Conventional Wisdom Tells Us . . . Beauty Is Only Skin Deep

This essay documents the social advantages enjoyed by physically attractive individuals—tall, slim, and beautiful or handsome women and men. We also discuss the powerful role physical attractiveness can play in the construction of self-identity.

"Beauty is only skin deep," goes the old adage. It’s a lesson we learn very early in our lives. From youth to old age, we are promised that, ultimately, we will be judged on the basis of our inner qualities and not simply by our appearance.

The conventional wisdom on beauty is echoed on many fronts. Religious doctrines teach us to avoid the vanity of physical beauty and search for the beauty within. Popular Broadway shows and movies such as Phantom of the Opera or Beauty and the Beast, fairy tales such as “The Ugly Duckling,” or songs such as Billy Joel’s “I Love You Just the Way You Are” or Prima J’s “Inside Out” promote the notion that appearances are too superficial to seriously influence our fate. All in all, our culture warns us not to “judge a book by its cover,” for “all that glitters is not gold.”

The conventional wisdom on beauty is reassuring, but is it accurate? Do social actors really look beyond appearance when interacting with and evaluating one another?

One finds considerable cultural inconsistency surrounding the topic of beauty—our actual behaviors contradict cultural goals, creating an imbalance between the ideal and the real. Although we say that appearances don’t matter, our actions indicate something quite to the contrary. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that an individual’s level of attractiveness dramatically influences others’ assessments, evaluations, and reactions.

Cultural inconsistency
A situation in which actual behaviors contradict cultural goals; an imbalance between ideal and real culture
Several studies show that attractive individuals—tall, slim, and beautiful or handsome women and men—are better liked and more valued by others than individuals considered unattractive (Čivre et al. 2013; Gueguen et al. 2009; Langlois et al. 2000; Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg 2010; Lorenzo, Biesanz, and Human 2010; Ludwig 2005; Patzer 2006, 2008; Segal-Caspi, Roccas, and Sagiv 2012). Interestingly, these preferences begin shortly after birth and are amazingly widespread (Ramsey et al. 2004; Slater et al. 2010). In seeking friends, individuals prefer the companionship of attractive versus unattractive people (Antheunis and Schouten 2011; Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg 2010; Marks, Miller, and Maruyama 1981; Patzer 2006, 2008; Reis, Nezlek, and Wheeler 1980; Wang et al. 2010).

In the workplace, attractive people are more likely to be hired and promoted than their unattractive competitors, even when an experienced personnel officer is responsible for the hiring (Behrend et al. 2012; Commissio and Finkelsstein 2012; Haas and Gregory 2005; Hamermesh 2011; Marlowe, Schneider, and Nelson 1996; Patzer 2006, 2008; Pfeifer 2012; Sala et al. 2013; Tews, Stafford, and Zhu 2009; Watkins and Johnston 2000). In courts of law, physically attractive defendants receive more lenient sentences than unattractive defendants (Abwender and Hough 2001; DeSantis and Kayson 1997; Devine 2012; Erian et al. 1998; Vrij and Firmin 2002), and attractive victims are more credible with juries than unattractive victims (Devine 2012; Madera, Podratz, King, and Hebl 2007). Within the political arena, attractive candidates regularly garner more votes than unattractive candidates (Lutz 2010; Ottati and Deiger 2002; Olivo and Todorov 2010; Sigelman, Sigelman, and Fowler 1987). And some studies suggest that students rate the performance of their physically attractive professors higher than that of their less attractive professors (Freng and Webber 2009; Rinoiolo, Johnson, Sherman, and Misso 2006).

Only in the search for a lifetime mate does the influence of physical attractiveness wane. People tend to choose long-term partners whom they judge to be of comparable attractiveness (Kalick and Hamilton 1986; Kalmijn 1998; Taylor et al. 2011). However, "comparable" can be a pretty big category, and within it people shoot for the most attractive person they can get (Carmalt, Cawley, Joyner, and Sobal 2008; Takeuchi 2006).

