

## **Psychology of Beauty: An Overview of the Contemporary Research Lines**

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*by Andrei Holman*

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## **Psychology of Beauty : An Overview of the Contemporary Research Lines**

**Abstract :** We present a synthesis of the contemporary approaches on the topic of corporal beauty, by dividing them into eight major research lines, each illustrated by a set of most representative theories and results : evolutionary, sociocultural and body image approaches, researches on the cross-cultural standards of beauty, on its factors, effects, personal benefits and media representations.

**Keywords :** beauty, research lines

Beauty is frequently conceived in contemporary psychosocial studies as physical attractiveness. Yet, as we will show, the concept of attractiveness can include references to other traits than the strictly physical ones, usually when dealing with contexts which imply a hypothetical or real social interaction (or relationship) between the perceiver and the perceived – such as the context of mate choice. Moreover, the sociocultural approaches prefer the term „beauty” in order to underline the cultural dependencies of this construct, the delimitation from the material level of the actual body. As a way of dealing with these ambiguities which complicate the task of synthesizing the various positions, we will keep track of the plurality of possible semantic loadings of the concept investigated in each research line.

The research lines presented are mainly differentiated on the bases of the concept representing the main focus of research (such as „body image”). Nevertheless, in some cases, it becomes as informative to mention their particular scientific approach – such as anthropological or cultural studies – or, in the instances where their option is more consistently ideological, the peculiar vision which supports them (such as feminist studies).

a. The **evolutionary approaches** attempt to explain attractiveness as a function of the genetic quality of the individual, defined as health status (past – developmental incidents, current and future – disease and stress resistance) as well as reproductive potential and quality (heterozygosity). Such biological endowment is signaled through a set of features, evolved through sexual selection, with a high degree of cross-cultural and even cross-species consensus in terms of their attractiveness : symmetry, averageness, and sexually dimorphic traits. As such, the strongest support for this perspective comes from the studies which reveal the cross-cultural homogeneity of attractiveness ratings of the same targets and the

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1. „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași, România ; holman@psih.uaic.ro.

lack of influence of the degree of exposure to Western mass-media on these ratings (Fink and Neave, 2005), as well from those suggesting that beauty preferences appear from the early childhood, supposedly before any cultural influences would begin to manifest.

According to the „fitness hypothesis” which is at the core of the evolutionary discourse on beauty, due to the presence of such features in healthy individuals, humans have evolved to prefer them in their mating choices (*e.g.* Fink and Neave, 2005 ; Frederick and Haselton, 2007). Yet, some evolutionary-inspired researches debate the importance of these physical traits with various methodologies. Some argue, for instance, that facial averageness is less attractive than expected (Pollard *et al.*, 1999), or that the effect size of averageness is smaller for the evaluations of the opposite sex than of the representatives of the same sex (Langlois *et al.*, 2000) – thus being less important in heterosexual choices.

One of the fundamental elements of the evolutionary perspective has also been questioned by some authors – namely the association of attractiveness to the health status of the individual. On the one side, research (*e.g.* Henderson and Anglin, 2003) support this thesis at the level of social perception, in the sense that people with attractive faces are considered to be healthier by their perceivers. On the other hand, as the meta-analyses on the topic show (*e.g.* Langlois *et al.*, 2000), the results of the medical investigations on participants with various health and attractiveness levels reveal only moderate relationships between the latter and physical health, as well as weak associations to mental health. Moreover, other studies suggest that such a relationship to health – in a moderate degree – exists for women, but not for men (Hume and Montgomerie, 2001), which is also the case with the link between one of the three main criteria proposed by the evolutionary view – sexual dimorphism – and attractiveness (Rhodes, 2006).

