural bodies – problems that are cultural inventions from the companies aiming solely to sell a product. The idea expressed by Removation Hair Removal ads summarizes the general feelings of many women: “Sometimes even nature makes mistakes.” Seeking support from the biological realm – support that does not exist in accordance with a biological standard (review chapter one for details) – beauty standards are twisted. Women are told that the way they were born – their true natural beauty – does not exist. Instead, the Iron Maiden, the created, unachievable, indescribable, perfectly beautiful woman, is marketed. Nature only creates women with flaws. Beauty marketers sell the idea: no woman is born truly beautiful – in fact, it’s quite the opposite: imperfections, though natural, make women inherently ugly. And only by buying beauty products and/or surgical services can they correct the ‘defects’.

This cycle of creating myths to make women believe they are ‘not beautiful’ and providing ‘solutions’ for ‘curing’ their ‘ugliness’ is the superficial cover for a deeper issue facing America today; the heart of the matter is that women are objectified and sexualized in a demeaning way that prevents them from achieving

the same professional, economic, and political success as their male counterparts. It is here that feminism and evolutionary theory truly meet.

The Beauty Religion

Cultural standards of beauty have seeped so far into our subconscious that we cannot even remember what true beauty is anymore. Our obsession with reaching the unachievable ideal set forth by the beauty industry has escalated into what Naomi Wolf deems “The Beauty Religion” (Wolf, 2002). Under this new fixation, people *learn* about the definition and embodiments of beauty – or at least the definitions and illustrations of what society want them to *believe*. These learned behaviors and rituals become evident in destructive ways: learned shame, learned sexuality, and learned behaviors arise in an effort to achieve the beauty ideal, but eventually become so embedded in the mind that the individual attempting to attain the goal actually believes them to be true (Green, 2011). In this way, society has invented, that is chosen and exploited, beauty standards – the definition of beauty, therefore, was *created*; it is the beauty *myth*¹⁶ (Wolf, 2002):

The beauty myth tells a story: the quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: strong men battle for beautiful women, and

¹⁶ Although Wolf has been criticized for exaggeration of some data (Gottschall et. al (2010), Wattenberg (1995)), I find her overarching themes and conceptual ideas valid (the critiques are of degree, not of kind). Her theme of women’s rules in society and how beauty standards affect them rings true, despite any statistical inaccuracies.

beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. None of this is true.

For Wolf, it makes sense that scientists would try and prove that there is a universal standard of beauty, because it supports sexist practices and promotes unachievable ideals. However, she never explicitly states, if not from biology, where these ideals are coming from.

So where are these lessons coming from? The first place is history. Women have been quietly accepting pain as a part of beauty for centuries. The story of beauty begins with childbirth – women are expected to deal with pain in order to be successful reproductively. Accordingly, women are expected to uphold the value that “beauty is pain” and put themselves through agonizing procedures including waxing, peels, bleaching, and surgery in order to achieve beauty perfection (Wolf, 2002). And despite the possible dangers of these procedures, namely the risks of infections and complications with cosmetic surgeries, more people are undergoing these procedures now than ever. Applying the biological argument, women are only of value while they are young, reproductive, and beautiful; once a woman is old, she will merely be attempting to achieve her past beauty – she will only be fighting to be “less ugly”. For this reason, dangers faced to achieve beauty perfection while young are to be ignored. “Live hungry, die young, leave a pretty corpse,” says Naomi Wolf (2002).

Women also look to the more recent past and establish role models: superficially beautiful women, who have been successful without accompanying characteristics of intelligence, power, or even personality, teach lessons on how to follow in their footsteps. Hungry, airbrushed, plucked and dyed models and actresses become the vision of success and happiness for women who observe them: they become the ideal. Someone who does not possess these features, or at the very least does not attempt to become like these role models, is deemed unworthy, ignorant, and undesirable (Wolf, 2002). Even feminists insist on “natural beauty”; however, very few women actually possess it. Most women would still need to wear makeup even to achieve this ‘natural state’ (Chapkis, 1986). Patzer, author of *Looks* (2002) summarizes: “We live in a media age where every sort of dream is manufactured and sold as reality.” Gimlin, author of *Bodywork* (2002), defined the body as a “medium of culture”. Culture, it seems, purposefully confuses the real with the ideal.

Today, the disconnect between cultural expectations and reality has reached an extreme. The main problem lies in the complete lack of acknowledgement between unrealistic images the media is producing and real women. Once upon a time, women could look at a magazine, see the airbrushing, and understand that the images they are absorbing are not real. This is not the case today; instead, we look at a magazine with wishful unhappiness, thinking about how beautiful those models are, and how we do not look like them. We have become conditioned to see this as reality. For example: while the über-thin model body is commonplace on nearly all

fashion magazines, in truth this body type is reflective of only 5% of the American population (Green, 2010). Women have become so involved in the unreal standards that they make them their own. For example, one of the possible side-effects of breast augmentation surgery is the loss of feeling in the nipple due to damage to nerves during the procedure – yet women who receive the surgery still affirm that having the implants will increase their sexual fulfillment (Wolf, 2002). Women feel “incomplete” without large breasts, and thus, less able to stimulate and gratify their partner’s desires (Wolf, 2002). By undergoing the surgery, women feel “complete” and able to please their partners. Herein lies the confusion: women are confusing their partner’s sexual fulfillment with their own.

Where are they getting these ideas? Women first rely on expectations from society – like the expectation that larger breasts will make one more attractive and sexually fulfilled – instead of experiencing for themselves¹⁷. Women expect that without the implants, their sex lives and success in general is not as great as they would be with the surgery. This not only fuels the beauty industry (professional breast augmentation surgery costs around \$4000), but it also makes women with unaltered breasts feel small and discontented. *Glamour Magazine* published a study where women remarked about their weight: $\frac{3}{4}$ said they were ‘too fat’, when according to height/weight measurements, only $\frac{1}{4}$ actually were medically defined

¹⁷ And where do women learn where this fulfillment comes from? Naomi Wolf (2002) argues that women learn female submission and violence against women from pornography. Believing that they are unable to achieve sexual gratification without aid, women turn to role models from pornography. The scenarios in the porn then become the ideal.

as overweight or obese (Chapkis, 1986). Society causes body dysmorphia - women disbelieve even what they know to be true because of the unrealistic expectations of society. The risks of attempting to maintain a societal ideal are dangerous. The skewed vision leads individuals away from the realm of reality and further into idealism; “normal” becomes anything but.