The link between physical attractiveness and being liked and rewarded exists at all stages of the life cycle, including infancy and childhood. Studies show, for example, that attractive babies are held, cuddled, kissed, and talked to more frequently than unattractive babies. This pattern holds true even when one restricts the focus to mother–child interactions (Badr and Abdallah 2001; Berscheid 1982; Leinbach and Fagot 1991; Parsons et al. 2011; Principe and Langlois 2011; Weiss 1998; Yamamoto et al. 2009). It is worth noting that babies apparently feel the same way about attractiveness. In research settings, newborns and young infants spend more time looking at pictures of attractive faces than they do pictures of unattractive faces (Ramsey et al. 2004; Riniolo et al. 2006; Rubenstein, Kalakanis, and Langlois 1999; Slater et al. 2010; Slater et al. 2000). This pattern holds true even for autistic children who, presumably, would be less connected to the social emphases on beauty (Da Fonseca et al. 2011). When attractive children make their way to school, they tend to be more frequently praised and rewarded by teachers than their less attractive counterparts (Clifford and Walster 1973; French et al. 2009; Kenealy, Frude, and Shaw 1988; Parks and Kennedy 2007; Patzer 2006, 2008). Furthermore, studies show that children themselves come to equate attractiveness with high moral character (Bazzini et al. 2010; Dion 1979; Dion and Berscheid 1974; Griffin and Langlois 2006; Langlois and Stephan 1981; Ramsey and Langlois 2002; Slater et al. 2010). The typical children's fairy tale is one source of this lesson. Remember Cinderella and her evil stepsisters? Or Snow
White and her wicked stepmother, who is disguised as an ugly witch? And how about Oz’s beautiful, “good” witch of the North versus the ugly and “wicked” witch of the West? The stories of our youth regularly couple beauty with goodness, whereas ugliness is usually indicative of wickedness (Bazzini et al. 2010; Ramsey and Langlois 2002).

In addition to issues of liking, reward, and moral character, physically attractive individuals are perceived as having a host of other positive and highly desirable characteristics. “Beautiful people” are assumed to possess pleasing personalities, personal happiness, great intelligence, mental and physical competence, high status, trustworthiness, and high success in marriage. Furthermore, these perceptions persist even when the facts contradict our assumptions (Andreotti, Zebrowitz, Leslie, and Lachman 2001; Brewer and Archer 2007; Chia and Alfred 1998; Dion 2001; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Feeley 2002; Griffin and Langlois 2006; Ludwig 2005; Meier et al. 2010; Patzer 2006, 2008; Perlini, Marcello, Hansen, and Pudney 2001; Senior et al. 2007; Verhulst, Lodge, and Lavine 2010; Yerkes and Pettijohn 2008; Zebrowitz, Collins, and Dutta 1998).

Some neuroscientists believe that our positive reactions to physical attractiveness are based in human evolution. They argue that humans’ attraction to beauty ensures the survival of the species. Can you think of a more sociologically based explanation for the impact of physical attractiveness as described in this chapter?

Some researchers feel that our perceptions of attractive people and their lifestyles may create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Snyder 2001; Zebrowitz et al. 1998). Thus, when we expect that handsome men or beautiful women are happy, intelligent, or well placed, we pave the way for expectation to become reality. This may explain why attractive individuals tend to have higher self-esteem, display more confidence, and are less prone to psychological disturbances than unattractive individuals (Cash and Pruzinsky 2004; Jussim, Robustelli, and Cain 2009; Madon et al. 2011; Patzer 2006, 2008; Saguy 2013; Taleporos and McCabe 2002). Some studies suggest, however, that this connection may be race specific. African Americans, for example, are far less likely than whites to link their appearance to feelings of self-worth (Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Jefferson and Stake 2009; Kelly et al. 2007; Kronenfeld et al. 2010; White et al. 2003).

By contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy, social reactions to physical appearance may endow handsome men and beautiful women with valuable cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to attributes, knowledge, or ways of thinking that can be converted or used for economic advantage. Cultural capital is a concept that was originally introduced by contemporary theorist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (1984), one accumulates cultural capital in conjunction with one’s social status. The more privileged one’s status, the better one’s endowment of cultural capital.