As a consequence of these results, other studies explored the variations of the importance of the evolutionary criteria and their health correlates depending on the attractiveness level of the target perceived. Their conclusion is that the link between attractiveness and health is limited to faces below the median in attractiveness. Such individuals’ appearance present strong deviations from the evolutionary criteria stated above, which are also associated with some chromosomal disorders and, consequently, with a low health status (Rhodes, 2006). In other words, high levels of health stress – affecting the functional state of the body – determine low levels of attractiveness through the deviations from the geometric standards that they induce, thus signaling the individual’s poor health state. Nevertheless, such a signaling function of these negative geometry-related apprehensions – in the case of unattractive people – seems less relevant for the other background referent put forth by the evolutionary perspective – one’s genetic potential. For instance, the idea that asymmetry signals poor genetic quality and developmental instability was empirically infirmed by biological data (Saad, 2004).

Another significant moderating variable seems to be the level of societal development, especially in terms of the health risks that individuals are exposed to in their physical environment. As Gangestad and Buss (1993, cited in Rhodes, 2006) show, attractiveness in a mate is valued more in societies with high parasitism rates and poorer health. In the Western cultures, due to the availability of medical cure and pharmaceuticals, as well as to the better nutritional status of the population, the link between health and beauty has been severely undermined. This raises the possibility of a biomedical underpinning of the cross-cultural variations in beauty standards – a theme which will be reviewed in the following pages.

Because of the contradictory results of the investigations carried out from a strict evolutionary perspective, other studies in this field include social factors in their analyses

of these complex relationships. An example from this „sociobiological” research field is the study carried out by Cunningham (1986) on the attractiveness of different types of facial features in various contexts. In his two „quasi-experiments on the sociobiology of female facial beauty”, he elicited attractiveness ratings of female photographs from male participants. The results allowed the extraction of several specific facial features with a high degree of attractiveness, grouped into three categories : neonate, mature and expressive. In the second study, which required male participants to make personality inferences and to relate to several potential contexts of interactions with the depicted women, these features proved to be correlated to personality attributions, altruistic inclinations and reproductive interest.

b. The investigation of the **cross-cultural standards of beauty** is based on the opposite hypothesis to evolutionism : it recognizes the universal character of some attractive features, but makes the assumption that there is a large inter-cultural variability in this respect. The empirical comparisons involved in such research are either :

- *cross-national* : for instance, Bjerke and Polegato (2006) investigated the ideal self-image of women in terms of health and beauty, in a sample of participants from five European cities, through their preferences for one of the two models, representing distinct advertising beauty types. Results revealed significant cross-cultural variation in ideal self-image in terms of health and beauty.
- *cross-continental* : for example, Swami *et al.* (2006) compared participants from Japan and Britain on the relative contribution of Body Mass Index (BMI) and Waist to Hip Ratio (WHR) in female physical attractiveness. BMI emerged as a significant predictor of attractiveness, but with a significant cross-cultural variation, in the sense that Japanese participants preferred images of women with lower BMIs than Britons, on one hand, and the latter placing a lower importance on body shape when judging female physical attractiveness than the former. This result is interpreted by the authors as a consequence of the cross-cultural differences in the sex roles occupied by the two genders, representatives of the cultures with traditional sex roles manifesting stronger preferences for „traditionally attractive” body shapes.
- between representatives of various *ethnic groups* in the same country : Poran (2002) compared Latina, Black and White women participants in what regards their conceptions of beauty, perceptions of cultural standards of beauty, as well as their tendency to engage in a specific social comparison process – the denial of personal disadvantage (a self-protective psychological mechanisms revealed in the studies on minorities). Results indicate similarities in the personal definitions of beauty, but significant variations in the cultural standard of beauty. For instance, Black women were most likely to mention Whiteness overtly as an important part of the cultural definition of beauty, Latina women sometimes mentioned Whiteness, while White women rarely did.