In the United States, we live in a culture that worships beauty. Today, beauty is reflective of cultural ideals of age, sexual orientation, social class, gender, ethnicity, and importantly, it’s a symbol of the self (Gimlin, 2002). Being beautiful means much more than just being a pretty face: physical deficiencies are seen as flaws in moral character. Those who cannot fix the problems of their physical flaws are dumb, poor, or ignorant. For example, people with acne are seen as unintelligent: they obviously do not understand how to properly clean their face. The acne says as much about their mental capacity as it does their physical appearance (Chapkis, 1986). It’s not sinful to be born ugly, but it is sinful not to try and make oneself prettier. In this way, women are expected to attempt to alter their ‘imperfect bodies’ in hurtful, often dangerous ways. Despite the pain associated with such treatments, women subject themselves to waxing, plucking, chemical dyeing, peels, injections, and even surgeries in order to make themselves more acceptable.

The media, heads of the beauty industry, and men are all-too-prepared to take advantage of this self-disgust in women and further fuel the cycle. If peels, Botox, ointments, cover up, foundation and surgeries weren’t constantly telling us

how we “need to get rid of those wrinkles”, would we even care that they were there? If shampoo commercials and ET specials weren’t explaining how to make our hair shinier, would we notice that it was dull in the first place? These are the questions we must ponder: are the things we believe to be “not normal” only that way because someone is telling us it’s so? As Naomi Wolf (2002) explains, “ideal beauty is ideal because it does not exist; the action lies in the gap between desire and gratification.”

Born from these unrealistic standards are models that uphold the “beauty ideal”. The mantra “thin is in” is constantly advertised through the skinny physique of actresses, models, and pageant queens. However, people are not simply “dopes of culture” (Gimlin, 2002). The general American population does not judge underweight women as being most attractive; overwhelmingly, in fact, average weight figures were consistently seen as being most attractive (Singh, 2011). Given a media that constantly glorifies and advertises female thinness, these results are extremely surprising. Why is it that media is constantly bombarding consumers with visions of extremely thin models if it is not what the consumers believe is most attractive? Clearly, there is a distinct disconnect between the reality of what people are attracted to and the idealistic world the media advertises. Yet still, exposure to images to advertisements with highly attractive models has been shown to increase overall physical appearance dissatisfaction in women (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). Why is this? The media has specialized on seeking little insecurities and building up self-resentment over time. The idea of forced comparison – showing

pictures of models with weight significantly lower than that of an average woman – does not necessarily make an individual believe that more beautiful women are thinner, but it increases dissatisfaction with their own bodies. It is more the idea that by comparison, consumers are unable to achieve the ideal exemplified by the models; this will leave consumers feeling the need to buy more products to make them appear more like the models. In other words, women will notice, “This fashion model is more beautiful than me. How can I be as attractive as the model?” The comparison leads women to search for something to make them appear more like the model: the fashion and cosmetic media exploit this motivation by suggesting “solutions”, implying that using them will make the consumer more attractive (Singh, 2011). Ultimately, these models become the aspirational reference group for ordinary females (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994).

One of the hardest things to understand, however, is that reality does not necessarily reflect healthy, wholesome qualities either. During the last four decades, fashion models, Miss America pageant queens, and *Playboy* centerfolds have become thinner; paradoxically, as the media standard has thinned, the average weight of American women under the age of 30 has risen (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). One in two Americans today are overweight or obese (Singh, 2011). In the United States, the average American male weighs 191 pounds; the average American female weighs 164 pounds. America holds one of the heaviest populations of people in the world today (Ogden, et. al, 2004). Let’s imagine that we were to use average American women as beauty models in media advertisements:

while advertisements would be more reflective of reality, they would still be promoting practices equally as unhealthy as those of anorexic models. Ultimately, this highlights the importance of the invention of beauty standards in society: regardless of the standard, if it is promoting detrimental and dangerous behaviors, it is damaging to society.

This is a complicated issue. And amongst the unsteadiness, women and men are attempting to negotiate the relationship of the body and self in a confusing culture/society (Gimlin, 2002). In the meantime, powerful social groups – namely, the beauty market and men in positions of power – will continue to thrive off of the insecurities that they created. How much of the “natural self” can one person give up in order to become truly “beautiful”? There is no “winning” the beauty game – even the people considered most beautiful still have not achieved perfection. And even if we took away every product to do with the beauty industry: surgeries, injections, hair treatments, makeup, clothes, diet pills, advertisements, billboards, commercials – everything – wouldn’t there still be beauty standards?

CHAPTER 3: BREAKING BEAUTY BELIEFS

It is impossible to deny the importance of both evolutionary theory and societal influence in the advancement of beauty standards. Our beauty standards were evolved in the context of a prehistoric environment as well as a societal one. As Gimlin (2002) states, we are not “dopes of culture”: we do not mindlessly consume beauty products unintelligently. Despite claims, not all people watch 85-pound models are think, “Gosh, I wish I looked like that.” And I will add too that neither are we “dopes” of biology: while it’s true that evolutionary processes placed many beauty ideals in our brain, that does not mean they are justified in our current societal context. After cheating on a wife, the claim, “Oh, honey, it’s just evolutionary destiny! I’m a male! I’m supposed to be procreating with as many females as possible in order to reproduce and contribute to the species!” would not likely pass as an acceptable excuse. We evolved in a biological *and* cultural context; to attempt to find the origins of beauty without each piece is impossible.