Bourdieu argues that an individual’s cultural capital works like a good investment. The capital itself—typically defined as family background, education, communication skills,
and so on—has inherent value and gains for the individual’s entry into “the market.” “Working” one’s cultural capital enables its “owner” to “buy” or accumulate additional social advantages.

The many studies reviewed in this essay suggest that physical attractiveness also forms another type of cultural capital that operates according to the same dynamic as the one described by Bourdieu. Physical attractiveness provides individuals with an extra resource in meeting life’s demands. Beauty places individuals in a preferred or more powerful position. As such, appearances are frequently converted to economic gain. (Anderson et al. 2010; Espino and Franz 2002; Haas and Gregory 2005; Hunter 2002; Kwan and Trautner 2009; Patzer 2006, 2008; Wolf 2002).

Thinking of beauty as cultural capital helps to explain Americans’ propensity for physical alterations. In the United States, we are “lifted,” “augmented,” “tucked,” “botoxed,” and liposuctioned more than in any other country in the world. In 2012, for example, Americans had more than 14.6 million cosmetic procedures (up 98% from the year 2000)—all of them performed for aesthetic reasons rather than reasons of necessity. Further, in nearly 10% of those procedures, the patient was between the ages of 13 and 29, indicating that our concerns with beauty start early (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2012). Some of us, of course, choose less drastic measures. National figures indicate that more than $220.3 billion is spent in the United States each year on personal care products (i.e., cosmetics, perfumes, hair products, and services like hair styling and personal training). This figure has more than doubled in the past 15 years. And note that such “beauty spending” surpasses the dollar amounts Americans devote each year to other socially central concerns such as nursery, elementary, and secondary schools combined ($41.1 billion); social services and religious activities ($159.1 billion); household maintenance ($59.9 billion); or Internet access ($55.6 billion; World Almanac 2013). It also is worth noting that some impose their obsession with beauty on their pets! In 2003, controversy swirled through the prestigious Crufts Dog Show in England. It seems that Danny, a Pekingese who won the show, underwent facial surgery to improve his prospects of victory (Trebay 2003)! The American Kennel Club has since prohibited any plastic surgery beyond tail cropping and ear docking for show dogs. But for everyday pooches, the surgeon’s knife is still an option. Owners invest in pet face lifts, tummy tucks, nose jobs, breast reductions, and the newest craze, “neuticles”—testicular implants designed to give neutered dogs a more “masculine” look (Moisee 2011).

“Buying” beauty is not strictly an American phenomenon. In many Asian and African cultures, for example, the increasing value placed on American facial and skin features has resulted in a dramatic upsurge in eyelid, nose, and facial reconstruction surgery as well as skin-lightening procedures. Reports also show massive increases in cosmetic sales throughout rural China and other Asian nations and long lines in Moscow, as Muscovites fight to purchase Estée Lauder and Christian Dior cosmetics (Branigan 2001; Kovaleski 1999; Li and Fung Research Centre 2012; Luo 2012; Martin 2009; Savacool 2009). All in all, human behavior may confirm Aristotle’s ancient claim: Beauty may be better than all the letters of recommendation in the world.

The effects of physical attractiveness go beyond our interactions with others. An individual’s “attractiveness quotient” also proves to be one of the most powerful elements in the construction of one’s self-identity. **Identity** refers to those essential characteristics that

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**Identity** Essential characteristics that both link us to and distinguish us from other social players and thus establish who we are.
In the fashion world, it pays to be zero—size zero. Yes, in recent years, a zero dress size (that's a 23-inch waist) has been the industry standard for runway models and fashion photo shoots. You may recall the flap in 2009 over a Ralph Lauren ad featuring a touched-up photo of one of his long-standing models—Filippa Hamilton. The photo (which went viral) depicted the model's head as wider than her hips! (Check it out on the web.) The model later claimed that she was fired by Ralph Lauren for being too fat. During fashion week in 2010, model Coco Rocha, currently a size 4, grabbed headlines with claims that her career took a hit once she abandoned industry standards. The $100 million fashion industry has yet to deliver on its promise to abandon its unrealistic and dangerous weight rules. In 2006, Ana Carolina Reston, an 88-pound model from Brazil, died of complications from anorexia. Coco Rocha (who is 5 feet 10 inches tall) says it was her own ill-fated experience with dieting when she was 108 pounds that convinced her to ignore the industry's "pin-thin" demand.