Putting together the corpus of results from the two approaches reviewed so far – evolutionary and cross-cultural – we can conclude about the validity of a joint model, which would include elements from both. As we’ve mentioned, the evolutionary-inspired associations between beauty and health status seem to appear only in individuals with low levels of attractiveness. We can hypothesize that for those more endowed in terms of physical appeal, their evaluations have less to do with the rigid evolutionary standards, being dependent instead, as Osborn (1996) suggest, on cultural norms. In other words, „Beauty is skin deep, but ugly is to the bone”, where „skin deep” implies the superficiality

and modifiability of „cultural beauty”, as well as the individual’s possibility to conform to its norms – in contrast to the structural, „deep” ugliness brought by the physical deviance from the geometrical standards.

c. The research on the **factors of beauty** – other than the evolutionary ones listed above – can be split in two major arrays on the basis of the focus of analysis :

- the **perceiver** – the idea that „beauty is in the eyes of the perceiver” has been a very popular one. Some of the studies testing this hypothesis – inspired by the social relations model (*e.g.* Osborn, 1996) focused on the variations in attractiveness judgments brought by experiences in ongoing relationships between people. For instance, Park and Flink (1989) compared the changes in variances of attractiveness ratings statistically explained by the perceiver and, respectively, by the target across three days of social interaction between the two. Their results show the decrease in the variance attributable to the target (from its high value in the first day) and the increase in the variance attributable to the perceiver, which more than doubled as a result of the interaction between the two (from 22% to 48%).

Another topic in the perceiver realm is the critical periods in the development of personal tastes in appearance styles. In their study using fashion advertisements with both male and female models, covering the interval from 1933 to 1990, Schindler and Holbrook (1993) reveal a marked gender difference in the preferences expressed by their participants. While men seem to have a clear developmental stage – around the age of 20’s – in which their lifelong preferences for women styles are decided, women’s preferences (in general, for both genders) seem to be built during a broader and older range of years. The explanations of men’s critical period in attractiveness assessment development, as suggested by the authors, are both in emotional terms (nostalgia), as well as in cognitive-perceptual ones (mere exposure).

Another investigation in the area of gender differences in judgments of attractiveness was conducted by Marcus and Miller (2003), who had participants of both genders rate each other on the dimension of attractiveness, while also providing metacognitions of the evaluations they thought they would receive from the others. Comparing the two sources of variance of the attractiveness scores, the authors found the highest levels of consensus to appear when men judged female targets, and the highest levels of idiosyncrasy in the situation of men rating other male targets. Regarding the metacognitions, women’s were highly associated to men’s judgments of them. Overall, results suggest that women have a high level of accuracy in self-assessment on the attractiveness scale, which could be a consequence of the consistency of evaluations received from men, thus, in time, enhancing their „correctness” of self-apprehensions.

- the **perceived** – a similar point to the evolutionary one concerning the importance of the spatial arrangement of the body parts in terms of symmetry is noticeable in the literature on the „ideal” proportions. One of the differences between the two positions is in terms of localization: while the influences of symmetry on human attractiveness have mostly been studied at the face level, proportions are usually analyzed on the overall level – of the body shape or profile.

According to this approach, the harmonic body shape – as perceived by the human eye – is a result of a series of definite numeric relationships between the sizes and positions of various segments of the body. The most frequently applied canons of beauty have been the

ratios of unity (1:1) and the golden ratio (1,618:1), based on the number *phi*. This holistic perspective on the body claims that the attractiveness of particular physical traits is dependent on the evaluation of the body as a whole in terms of its deviations from the ideal proportions. Support for its arguments comes from the various referents of these geometrical relationships in art history, from the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman art, to the body representations in the Renaissance period, initiated by Leonardo da Vinci.

These geometrical standards are of particular importance for aesthetic surgery – the medical branch involved in the artificial increase of one's „beauty status“. For instance, in an article published in the *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* journal, Atiyeh and Hayek (2008) present in detail these numeric principles of bodily harmony, as addressing the need to „determine the beauty of the final result as precisely as possible“ (p. 209). Moreover, as the authors admit, modern plastic surgeons have frequently used the neoclassical canons of beauty as working guides on their patients, even though studies on real Caucasian, Asian, and African Americans revealed that such proportions do not represent the average. In other words, the Renaissance geometrical relationships, developed as a mathematical formalization of the ideal body, as depicted in art, have been applied in reshaping real human bodies.