The Darwinian idea of sexual selection with regards to the evolution of beauty standards has drawn several criticisms. In general, the idea that a universal standard of beauty exists remains largely controversial. While there may be traits that are commonly found to be attractive, researchers would be hard pressed to find an object that every single individual deems beautiful. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, goes the age-old saying. Attempting to address such large topics as

beauty origins becomes, in the eyes of many critics, an overly reductionistic task (Grosz, 2011). This is especially true when deriving connections between outward beauty and fertility: reproducing people aren't the only ones we find attractive. Infertile men and women, non-reproducing partners (including gay and lesbian couples), post-menopausal women, etc. are still judged under beauty standards, for example. Grosz (2011) explains: "this [would] mean that those sexual encounters which cannot lead to reproduction [would not be] regarded as genuine sexual encounters, because there is no measurable object of scientific investigation without reproductive success...animals themselves do not engage in copulation in order to reproduce; rather they engage in copulation because it in some way pleases or provides something of benefit for them. Reproduction is the side effect or by-product of sexuality, not its purpose, aim, or goal."

Another issue lies in the differences in the rate of societal/biological change. The evolution of culture occurs at a much more rapid pace than that of biological evolution (Wolf, 2002). Cultural standards change in "fads"; biological changes happen over thousands of generations and millions of years. The societal and cultural environments in which the beauty standards were created are not the same as those today. However, one of the answers with defining these universal characteristics of beauty with regard to the constantly changing cultural environment may lie within the specificity of the study: for example, while it may be hard to discover one accessory that all cultures deem attractive, all cultures use some type of accessories for body decoration. In this way, ornamentation is

universal, but the specific method and decoration differs (Etcoff, 2000). This provides the perfect example of how culture, power, and standards may coexist. As Nancy Etcoff summarizes:

“The universal preferences remain – for clear skin, lustrous hair, full lips and so on – but the exact incarnation of these features can differ depending on who holds the reins of power.” (Etcoff, 2000)

Sexual selection designed the primary and secondary sexual characteristics that we commonly identify today as attractive. Let us take, for example, female weight. We have established that women with lower waist-to-hip ratios have elevated levels of estrogen, and therefore are more promising reproductive partners. As Etcoff describes above, the embodiment of the physical features may differ depending on “who holds the reins of power” – i.e. who is culturally powerful and important. In the United States, the beauty industry holds these reins; thus, the unrealistic images of women below the weight of an average American is showcased while fueling the multi-billion-dollar American beauty industry. This example illustrates how evolutionary theory and societal influence are unavoidably interwoven.

The other major issue with the purely biological theory for beauty goes back to how we are not simply “dopes” of biology¹⁸. Personality does count in the mating

¹⁸ Yes, according to Nancy Etcoff (2000), your picture is the most important feature on your Facebook profile. However, in addition to your own physical appearance, the action of the photo is of equal importance. Judgments about you studying in class may be equally as important as those of you photobombing your cousins’ wedding pictures.

game. Looks are clearly important, but they may only take one so far. Patzer, author of *Looks*, offers the following hypothesis:

“Evolutionary theory seems to predict eventual disappearance of less than high personal appearance, which would resolve lookism...hypothetically, over zillions of years, fewer and fewer people of lesser personal appearance would be born in this scenario until only people of greater personal appearance would be producing offspring.” (Patzer, 2008)

Evolutionary theory, in this description, does not seem to align with the world in which we live. Obviously, the most beautiful people are not the only ones reproducing. Biology offers a solution to this called assortative mating. In this theory, organisms seek out potential mates with similar characteristics to themselves. From an evolutionary standpoint, it is adaptive for a healthy and reproducing - if not beautiful - individual to pass on the genes most similar to their own (Etcoff, 2000). The mate that best passes on adaptive genes does not necessarily mean that the mate choice is the most beautiful. Attraction is more than physical beauty; a person may be attracted to another without the necessity of physical beauty. Assortative mating has implications for mate selection, but again, it does take outward appearance into account.

Additionally, not being “dopes of biology” means we are not so superficial as to only take physical appearance into account. Today, physical appearance has ostensibly become a signal of inward character; often we are attracted to particular outward characteristics because of what we take to be their deeper meanings. Women are more likely to consider an unattractive but successful man for a long-

term relationship than an attractive dead-end-job worker¹⁹ (Etcoff, 2000). A man dressed in a business suit is described as “more attractive” than when he is wearing a McDonalds uniform (Etcoff, 2000). This is not merely because of the physical appearance of each outfit, but because people make inferences about the success of each man based on the way they dress. Society illustrates how more successful men are “supposed” to dress, so women *expect* that a man in a suit is more successful than the man in the burger uniform – this attraction is as much cultural as it is biological. Clearly, evolutionary origins have become intertwined with cultural standards – the way we modify ourselves says as much about us as our actual bodies.

But the biological explanations for the origins for beauty standards are not the only ones without faults. Many sociologists argue that beauty is an entirely cultural invention: beauty standards would not exist if corporations, men (in order to keep women down) and women (in competing with one another) had not invented them (Wolf, 2002). While all three influences can have detrimental effects on individual self-perception and self-esteem, the blame cannot be placed on one party. The argument that men invented these roles is especially skewed: if the beauty myth exists, it also largely pressures men. While they are not criticized for being “ugly”, men are pressured to maintain a strong, masculine, dominant

¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that the same women were more likely to consider the attractive male for short-term, noncommittal sex (Etcoff, 2000). In this way, the lure of attractiveness works from the male point of view, but because the women does not establish a long-term partner, it is not adaptive.

character. The market for muscle building and weight loss is also extremely profitable, and is the aim of many advertisements and corporations (Etcoff, 2000). In this manner, men are still victims of ideals; they just differ from the ones affecting women.