In 2006, Madrid issued the first ban on rail-thin models at its fashion week, arguing that the industry had a responsibility to portray healthy body images. The mayor of Milan indicated that she would follow suit in her city. In 2009, the editor of the German magazine *Brigette* announced that the magazine would no longer use professional models, opting instead for using real, everyday women. Italian fashion houses Prada, Versace, Armani, and later the Victoria Beckham line soon followed *Brigette*’s cue. And in 2012, Israel became the first country to pass a law banning "malnourished" models from appearing in marketing campaigns. The World Health Organization contends that a body-mass index of less than 18.5 signifies malnourishment and the Israeli law now defers to that standard in judging its models.

Here in the United States, consumers are fighting back. In 2013, blogger Jes Baker began a campaign against Abercrombie & Fitch’s CEO Mike Jeffries. Jeffries refused to sell clothing larger than a size “Large” citing larger customers as un-American! The fashion industry may finally be catching on. *Glamour* magazine caused quite a media stir (and received favorable feedback from women) when it featured a photo spread of plus-size model Lizzi Miller. (Actually, Miller is a size 12 to 14, but the fashion industry regards size 6 and over as "plus.") And while Kate Moss believes that "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels," Heidi Klum says the secret to her looking young is keeping on extra weight. "Weigh" to go, Heidi.

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down, pump up, tan, tattoo, and even surgically reshape our bodies, all in the hopes that a “new” and more beautiful body will boost our sense of self.

In theory, connections between body weight and identity should be quite straightforward. Throughout the socialization experience, we are exposed to what sociologists call appearance norms—a society’s generally accepted standards of appropriate body height, body weight, distribution or shape, bone structure, skin color, and so on.

When individuals conform to appearance norms, they enjoy positive feedback from intimates, peers, and social group members at large. These reactions enable one to develop a “normal” body image and a heightened sense of self. In contrast, individuals who deviate from appearance norms are likely to be negatively sanctioned. Indeed, one study found that the negative sanctions applied to overweight individuals may continue to be applied even after the individual loses the weight! (Latner, Ebneter, and O’Brien 2010). As such, those who stray from average body weight may develop deviant or negative self-identities (Goffman 1963; Millman 1980; Schur 1984; for recent empirical work, see Armitage 2012; Carr and Friedman 2005; Gimlin 2002; Saguy 2013; Silverman and Santorelli 2010; Wang et al. 2009). This phenomenon begins in childhood, and some worry that with increases in childhood obesity, Americans’ collective self-esteem will drop precipitously in coming decades (Saguy 2013; Silverman and Santorelli 2010; Wang et al. 2009).

In the everyday world of experience, body weight and its connection to identity can be quite complex. For example, several studies, as well as testimony found on countless weight-loss websites, show that when certain individuals move from thin to fat (in American society, a shift from a normal to a deviant body), such individuals nevertheless maintain a slim, and hence “normal,” body image. This sense of normalcy often persists even in the face of objective evidence to the contrary, such as scale readings or clothing size (Berscheid 1981; Degher and Hughes 1992; Gettleman and Thompson 1993; Jones et al. 2010; Kuchler and Variyam 2003; Powell et al. 2010; Stanley, Sullivan, and Wardle 2009; Wachsberg et al. 2011). Similarly, some individuals who achieve “normal” bodies via diet, eating habits, illness, or surgery continue to identify themselves as overweight, disproportioned, or disfigured (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2008; Kuchler and Variyam 2003; Rubin, Shmilovitz, and Weiss 1993; Stenson 2009; Williamson et al. 2001).