Research testing the relevance of these proportions for human attractiveness has suggested a different set of numeric relationships as important for the two genders. They usually represent ratios of sizes of two body parts, and their optimal state (their beauty standard) is derived from various fundamental geometrical proportions. In women's ratings of men's attractiveness, waist-to-chest ratio, body mass index (BMI), and waist-to-hip ratio seem to be the most important cues, while in the evaluations of women, the set is comprised of five such ratios: bust-to-underbust ratio, bust-to-waist ratio, bust-to-hip ratio, waist-to-leg ratio, and an androgyny index (Atiyeh and Hayek, 2008).

Other studies have revealed the importance of specific physical features. For instance, Grundl *et al.* (2008) investigated, in a research published in the *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* journal, the features that create an attractive eye, by manipulating specifically the eye axis of the female targets judged by German participants of both genders. The results of this study show significant age differences in the eye axis preferences, in the sense that young subjects regarded the oblique type of eye axis as more attractive, whereas older subjects showed a preference for the more horizontal eyes.

Various situational factors have also been taken into account in the area of the perceived. Jones *et al.* (2006) analyze gaze direction and emotional expression, revealing significant interactions of these two factors with physical attractiveness. Expression seems to determine different attractiveness ratings for faces with direct and averted gaze, in the sense that for judgments of faces with direct gaze, preferences were stronger for smiling faces than for faces with neutral expressions, while the opposite result was found for faces with averted gaze. These results are interpreted by the authors in a social interaction frame, suggesting that individuals base their attractiveness ratings on the inferences drawn from the facial cues regarding the other's interest in the perceiver.

A target-related factor investigated in a study published in the *International Journal of Cosmetic Science* by Mulhern *et al.* (2003) is the use of cosmetics by Caucasian women, aiming to assess the contribution of each type of facial cosmetics in overall attractiveness, as judged by Caucasian participants of both genders, as well as their interaction effects. Results show significant between-genders differences, eye make-up proving to be the stronger predictor of attractiveness when evaluated by women, while the combination of foundation with eye make-up having the strongest impact on men preferences. Overall, the

effects of make-up in the attractiveness evaluations of women seem to be comparable with those of the more „traditional” criteria put forth by evolutionary approach – the structural geometric facial features. Other examples of attractiveness factors in the perceived target’s control, whose importance was assessed using a similar research design, are body dynamics (Riggio *et al.*, 1991) or posture (Osborn, 1996).

An interesting idea put forth in this last study is the connection between these appearance enhancing actions and the cultural standards of beauty. Osborn (1996) observes that the effectiveness of these beautification practices is assessed through a set of cultural criteria. The term conceived for this relationship between the individual space of action and the societal appearance norms is the „social role theory of beauty”. As we will see, the theme of „cultural operant conditioning” in what regards appearance – the cultivation and reinforcement of specific beautification behaviors, in agreement with the prevalent norms – has also been extensively researched in the sociocultural studies.

d. The **effects of beauty on the perceiver** are investigated at various levels :

- the **neural activity level**, revealing the brain regions which respond to attractiveness. For instance, Chatarjee *et al.* (2009) report a study using functional MRI (fMRI) in order to investigate the neural activity associated with the apprehension of faces. Participants were required to perform two successive judgment tasks – facial beauty rating and facial identity recognition – on artificial (computer-generated) faces, which allowed the precise control of various geometric parameters. Results reveal that despite the differences in neural correlates between the two tasks, there was a specific brain region – the ventral occipital region – which remained responsive to facial beauty in both situations. As the authors conclude, this area is activated automatically by beauty and may serve as a neural trigger for the mental effects of beautiful faces.
- the **cognitive processing level** – including, for instance, studies on the processing advantages of attractive targets ; in their three computer-based experiments on this topic, Becker *et al.* (2005) found that physical attractiveness leads to more efficient matching for female faces, but not for male faces, in the sense that attractive women are less confusable with one another. The significantly weaker effect discovered in the case of male attractive faces processing is interpreted by the authors in a sexual selection frame, as revealing different socio-sexual functions that attractiveness has for men and women.