The larger problem with the beauty myth consists of its basic foundations: myths are often untraceable or have invented origins. While the gains for its invention are obvious, the foundation for it is not. There are clear connections between physical appearance and inward signals; we cannot simply ignore these findings:

Feminists cannot abandon all biological explanations of behavior, whether in humans or animals, because of the worry that some detrimental finding will occur." (Zuk, 2002).

There are definite connections between cultural ideals and biological origins. It's often difficult to separate the two concepts. Even if there were not cultural and societal influences, beauty ideals would still exist. To completely dismiss the concept of beauty would be useless: the standards do exist. Our ancient ancestors found certain traits to be adaptive for survival and reproduction; thus, those individuals possessive of the given characteristics gained power and influence. This in turn created an ideal – the thing everyone desired.

Neither biological origin nor cultural invention solely account for the origins of beauty. It seems that evolutionary history has wired us to look for certain trends and patterns to help continue our species and keep us reproducing; at some point

along our evolutionary history, certain characteristics were adaptive and thus desirable. Business interests noticed these trends – thus we have the production and globalization of products for enhancing and creating specific beauty characteristics. Explaining the origins of beauty standards using either concept alone is overly reductionist; it is the interdisciplinary evolution that more definitely explains beauty origins. For example, the flushed cheeks that naturally and easily portrayed fertility were made available in a jar – blush was first used in ancient Egypt by the members of royalty (Dutton, 2010). Today, we continue to see some of these ancient features as symbols of beauty: red lipstick, indicative of fertility, continues to be the most popular shade of lip color; eyeliner continues to make eyes appear darker and more dilated, suggesting arousal; long, lustrous, pheromone-releasing hair is still seen walking on the red carpet; and the hourglass figure, correlating with fertility, is still desired by a large population of men and women. However, society has largely lost touch with reality; instead, corporations look past secondary sex characteristics and exploit all available imperfections in order to generate profit. Arbitrary, seemingly maladaptive trends have caught on. The anachronistic presence of armpit hair on humans with otherwise limited hair suggests an adaptive function. But today, armpit hair is considered “disgusting” and “nasty” on women. Biologists might argue that because we practice better hygiene today than did our ancient ancestors, we no longer require the hair anymore. The companies making millions of dollars selling razors, shave gel, and Nair® would likely gladly agree.

The meeting of evolutionary standards and cultural influence created the perfect storm for the formation of beauty ideals. By taking advantage of the notions originally put into the subconscious by sexual selection, society creates an ever evolving standard of beauty that generates a constantly growing, multi-billion dollar revenue. Once founded in natural beauty, culture has grasped these basic concepts and taken them to extremes. The main motive? Generating income.

The beauty industry has developed an infallible plan: by continually marketing an unachievable yet desirable ideal –perfect beauty – while selling products to reduce (but never quite eliminate) the opposite – ugly – industry manufacturers are able to generate an incredible income. It's unlikely that the media is going to change. With the beauty industry generating billions of dollars each year, the companies that promote negative body image have no reason to change their ways. In 2004, the *Dove* launched the “Campaign for Real Beauty”, putting out advertisements featuring ‘normal’ women: an array of black, white, Asian, overweight, tall, freckled, red-haired, elderly, replaced stick-thin, cookie-cutter models. And while it was a step in the positive direction, critics immediately made evident the clear truth: ultimately, *Dove* was still just trying to sell beauty products. Still present in all the ads: clear skin, straight teeth, styled hair, etc²⁰.

²⁰ Also present? Hypocrisy. Unilever, the company that owns *Dove* also owns *Axe* –a men’s deodorant line made famous for their advertisements, one of which including the line “turns nice girls naughty”. Unilever received numerous complaints about empowering women through one ad while simultaneously “objectifying and

So the media likely won't change: it's up to us. Awareness is both a challenge and a necessity in today's beauty-crazed world. We need a reality check. Between 60 – 69% of centerfolds are at weights below 85% of the weights reported by actual women of their age (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005). The photos of the models in those magazines are not real. This is not to say that beauty (and the beauty industry) is evil. Wearing makeup, dressing in stylish clothes, or wishing to lose those extra fifteen pounds: these things are not wrong. What is wrong is the motivation behind the action. We must step back and ask ourselves: why am I doing this? Who is telling me I need to do this? Are my actions healthy, both physically and mentally? If I weren't doing my beauty regime, what would happen? Are the reactions to these questions, both from myself and from others, acceptable? Who is benefitting from my beauty routine? It's not bad for a person to care about their appearance – at times, it is necessary. Beauty standards are dangerous when they're taken to an extreme, which unfortunately, culture does.

Most importantly, beauty does exist. But beauty, as most of us normally think of it, is superficial. Yes, people will always make judgments about others based on their physical appearance. Yes, it is important to have pride and self-confidence in ones exterior. But we also must be aware of how we live in a world that constantly degrades our outward appearance and makes us self-conscious. Naomi Wolf (2002) explains it well:

degrading" them through another. Unilever also owns "Slim-Fast" weight loss products and a skin-bleaching treatment aimed at women of color (Semuels, 2007).

“Are women beautiful or aren’t we? Just as the beauty myth did not care what women looked like as long as women felt ugly, we must see that it does not matter in the least what women look like as long as we *feel* beautiful.”

It sounds cliché, but regardless of what others think/say, it’s truly self-evaluation that conducts the most important judgments about beauty. If we could all look in the mirror and think, “This is my body. It is a human body, and it has particular flaws; but every person has them. People will like me for *me* – complete with my imperfections. I do not need to prove my beauty to anyone. I am a human being, and I am a beautiful person.”

CHAPTER 4: BEAUTY POSITIVE – THE NEW CAMPAIGN FOR TRUE BEAUTY

On a not-so-special Saturday afternoon while babysitting, I was sitting in a pink tutu, crown sitting on my head, helping my little nieces put on their fifth costume change of the hour. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Maleea said,

“Am I pretty?”