What explains the failure to incorporate a “new” body into one’s identity? Some believe the phenomenon is social in nature. This is because misperception of one’s body varies with one’s social location. Thus, overweight men are more likely than overweight women to underestimate their weight. Average or underweight women are more likely than average or underweight men to overestimate their weight. Racial minorities—especially African Americans and Hispanics—are likely to underestimate their weight, as are those who are highly religious. And the elderly as well as those with low levels of education are more likely than other age and education groups to underestimate their weight (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2008; Kim 2007; Krauss, Powell, and Wada 2012; Kuchler and Variyam 2003; Martin, Frisco, and May 2009; Stanley, Sullivan, and Wardle 2009).
But the misperception of one's body may also be a function of one's childhood years—in particular, the “first impressions” such individuals formed of their bodies during their primary socialization. Children who develop “slim and trim” images of their bodies often succeed at maintaining that image as they build their adult identities. In essence, that skinny kid of an individual’s past can cover her or his adult eyes and obscure the portly grown-up in the mirror. In contrast, children who are labeled as “fat” or ridiculed during their early years seem never to fully embrace the notion of a normal or thin body, even when they achieve body weight within or below national weight guidelines (Laslett and Warren 1975; Millman 1980; Northrup 2012; Pierce and Wardle 1997; Rubin et al. 1993; Sanchez-Villegas et al. 2013; Sands and Wardle 2003; Thompson and Stice 2001; Wang et al. 2009).

Can those affected by first impressions of their bodies ever synchronize their identities with their current physical condition? Research shows that certain rituals prove helpful in this regard. When body transitions are marked by some sort of “rite of passage,” individuals are more likely to adjust their identities to reflect their new weight. So, for instance, patients opting for surgical weight loss may request a “last meal,” write a will, or burn old clothing and photographs. Such rituals prove quite powerful in signaling the death of one’s “old” body. Similarly, dieters often engage in rituals such as clothing shopping sprees or body-boasting beach vacations to mark the achievement of a target weight. Dieters report the power of these rituals in signifying a physical “rebirth” (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2003; Rubin et al. 1993, 1994).

Intense social feedback also appears critical to synchronizing identity with body weight. Repeated reaction to one’s actual weight can eventually alter faulty self-perceptions. Thus, although the overweight individual may be able to neutralize the numbers that appear during his or her morning weigh-in, that same individual proves unable to ignore repeated stares or blatant comments on weight gain by family, friends, or strangers. Similarly, the newly thin often report the wide-eyed gasps, exclamations, and smiles of those viewing their new bodies for the first time as the factors most significant to their adoption of a true sense of body size (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2003; McCabe, Ricciardelli, and Holt 2010; Rubin et al. 1993, 1994).

Note, however, that some sources of social feedback can hinder the synchronization process. For example, when individuals use media images to measure their own appearance, they tend to overestimate their body weight. Such overestimations, in turn, have a negative impact on self-identity. Women appear particularly susceptible to such media influence. Although the media present the “acceptable” male in a variety of shapes and sizes, “acceptable” females rarely deviate from the thin standard. Thus, daily exposure to as little as 30 minutes of TV programming may contribute to the self-overestimation of body size typical among women. Furthermore, these same short periods of TV viewing may indirectly increase the incidence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia among women and steroid use among men (Bartlett, Vowels, and Saucier 2008; Conway 2013; Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006; Grave, Ward, and Hyde 2008; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002; Grogan 2008; Harper and Tiggemann 2008; Harrison 2000; López-Guimerà et al. 2010; Martin 2010; Myers and Biocca 1992; Myers et al. 1999; Stice, Spangler, and Agras 2001; Thomsen et al. 2002; Vanden-Buick 2000; Vandenbosch and Eggermont 2012; Vartanian, Giant, and Passino 2001).
Your Thoughts . . .

The makers of Dove soap have initiated a new advertising campaign called "Real Beauty." You can watch it at this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyjGk. The campaign suggests that we do not see our faces in as positive a light as others do. Using some of the ideas suggested in our discussion of body weight misperceptions, explain the Dove “findings.” Are the claims sociological plausible?

BOX 8.2 Second Thoughts About the News: The Barbie Ideal

Since Barbie was introduced in 1959, people have noted that her "ideal" figure may be nothing less than impossible to achieve. Researchers worldwide have examined the issue and found that a 5’6” woman replicating Barbie’s figure, would sport a 27 inch bust, a 20 inch waist, and hips 29 inches—measurements almost unheard of among the general population. Indeed, researchers from the University of South Australia suggest that the odds of finding a woman with Barbie’s proportions are 1 in 100,000. And scholars at Finland’s University Central Hospital in Helsinki point out that such a woman would lack the necessary body fat required for a woman to menstruate (Winterman 2009).