In the same vein of sexually selective cognition, Maner *et al.* (2003) examined, across five experiments, the cognitive biases induced by beauty. Their results indicate a differential selective processing of attractive men and women by the two genders, in the sense that the two cognitive phenomena investigated – biased estimates and recognition of attractive targets – appear less in the case of male targets, as well as being less manifested by female perceivers. The other between-subjects variable included in the research design – one’s involvement in a stable relationship – also had a significant interaction effect with gender, in the sense that being committed to a relationship reduced women’s, but not men’s, attention to attractive targets of the opposite sex. At a more general level, these differences indicate a consistent tendency to focus on attractive women, which manifests not only in men, but also in women. This result is in line with other studies in the field, and can be read in two frames, either as revealing the intense social comparison processes that women engage in as competitors in the „sexual market” (the evolutionistic account), either as a sign of the self-objectification perspective that women have interiorized,



adapting to and striving for the decorative role that the patriarchal society has limited them to (the feminist account).

Another relevant study in this area is the investigation carried out by Olson and Marshuetz (2005). Their results reveal another cognitive effect of beautiful faces, similar to the ones specific to the studies on implicit attitudes, namely the priming of positive words by attractive upright faces, while no priming effect emerged for unattractive faces or for other sorts of attractive stimuli. Another important result of this experimental investigation was that attractiveness can be perceived from minimal amounts of visual information: even when the faces were presented under severely impoverished viewing conditions (induced by masking or rapid presentation), participants could judge correctly their attractiveness level.

- the **emotional level**, investigating the effects of attractive people on one's mood and body satisfaction, usually introducing the perceiver's body image as a mediator of these influences. For example, Pinhas *et al.* (1999) found that women were more depressed and angrier as a consequence of exposure to pictures in fashion magazines. Other studies focus on the interaction of physical attractiveness with other personal traits. Gutierrez *et al.* (1999) investigated in their experimental research the effects of exposure to physically attractive and dominant same-sex individuals on self-evaluations, measured on the dimension of mate-value (desirability as marriage partner). Results show a different between – genders pattern: women's self-assessments of their mate value are negatively influenced by exposure to highly physically attractive women, while men's self-assessments were more affected by the social dominance of the men to whom they were exposed. These two „threats” to self-esteem mirror and are determined by their high importance in the perceived attractiveness of the opposite gender; in his investigation on 37 cultures, Buss (1994) discovered the universal character of the preferred characteristics in one's ideal mate, the patterns for each gender being related to the „threats” mentioned before: for men, beauty and youth are the essential qualities, while for women it is men's social status which mostly determine their attractiveness.

Other studies also reveal mediators of these effects; for instance, Choi *et al.* (2008) notice that the mechanism of how women are negatively affected by beautiful female models is still unclear, and propose a third-person effect framework as a possible such mechanism. Overall, their results show that lower body satisfaction is specific to women who believe that men (especially close male friends) would be more influenced, in their female beauty evaluations, by the images of fashion models they were exposed to.

- the **social inferences level** (stereotypes) includes the vast person perception research on the personality traits which are ascribed to beautiful targets by perceivers, in various interpersonal settings (*e.g.* Ellis *et al.*, 1983). This phenomenon can be traced back to the antic assumption that character is immanent in appearance – as Aristotle formulated it, „Beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction” – or to the theories of physiognomy regarding the connection between beauty and virtue, respectively between beauty and vice.

Other studies on the „what's beautiful is good” phenomenon reveal its limits and variations; for example, Dermer and Thiel (1975), in their study on the inferences drawn by women about attractive female targets, show that attributions favorability is not consistent along all the personality dimensions. More specifically, their results reveal



various socially undesirable personal characteristics which were ascribed to targets of high attractiveness, such as vanity, egotism, materialism, snobbism or likelihood of a marital disaster. Generally, as Eagly *et al.* (1991) conclude on the basis of their meta-analysis, „the differences in subjects' perception of attractive and unattractive targets were largest for indexes of social competence; intermediate for potency, adjustment, and intellectual competence; and near zero for integrity and concern for others”.