Try explaining it simply to a 4-year-old. Despite months of research, hundreds of articles, and constant thought about beauty and beauty standards, I was speechless. Suddenly, theories about evolutionary biology, sexual selection, secondary sex characteristics, symmetrical characteristics, *The Beauty Myth*, the beauty-industry’s multi-billion dollar revenue, and women’s oppression seem inexplicably complex.

Still twirling around in her sparkly, pink costume, she analyzed her appearance in the mirror. Without hesitation, she placed her tiny hands on her hips, stood up straight, and transferred her weight to one side – a pose I’ve seen many times on the daily newsfeed of my Facebook – from my 21-year-old friends. Awaiting my answer, she looked into my eyes.

“Of course you are,” I said, “just like a princess.”

My answer allowed us to continue our play date, but highly dissatisfied me. Today, more than ever, it’s necessary to talk to young children – especially girls – about the nature of beauty standards. In order to grow up with a healthy sense of self-esteem, these children need early exposure to the truth about these harmful

influences and unrealistic standards. Paradoxically, the importance of beauty for young children is increasingly taboo but ever-more-prevalent in our culture. The expanding popularity of child beauty pageants and child stars of films, television and the Internet have pushed these ideals towards the extreme. By the third grade, one-third of girls believe they need to lose weight (Patzner, 2008). About 30% of girls between 10 and 14 are dieting (Hirsch, 2010). By middle school, most have tried dieting (Gimlin, 2002). At younger and younger ages, children know and are influenced by media images of ideal physical appearance. Quickly, their expectations are formed – from an early age, being pretty is important.

Growing up in a beauty-obsessed culture is confusing for a girl. In childhood, girls want to “get bigger” – they want to grow. But according to research, 42% of first graders want to be thinner; 35% of them will attempt dieting before they are 12 years old (Green, 2010). By seventh grade, 15 – 20% girls begin the day by putting on eyeliner, mascara and lipstick (Bloom, 2011). These children are already beginning to embrace the cultural standard of beauty: simply waking up and going to school isn’t good enough. The market of self-disgust begins at an extremely early age.

And where are these expectations coming from? Of course, there is overlap from the media/societal pressured described in chapter 2 – for example, the average child observes over 5,000 advertisements a day, with 1 in 3 being focused on appearance (Green, 2010). But there is also a special market directed specifically at the new female generation, as captured by Peggy Orenstein in her book *Cinderella*

Ate My Daughter (2011): *princess culture*. In general, the more mainstream media girls consume, including television, advertisements, toys, books, games, and the internet, the more importance they place on being pretty (Orenstein, 2011). Under it, young girls – of a target age between 2 and 6 - are showered in sparkling pink outfits, blonde-haired, blue-eyed dolls and Disney brand lipgloss. In 2009, princess²¹ items alone had generated over \$4 billion (Orenstein, 2011).

As girls get older, princess culture becomes increasingly confusing. “Tweens”, or those aged between 10 – 14, are uniquely targeted by the ‘cuteness’ of the children’s market as well as the ‘sexiness’ applied to young adults. Marketers apply a term to this group: KGOY – Kids Getting Older Younger (Orenstein, 2011).

Biologically speaking, they are actually correct:

The average onset of menstruation has dropped from age seventeen at the beginning of the 20th century to twelve-years-old today. It’s not uncommon for eight-year olds to experience breast development. That means ten-year-old girls frequently resemble sexually mature women...Yet, although they are physically more advanced the pace of girls’ psychological and emotional development has remained unchanged; they only look, and act, older on the outside. (Orenstein, 2011)

Unfortunately, however, these girls are being imprinted with the same detrimental message that their mothers are also receiving: that they need to look and act a

²¹ There are more than twenty-six thousand Disney princess items on the market today (Orenstein, 2011). The Disney princesses describe many of the beautiful traits outlined in biology: clear skin, lustrous hair, large eyes, red lips and a tiny waist. But in the same way models become the unrealistic foundations for adult women’s notions of beauty, Disney princesses become early, idealistic role models for girls.

certain way to obtain value to society (Wolf, 2002). The less convincing a young person needs to believe in their 'natural insufficiencies', the better.

In light of the ever-increasing importance of physical appearance in today's world, the role of parental influence is pivotal in the development of self-image and beauty. It's clear that we need to create a positive environment where we can raise children to feel positive about their bodies, sexuality, and personality. But clearly, as demonstrated by my dress-up dilemma, it's not so easy to talk about. In fact, the way we talk to young girls about beauty is a current popular topic. Early in 2011, author Lisa Bloom suggested that, given its permanent influence, adults should not compliment the physical appearance of small children: telling a girl she is "cute" or "pretty" will cause her to form a complex; for this reason, "beauty talk" should be avoided, and compliments only surrounding personality should be utilized (Schwyzer, 2011). Bloom's article became one of the most talked-about and shared of 2011 (Schwyzer, 2011). While Bloom had good intentions and increased knowledge about the negative influence that unrealistic standards can produce, she creates a false dichotomy: we can talk either about girl's personality or physical appearance, but not both. Professor of gender studies Hugo Schwyzer (2011) reassesses:

In a culture that reminds them at every turn that their primary value is in their looks, girls do need constant encouragement that their minds matter as well. It is vital to talk to girls about books, about politics, about art, about sports, about ideas. But girls also need help navigating the confusing messages they get about their bodies. Very few problems are solved by not talking it out with them.

Schwyzzer's point is this: while it is ridiculous to constantly focus attention of looks, there is inherent value in discussing physical appearance. Without complimenting physical beauty, the complex of attractiveness would simply shift to something else – intelligence, athletic ability, personality, etc. In fact, ignoring beauty simply fuels the belief that one must choose between beauty or intelligence; while complimenting girls on only one, it is inferred that she lacks in the other. It is for this reason, argues Schwyzzer, that beauty must be complimented *in addition to* many other virtues (like intelligence, skills, etc.) in order to give children the “symphony of encouragement” they need. Peggy Orenstein describes her run in with a friend/parent: “I want my daughter to have a strong identity as a girl, as a woman, as a female,” she says. “And being pretty in our culture is very important. I don't want her to ever doubt that she's pretty. So if she wants to wear a princess dress and explore that side of herself, I don't want to stand in the way” (Orenstein, 2011). Allowing children to explore a variety of activities, including pretend princess-ing, encourages the discovery of their talents, skills and passions. In this way, they will come to understand they are naturally good at many things.