In 2013, artist Nickolay Lamm turned the Barbie issue on its head. Lamm created a Barbie prototype that better approximated the human female body—one based on the CDC’s measurement recommendations for a healthy 19-year-old girl. Lamm has encouraged the Mattel Toy Company to consider manufacturing and selling a more typically sized female image. A “normal” Barbie is still attractive, argues Lamm. Yet this more realistic image holds less potential for encouraging young girls to strive for an unattainable body.

In comparing the traditional and proposed Barbies, what do you think?

Before leaving this discussion of the ideal body, it is important to note that definitions of that ideal can change dramatically as one moves through history or across different racial and ethnic groups. As recently as the 1950s, for example, a Marilyn Monroe-ish figure—5 feet 5 inches and 135 pounds—was forwarded as the American ideal. But just
four decades later, the ideal body slimmed down considerably. Images of the 1990s depict that same 5-foot-5-inch female at under 100 pounds (Fox-Kales 2011; Greenfield 2006; Killbourne 2000; Wolf 2002)! The movement toward thinness is also illustrated in longitudinal studies of beauty icons such as Miss America winners and Playboy centerfolds. Current figures suggest that these icons are approximately 20% thinner than a woman of average size. Indeed, an increasing number of these icons fall within the medically defined range of “undernourished” (Rubinstein and Caballero 2000; see also Martin 2010, and see Bonafini and Pozzilli 2011 for historical analysis of the ideal female body.) But note that such research projects illustrate race-specific standards of attractiveness. For example, African Americans—both men and women—associate fewer negative characteristics with overweight bodies than do Anglo-Americans. Furthermore, in cross-sex relationships, African American males are nearly twice as likely as Anglo-American males to express a preference for heavier females (Gray et al. 2011; Hawkins, Tuff, and Dudley 2006; Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Jackson and McGill 1996; Kronenfeld et al. 2010; Martin 2010; Thompson, Sargent, and Kemper 1996).

Your Thoughts . . .

Think of two public figures that capture today's "ideal" male and female body. How do these images compare to the ideal bodies of earlier eras? Has the historical cultural trajectory changed in any way?

Social feedback on weight and the use of such feedback in identity construction illustrate the utility of Charles Horton Cooley's concept, the looking-glass self. The looking-glass self refers to a process by which individuals use the reactions of other social group members as mirrors by which to view themselves and develop an image of who they are. From Cooley's perspective, individuals who seem unable to “see” their current bodies may be using reactions of the past as their mirrors on the present. Similarly, the use of TV “mirrors” in the definition of self may lead to fun-house-type distortions. The key to accepting one's current body type is collecting appropriate contemporary mirrors and elevating them over those of the past.

If we could wipe the slate clean—start over in a new context—would we change our thinking on physical appearance? Some researchers have asked just that in exploring virtual worlds such as those created in Second Life, an online community. Despite all the hype that promises such sites will create new and better contexts of interaction, the sociocultural patterns surrounding physical attractiveness remain the same. People prefer to date, befriend, and interact with other users whose profiles present physically attractive faces and bodies (Chow et al. 2009; O'Brien and Murnane 2009; Principe and Langlois 2013). Interestingly, however, people are unwilling to “steal” this valuable form of cultural capital. Studies repeatedly show that those who create online images of themselves such as "avatars" tend
to create images that match their actual physical appearance or only minimally improve it (Martey and Consalvo 2011; McCue 2008; Messinger et al. 2008; O’Brien and Murnane 2009; Sung, Moon, and Lin 2011; Taylor 2002).

Thus far, we have discussed the various effects exerted by an individual’s physical appearance. But it is interesting to note that the influence of physical appearance goes beyond the realm of the person. Appearances influence our evaluation of objects as well. Often, we judge the value or goodness of things in accordance with the way they look. Some researchers have discovered, for example, that the architectural style of a home can affect the way in which others describe the atmosphere within the structure. Farmhouses, for instance, are generally identified with trustworthy atmospheres. Colonial-style homes are perceived to be the domains of “go-getters.” And Tudor-style homes are associated with leadership (Freudenheim 1988). And, of course, the great chefs have taught us a similar lesson: Looks equal taste. Thus, great chefs underscore the beauty of food. For the connoisseur, the presentation of the food—the way it looks on the plate—is as important as the flavor.