- the attitudinal level – studies focused on the development of sexist attitudes and behaviors have revealed their influences from the exposure to media images in sexually objectifying frames. Generally, individuals of both genders exposed to such content have a higher acceptance of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex-role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial beliefs about relationships compared to those in control conditions (Machia and Lamb, 1999).

e. The **personal benefits of beauty** – mostly represent consequences of the advantages in social perception outcomes stated above. Such self-fulfilling prophecies come in many forms: psychological (mental health, sense of personal competence, life satisfaction, etc. – Sullivan, 2001), social (*e.g.* help from strangers – Patzer, 1985, cited in Sullivan, 2001), economical (financial earnings – „beauty bonus” – Umberson and Hughes, 1987). There are virtually no areas of social interaction which are left uncontaminated by physical attractiveness, in which the beautiful would not receive certain privileges, most of the time outside the conscious awareness of their „victims”. Moreover, attractiveness brings an advantage in terms of the accuracy of personality traits ascribed by people with whom beautiful individuals interact, as compared to the less attractive ones, because it motivates the perceivers to initiate a closer social contact, to engage in a more in-depth social interaction with the perceived. In other words, „people do judge a book by its cover, but a beautiful cover prompts a closer reading” (Lorenzo *et al.*, 2010).

There are also distinctive and significant social consequences assigned by society to those at the other end of the beauty continuum. We might say that these negative effects of being ugly are one of the few forms of social discrimination which have escaped the censorship of political correctness. As Berry (2007) remarks, „unattractive and ordinary-looking people are fair game for insults and discrimination” (p. 2). An illustrative example that the author offers of this still legitimate prejudice and its consequences is the case of short men in the US, who „are more likely to drop out of school, drink heavily, date sparsely, and become emotionally depressed and physically ill. They have less opportunity than tall men of marrying and having children. Their salaries are far less than those of tall men” (p. 60). As I can be noticed, the drawbacks of not attaining the appearance standards mirror the advantages received by those at the opposite end of the beauty continuum.

One of the hidden purposes of this „*looksism*” would be, as the author suggests, a commercial one, namely the persuasion of those less gifted in the attractiveness domain to invest their earnings in the solutions provided by beauty industry, in order to avoid discrimination and receive access to the forbidden privileges of the beautiful.

f. **Body image** – for instance, Jung and Lennon (2003) investigated the fluctuations of women's body image after exposure to attractive images, taking into account participants' appearance self-schemas (cognitive representations of organized information about the self in relation to appearance). Their results show that only in women who were schematic on appearance such exposure led to lower body image and mood. Similarly, Wiederman and

Hurst (1997) studied the relationships between women's sexual self-schema and physical attractiveness, body size and shape, and body image. Bulhmann *et al.* (2009) examined the mental associations of beauty in individuals with Body Dysmorphic Disorder in three samples: individuals diagnosed with, individuals with subclinical BDD symptoms, and healthy control participants. Using the Implicit Association Test, the authors revealed that BDD participants manifested a stronger stereotype about physical attractiveness – its association to competence –, indicating a higher degree of inferential reactivity (of contamination of personality inferences with beauty evaluations), which might reflect a cognitive mechanism responsible for their disorder.

One's body image is also investigated in many studies in this area as a mediator of the effects of exposure to the beauty ideals in the mass-media. These effects are analyzed on a behavioral level – such as eating disorders – or at a psychological one – which includes many of the dimensions listed above: body dissatisfaction, negative self-appraisals, low self-esteem, etc.

g. **Socio-cultural approaches**, preoccupied with the societal roles of beauty definitions and norms, usually emphasize the ubiquitous influences of beauty in all social aspects – the „social aesthetics” research field –, as well as the opposite relationships, the socially constructed character of attractiveness criteria and norms. As Rhodes (2006) notices, this idea of the beauty standards being arbitrary cultural conventions already has a respectable history, being formulated by the first time by Darwin, after observing large cultural differences in beautification practices.