And while parents are a source of influence with regard to beauty culture today, the advancement of technology had created an entirely new medium for negative influence. The Internet has become a new haven for unrealistic beauty standards. Teenagers spend an average of 53 hours per week consuming various forms of media (Gregoire, 2012). Advertisements no longer only appear on billboards and in magazines, but are constantly streaming online. And the influences

from the media gain new momentum because of the popularity of social networks. The massive explosion in popularity of Facebook and other social networking sites puts continual pressure on physical appearance – updates in profile pictures not only illustrate how a person looks, but also what they are doing. Looks take on a whole new importance in the Internet era: according to research, one’s profile picture is considered to be the most revealing and important aspect of the Facebook profile (Etcoff, 1999). This importance is never as clear as with dating websites. While online dating companies strive to make personality count, ultimately immediate judgments regarding appearance have great influence on prospective partners. In 2001, Beautifulpeople.com, a website designed for “establishing personal and professional relationships”, was founded with a simple, albeit controversial, statement:

To become a member, applicants are required to be voted in by existing members of the opposite sex. Members rate new applicants over a 48-hour period based on whether or not they find the applicant ‘beautiful’. Should applicants secure enough positive votes from members, they will be granted membership to the BeautifulPeople community. (Beautifulpeople.com, 2012)

Today, the website has over 5 million members, with a mere 20% acceptance rate for applicants²². Although vanity and narcissism are clear criticisms for members of the website, the founders believe that they are not to blame for these standards; they insist that the “ideal for beauty is decided by the members” – in other words, if people really believed that unattractive people were beautiful, they

²² 700 marriages have occurred as results of matches on BeautifulPeople. No statistics were included to describe how many of those marriages ended in divorce.

would pass the system and be allowed on the website (Beautifulpeople.com, 2012). The fault of hurt feelings is only of other people. The minimum age for members is 18. As of 2010, the company started charging a monthly fee for registered members, causing many to leave the website for “less costly means of communicating with friends”, including Facebook -where there is no minimum age requirement (BBCNews, 2010).

Some girls have taken it upon themselves to utilize the Internet to discover beauty standards. Afraid that their parents and friends will not give them truthful answers, a wave of young girls have taken to YouTube posting videos asking, “Am I ugly?” Hundreds of videos, usually made by girls between the ages of 11 and 17, have been uploaded, following the same trend: titles include “Am I Ugly or Pretty?” and “Am I Ugly, Be Honest”. In one video, which has received over 3.4 million views and 92,000 comments, a middle-schooler states, “I wanted to make a random video seeing if I was like, ugly or not? Because a lot of people call me ugly and I think I am ugly...and fat...tell me what you think.” The responses to her inquiry? “UGLIER THAN A DEMON” says one viewer. “I think you look pretty and nice,” say another. “Ur 2 young to be using the Internet, much less having these losers judge you,” states a concerned commenter (Gray, 2012). The Internet often makes it confusing, especially for young people, to differentiate between friends and bullies. Unfortunately, online bullies are often more influential than the supportive individuals of the Internet community. Teens and tweens, unable to recognize or accept the intentionally malicious character of Internet bullies, take these mean

comments very seriously. With the latest increase in suicides among young people, it is currently an extremely relevant matter. Adolescent behavior specialist Amy Graff explains that when teenagers put themselves up on the Internet, it only magnifies the difficult and intense experience of adolescence (Gray, 2012).

Even the 'supportive' online community can be misleading. The recently discovered blogs entitled "thinspiration" revealed a pro-anorexia community in which members exchange tips on staving off hunger, upload pictures featuring protruding hip bones, ribs and collarbones, and comfort individuals who are "criticized" for "choosing" an anorexic lifestyle (Gregoire, 2012). Many of the pictures posted to the website depict highschoolers documenting weight loss progress through homecoming dance photographs. An intermingling of models, weight loss success stories, and advice – which at times encourages drug use, eating disorders and other harmful behaviors – work to 'inspire overweight girls to lose weight'. One of the catchphrases used: "I beat obesity²³!"

Dangerous blogs like this aren't hard to come by – a simple Google search will yield millions of results – but somehow, the practice remains largely unknown to parents. Young women feel that they are connecting to a community with similar body dissatisfaction to their own; and when 85% of women admit to disliking their bodies (Wolf, 2002), that connection is not hard to come by. An eating-disorder

²³ My personal favorite caption from a popular 'thinspiration' website: (from the FAQ page) "My site is nothing like a pro-[anorexia] site like this: [proceeds to embed the URL of an pro-ana website]" (Gregoire, 2012)

treatment center in Chicago reports that between 30 and 50 percent of its teen patients use social media to find support for their eating disorders (Gregoire, 2012).

Not all teens find inspiration from pro-ana websites. However, even basic social media has negative influence of body image and self-esteem. A 2011 study from the University of Haifa in Israel found that the more time teenage girls spend on social-networking sites, the more likely they are to have negative body image and eating disorders (Gregoire, 2012). With the growing number of teens connecting to social media sites everyday, it seems that external influence – mainly from parents – is needed now more than ever. Unfortunately, we often see exactly the opposite.

The Rise of Toddlers & Tiaras

“I can’t wait to be like mommy with big boobs,” says 7-year-old Poppy Burge. “They’re pretty.”

Last year, Poppy received a \$10,000 voucher for breast augmentation surgery for her 7th birthday present, a gift from her mother, Sarah – the Cambridgeshire-residing, self-proclaimed “Human Barbie” who has spent more than \$800,000 on her own surgeries (Moss, 2011). On the other side of the globe in San Francisco, Kerry Campbell gave her 8-year-old daughter, Britney, injections of Botox to prepare her for a beauty pageant. Despite bruises, puffy skin and pain only numbed by ice packs, Britney stated excitedly, “I look way better – like – beautiful, pretty – like – all those kinds of nice words” (Moss, 2011).