Such links between an object's appearance and notions of quality or identity are at the heart of the marketing industry. Indeed, in the world of advertising and public relations, “packaging” a product so as to convey the right image is truly the name of the game. A product must be more than good. Its appearance and “story” must lure the consumer. The importance of packaging holds true even when the object is a living thing! Indeed, research shows that “good marketing” can change our perception of an animal's attractiveness and, thus, its desirability. In one set of studies, labeling an animal as an endangered species increased subjects' perceptions of the animal's attractiveness. Once subjects learned that an animal was endangered, animals routinely thought to be ugly were reassessed as cute, majestic, or lovable. This shift in perception is important, because the same study showed that people are more sympathetic to campaigns designed to save physically attractive animals. Like people, being attractive affords an animal with more cultural capital (Gunnthorsdottir 2001; Martín-Forés, Martín-López, and Montes 2013; Tisdell, Wilson, and Nantha 2005).

Is beauty only skin deep? After reviewing research findings on physical attractiveness, we cannot help but view this conventional wisdom with some skepticism. When it comes to evaluating and reacting to others, ourselves, and even inanimate objects, beauty matters. The more attractive the proverbial cover of the book, the more likely we are to value its story.

LEARNING MORE ABOUT IT


In *What's Wrong with Fat? The War on Obesity and its Collateral Damage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Abigail Saguy studies the ways in which fatness have been framed through the decades and shows us that being fat was not always considered a sign of personal weakness or disease.


**GOING ONLINE FOR SOME SECOND THOUGHTS**

The Media Awareness Network provides some interesting discussions of beauty and body image in America. Visit them at http://mediasmarts.ca/body-image.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons provides facts and statistics on who's having cosmetic surgery, why, and where it is most prevalent. Visit its website at http://www.plasticsurgery.org/.

When Jennifer Tress’s husband told her he was leaving her because she wasn’t pretty enough, she did something more than cry! Visit her organization the YNPE Action network at http://www.yourenotprettyenough.com/v2/. There you can watch videos, share your own “beauty” story, and take a pledge to minimize the importance of attractiveness in your life.

First Lady Michelle Obama heads *Let’s Move*, a program devoted to fighting childhood obesity. To learn more about it, visit http://www.letsmove.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity.

**NOW IT’S YOUR TURN**

1. Choose approximately 10 bridal pictures from your local paper. Using conventional cultural standards, choose brides of varying attractiveness. Remove any identifying names and show the pictures you’ve selected to five “judges.” Supply the judges with a 5-point scale, where 5 equals “just right” and 1 equals “inadequate,” and have the judges rate the brides on the following standards:

   - attractive
   - sensual
   - good-humored
   - sophisticated
   - happy
   - successful
   - intelligent
   - trustworthy
   - pretty
   - wealthy

Check the judges’ ratings. Is there any relationship between the answers addressing physical attractiveness and those pertaining to personality characteristics? Now, repeat Exercise 1 using pictures of men from your local newspaper. In
choosing your pictures, be sure to select men who are similarly dressed and of similar ages.

2. For this exercise, you will need to gather 20 to 30 ads that feature both products and people. In making your selections, choose ads for “glamorous” products (perfume, clothing, vacations, and the like), as well as ads for nonglamorous products (antacids, cleansers, insecticides). Analyze the patterns you find (if any) between the type of product being marketed and the attractiveness of the people used in the product’s ad.

3. Review the personal ads in three newspapers: the Village Voice, your local town newspaper, and your college newspaper. Content-analyze 3 days’ worth of ads that feature people. Record all the information about their physical appearances—weight, height, facial characteristics, and so on. What do your data tell you about current appearance norms? Using your data, discuss the similarities and differences in the appearance norms that govern each of these three contexts. Now look at the personal descriptions offered on 10 Facebook sites. Are the appearance norms for cyberspace different from those stressed in the print media?