For instance, the study carried out by Robertson (2001) on the evaluation criteria used in the Miss Nipon contests in the first half of the XX-th century illustrates an idea at the core of the feminist perspective – „personal is political” – but in a more literal fashion – without any reference to the gender relationships. Instead, the author emphasizes the political intentions which were guiding the selection of Miss Nipon, which were the improvements in the „Japanese race” through sports and a more Western-like clothing style (less body restrictive). As such, the main criterion for this selection was the girls' height, as well as other eugenics – oriented dimensions, such as their reproductive potential, proportionate health or purity of their spirit and blood.

A similar case is the cultural construction of obesity, a topic on which representatives of this approach have remarked the variability and arbitrariness of the medical (supposedly scientific) standards, suggesting their dependency on a political war against fatness. As the media portrayals of beauty use increasingly thinner models, body weight has received moral connotations, obesity – as defined by the current standards – being associated with lack of self-control, self-discipline and generally, an inferior moral status. Moreover, the correlation between body weight and socio-economic status in contemporary society seems to manifest a historical reversal: in the Western societies of today, it is the thin people who are the rich ones.

The gradual lowering of the obesity thresholds seems contradictory even with the biomedical results, which show that people who are moderately overweight have a higher life expectancy than people who are not overweight. One of the possible hidden causes of this phenomenon is the financial interests of insurance companies, since these it allows them to deny coverage or to increase premiums for heavier people (Berry, 2007), using the medical legitimization of the risks of obesity-related illnesses.

The feminist perspective, most often employed in this array, claims that beauty ideals and practices are tools for the oppression of women, reducing them to an inferior, unnatural and decorative role (*e.g.* Jeffrey, 2005; Wolf, 1991). Although initially reserved

for the analysis of feminine beauty, the feminist perspective has also included masculine beauty, drawing attention to the increasingly stronger cultural forces directed at men in this respect. The specificity of the feminist writings – which are reserved a larger space in the following section, dealing with cosmetic surgery – is the inclusion of patriarchy as an essential referent in the cultural exploration of beauty and, generally, of the roles and meanings of the body. Even though there are differences within the various feminist positions, the concept of oppression of women in more or less a general one. This oppression is carried out, among other instruments, through contemporary beauty standards and practices, which have a series of masked roles and consequences: to assign women an inferior status, to legitimize it through the cultural focus on superficial, unimportant characteristics – such as appearance – and to limit women's involvement in actions which would contribute to their real social ascension. Thus, they create an artificial space of competition in which they would invest their efforts, while raising the beauty standards high enough in order to make sure that most of them would fail to attain them. This, in turn, ensures the diminishing of women's self-esteem, a necessary and final piece of the puzzle which would guarantee their interiorization of the lower social status. Being submitted to the continuous scrutiny of their appearance by men, women learn to evaluate themselves „first and best”, which leads to their own self-objectification, treating their bodies as exterior objects (Jeffreys, 2005).

For instance, Scott (1997, p. 12) puts forth the following four central themes of the feminist studies on beauty :

1. Beauty is fundamentally feminine.
2. Beauty is imperative for women.
3. Beauty is paramount among women's qualities.
4. Women's beauty requires substantial modification of the natural appearance.

h. **Media studies on the representations of beauty** – apart from the theme of self-evaluation effects of mass-media portrayals of beauty above (*e.g.* Pinhas *et al.*, 1999), other studies point out, for instance, variations in the beauty representations across cultures. In this respect, Frith *et al.* (2004) analyzed advertisements collected from women's fashion and beauty magazines in Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States, taking into account models' clothing style, beauty type, product categories. Their general conclusion is that overall, Western models were assigned a seductive role in adverts more often than Asian ones, being more used in pictorials „body oriented”. Yet, there are also studies (*e.g.* O'Barr, 1994, Griffin *et al.*, 1994) which conclude on the increasing homogenization of such representations across cultures.

A connected area of research is the analysis of the specific definitions of beauty in various communication spaces. Smith *et al.* (1999) examined the personality characteristics of physically attractive characters in U.S. films across a random sample from 5 decades of top-grossing films. They found a consistent „beauty-and-goodness” stereotype, stable across time periods, character sex, and characters' centrality to the plot, in the sense that in the Hollywood movie industry, the beautiful characters are endowed with more positive personality traits than the unattractive ones.