Child beauty pageants first obtained popularity after the notorious Jon-Benét Ramsey tragedy, but today they have exploded into a fan-driven media craze. Two

million viewers tune in weekly to the TLC reality series *Toddlers & Tiaras*, which follows children and ‘pageant-parents’ from their practices to backstage rituals to performances to crownings (Authentic Entertainment). Immediately after its original airing, *T&T* generated controversy because of its behind-the-scenes footage of the pageants. Viewers were allowed back to observe the child glamour pageant process from beginning to end; many did not like what they saw.

The hypersexualization of young children rightfully drew immediate concern. A normal pageant contestant wears makeup, spray tans, false lashes, wigs and flippers (false teeth the competitors wear to make them look like they have perfect, white, adult teeth). In total, the cost for normal preparation for a ‘glitz’ pageant usually tops \$2000 per competition (People, 2011). Glitz pageants are defined as pageants where young children and babies are allowed/required to wear makeup and costumes covered in rhinestones. “Natural pageants” disqualify contestants for wearing makeup and encourage contestants to dress and act their true age. Natural pageants emphasize the interview portion of the competition, while glitz pageants often do not have an interview - but they do have swimwear and evening gown modeling competition segments. Although money is awarded in both types of pageants, natural pageants give specific scholarships for academic/extracurricular activities. Glitz pageants are consistently more popular²⁴ (People, 2011). Modeling of pink, frilly bikinis and performances to pop music –often accompanied by risqué

²⁴ The popularity of Glitz pageants further fuels the idea that natural beauty is not “fun” or “pretty” – anytime personality is taken into account, the “beauty” pageant becomes invalid.

dance moves or gestures – only add to the unease. The girls (who are under no lower age limit during competition, so even newborns are able to compete) are subject to many routines that adult women are barely able to tolerate, including eyebrow and upper lip waxes, airbrushed tans and makeup, the application of false eyelashes and the curling, ratting, and spraying of towering hair (Authentic Entertainment, 2011). Quickly, these girls come to understand that they are ‘inadequate for competition’ without the full preparation of hair, makeup, costumes, etc. Peggy Orenstein was able to shadow a taping of an episode:

[I felt queasy] at overhearing a woman advise her six-year-old that “one of the judges is a man, so be sure you wink at him!” or a father telling a TV reporter that he enjoys getting a sneak peek at what his four-year-old will look like when she’s sixteen. (Orenstein, 2011)

What that father said is hauntingly similar to what the marketing officials said about “getting older younger” - the earlier sexualization of children. Child pageants are not only manipulating these girls into falling for society’s pressures for young girls, but putting them on display in front of a weekly audience.

And while it’s true that society continues to bombard young children with images of stereotypical, over-the-top beauty standards, it’s clear from watching a single episode of *T&T* that the problem is much more complex. This problem is exemplified in the show; why do these girls enter the sparkly, competitive and dramatic world of pageantry? Many mothers register their children because they believe it will be a positive, beneficial experience; they join so that their children may learn lessons in “social skills, listening skills, confidence, independence, poise,

and talent...the competitive nature will teach [their children] valuable life lessons” (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005). While many of the mothers claim that their daughters “insist” on performing in pageants, one cannot attend a pageant or watch an episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras* without hearing “No, mom! I don’t want to [perform]!” Clearly, the girls are not the ones insisting on performing in the pageants.

My research leads me to conclude that the insecurities that their mothers face with regard to their physical imperfections are thrust upon these young girls. As previously established, society is telling women that youth, slenderness and health are the epitome of beauty. And who best illustrates these qualities? Young girls. Women are living vicariously by placing their children on display through pageantry. It’s more than for sake of pride; the beautiful characteristics of a child are also those of her mother, and the imperfections are equally the mother’s fault. So while the children are competing in the pageants, it’s truly the mothers that end up wearing the crowns.

And because of the popularity of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the shenanigans only continue to increase. It has become equally important to do/wear over-the-top routines/costumes in order to gain fifteen minutes of fame. The Parents Television Council has described *T&T* as “the most blatant example of sexualization of a child that [we] have seen” (*People*, 2011). Numerous routines have now been made famous thanks to the airing of them on television. Three of the most famous include: 4-year-old Maddy Jackson dressed up as Dolly Parton for her routine, donning a faux

set of oversized breasts and padding for her rear end; 2-year-old Mia, costumed in a 80's-style Madonna costume, complete with coned-shaped bra and a tight, metallic gold dress, and danced to "Like a Prayer", 6-year-old Paisley, dressed as Julia Roberts from *Pretty Woman* – in her prostitute outfit, including knee-high leather boots and a blonde wig (Authentic Entertainment, 2011). In the last case, Paisley's mom admitted the costume "crossed the line" – weeks after her daughter competed²⁵. Given the children's ages and the nature of their costumes and performances, it's clear that their routines were not self-chosen. Instead, desperate mothers, in an attempt for fame and acknowledgement, put their children on display.

Of course, *Toddlers & Tiaras* caters to a very specific task: entertainment. It's likely that the actions of both the mothers and their children are exaggerated and edited to show them in a certain – overly dramatic – light. Not every parent is parading his or her child around in a sparkly, pink ball gown. However, these influences are illustrative of a common societal problem. For example, daughters are more likely to have ideas about dieting if their mothers diet, which often leads to increasing self-esteem issues during adolescence. If learned early enough, these initial ideas become increasingly influential and unhealthy; for example, it's easy to imagine the negative influence of these early ideas as one 5-year-old stated, "on a diet, you can't eat" (womenshealth, 2009). Reinforcement of thin ideals by peers and

²⁵ And won. Paisley took first place after donning the streetwalker costume to an audience of smiling mothers and judges (People, 2011).

family members has been connected with bulimic symptoms (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005).