Englis *et al.* (1994) compared the emphasis placed on different ideals of beauty across two US-based communications media (print – fashion magazines vs. music television) and formats (advertising vs. entertainment). The results reveal a multiplicity of beauty ideals, each strongly associated with contextual cues, but also a set of ideals more prevalent than others, namely the sensual/exotic, trendy, and classic/feminine forms of beauty. In a

similar vein, Sypeck *et al.* (2003) analyzed the trends in print media's depictions of the ideal of feminine beauty between 1959 and 1999, by measuring the body size and the proportion of the body depicted on the cover of four American fashion magazines. They found that while the first indicator decreased – in the sense that the models were increasingly thin –, the second increased, in other words the depiction of the entire body of the models became more and more frequent across time. Garner *et al.* (1980) and Wiseman *et al.* (1992) revealed a similar consistent trend towards thinness in their examinations of the evolution of Playboy magazine centerfolds and Miss America Pageant contestants, together covering the period from 1959 to 1988. The same phenomenon appears in the fashion world: while in the 1950's models weighted 8% less than the average American woman, in the 1990's the difference went up to 23% (Berry, 2007). Such data indicate the higher importance of and cultural pressure from the thin ideal for women in contemporary society.

As the socio-cultural approach has suggested, men have also been included in the target audience of beauty industry, the pressure on their remodeling of appearance according to its norms being on the rise. An example of the instruments of this pressure comes from the results of the study cited by Berry (2007) on the evolution of the muscle size of the GI Joe dolls from 1982 to mid-1990's; the muscles that the doll was gradually endowed with have reached unrealistic proportions during this time interval – as compared to the actual possibilities of the human body. Of course, the evolution of the Barbie dolls has also included unrealistic modifications, each moving it closer to a material prototype of current beauty standards.

Gottschall *et al.* (2008) investigated the gendered attractiveness emphasis (the difference of attractiveness between the two genders) in a large sample of traditional folktales from 13 diverse cultural areas. The research aimed to empirically compare the hypothesis of the two confronting perspectives on this topic: the feminist, constructivist one, according to which the greater cultural emphasis on female attractiveness is a specific Western phenomenon, and the evolutionary account, which suggests that it is a universal one. The results of their analysis reveal that across culture areas, information on physical attractiveness was much more likely to be conveyed for female characters, thus providing support for the evolutionary hypothesis. The authors conclude that the „beauty myth” – the term used by feminism when referring to the Western societal definitions of beauty and their misogynistic character – is no myth, since it appears virtually in all the cultures.

A similar result was found in cross-cultural studies on the portrayals of the two genders in advertisement productions (Saad, 2004), women being placed in decorative roles, generally depicted as younger and more attractive than men.

## **Psihologia frumuseții : o privire sintetică asupra abordărilor contemporane**

**Rezumat :** Articolul prezintă o sinteză a abordărilor contemporane ale temei frumuseții corporale, clasificate în opt linii majore de cercetare, fiecare fiind ilustrată prin cele mai reprezentative teorii și rezultate : abordările evoluționiste, socio-culturale și centrate pe imaginea corporală, cercetările asupra standardelor transculturale ale frumuseții, asupra factorilor, efectelor, beneficiilor personale și reprezentărilor sale în media.

**Cuvinte-cheie :** frumusețe, linii de cercetare

## La psychologie de la beauté : Une synthèse des approches contemporaines

**Résumé :** L'article présente une synthèse des approches contemporaines sur le thème de beauté corporelle, classifiées en huit lignes principales de recherches, chacune illustrée avec un group de théories et résultats significatives : les approches évolutionniste, socio-culturel et centrée sur l'image corporelle, les recherches sur les standards cross-culturel de beauté, sur ses facteurs, effets, avantages personnels et représentations dans les media.

**Mots-clés :** beauté, lignes de recherches

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