And in the end, it's those children who pay for these insecurities of their parents. Mothers often say that competing in pageants gives their children confidence and help them to develop a strong personality. However, recent studies suggest that childhood pageants are linked to lower-self esteem and self-image issues later in life; the prevalence of eating disorders in individuals who had performed in pageants is significantly higher than those who have not (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005). The damage done by these competitions often is not seen until years after the pageant actually occurred (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005). And while specialists suggest that promoting positive self-evaluation leads to healthier self-esteem (Hirsch, 2010), pageantry forces girls to focus on superficial beauty in a comparative and competitive manner. The truth is, regardless of their final placement, all of the girls lose: those who win learn that they will receive appraisal solely because of their sexualized physical beauty, and those who lose understand that they "aren't pretty enough" for this recognition, so they must be full of flaws. Either way, the self-esteem of these young girls is irrevocably damaged. According to recent research, participation in childhood beauty pageants has been attached to adult mental disorders including body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse dysregulation (Wonderlich, Ackard & Henderson, 2005).

Childhood beauty pageants serve as an example of cultural demonstrations of extreme of beauty standards. The beauty standards derived from biology are taken to an extreme when applied to children of such a young age. Biological signals indicating youth - signals that children naturally have, including large eyes, clear skin, and petite frame – are exaggerated using products and costumes. Clearly, children competing in pageants do not carry reproductive potential. It's disturbing to think of judges as evaluating participants based on fertility signals and mate potential. Yet signals indicating adult reproductive fertility, including red lips, rosy cheeks, an hourglass figure and developed breasts, are also included in the children's competition routines – painted red lips, corseted dresses and Madonna bras are normal pageant occurrences. Clearly, these standards are products of a cultural, not biological, fixation of beauty. What began as a biological phenomenon has been elevated to a societal extreme – we need a reality check.

Conclusion

Beauty surrounds us everyday. Technology, media, and competition surround us and make it impossible to ignore. Of course, not all of it is bad: beauty, after all, makes us happy. We strive towards the standards because we desire to be beautiful. But what we must realize is that we already possess the features that we desire.

As I've established, the origins and development of beauty standards are extremely complex. While sexual selection may have influenced the foundations of at least some beauty standards by clarifying signals to aid in the survival and

reproduction of species, cultural influences clearly and specifically influenced beauty norms as well. Some general characteristics may have been derived from biology – for example, ornamentation seems to be a widespread phenomenon across cultures. However, the utilization of these characteristics varies drastically across the globe because cultural and social contexts are highly influential.

But people are even more complex than beauty standards. Simply because these standards exist, not everyone ‘buys into’ them. It would be a gross exaggeration to state that all men believe women must wear makeup to be considered professional. Most women likely do not believe that tabloids and beauty magazines depict realistic images of actresses. But as I’ve made clear in this chapter, future generations need to be aware of the dangers of unrealistic standards. We cannot sit idly and watch these beauty standards thrive; redefining beauty must become an active process. When we can focus on the amazing beauty of the human body – the tasks we are able to perform, the unique characteristics of every individual including physical traits and personality, the systems which allow our bodies to function in such magnificent ways – when we can understand this beauty and teach it to others, we can redefine beauty.

On a personal note, I myself am not immune to beauty standards. In fact, they are a large part of my life. As a 22-year-old woman, I am conscious of my appearance: I wear makeup, choose specific attire to don on a daily basis, style my hair regularly, shop in malls, etc. Until my research and understanding, I did not think about why I did these things. This is likely illustrative of the power of the

beauty standards; we are influenced by them even when we are not aware that they exist. Now I can see the reasons. Some of them are bad (like trying to become like the celebrities I follow on Facebook) but some of them are good (like maintaining a healthy weight).

As a professional choreographer for competitive dance teams, beauty standards are especially important to me. An expectation for thin, beautiful dancers has evolved, making the dance studio environment especially akin to the power of low self-esteem and the influence of negative body image. Surrounded by mirrors, I continually see girls looking at themselves in the mirror, evaluating (and often criticizing) their bodies. The uncomfortable sucking in of a stomach or pinching of hips is a common practice for many of my students. I sometimes see the things I have previously described from *Toddlers & Tiaras*: yes, my students (including elementary students) must wear makeup during competition. Yes, their costumes are often pink and sequined. Yes, they are judged on their physical appearance (lines, costumes, matching others, etc). No, I don't like it. Sometimes, I am reasonable about it: the makeup is necessary so that the stage lights do not flush out the dancers faces; without it, the important acting aspect of a dance would extremely difficult to see. More often, I see 7-year-olds preparing for their performances backstage, pouting their lips and batting their lashes, worshipping their heavily made-up faces in the mirror. And that is more difficult to justify.

But as someone who has a little bit of say in the industry, I hope that I can be a good role model for my students and help them to understand the unrealistic

standards push on all of us by society. The first key is acknowledgment; taking a step back to look at the big picture allows us to see where we stand. The next step is understanding; that is why I have explored these standards in the course of this essay. Internalizing the research makes it easier to take on hardships. The final step is action. Beauty surrounds us, and it's not going anywhere. We live in a beauty-worshipping society. And despite the overwhelming amount of 'beauty talk' from magazines, television, advertisements, etc., there is inadequate dialogue happening about beauty today. Talking about true beauty, what it is— idealistic, a standard - and where it comes from —evolutionarily and culturally - is necessary, and today, it's not happening enough.

The problem is a large one, and of course, it's difficult to change something rooted in tradition and controversy. Beauty is important in many aspects of our lives, and in some ways, the important changes are nearly impossible to make. The only way to “win” the campaign for true beauty is to understand happiness: we cannot expect society, our friends and family, the media, biologists, feminists or anthropologists to tell us what makes us happy. We must discover it for ourselves. Be it walking around with no makeup on, dancing onstage, or donning a sparkly tiara – we must do what makes us happy.

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