

Dying to Be Beautiful: The Effects of Media on Young Women and Girls

Annotated Bibliography

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Feng, C. (2002 December 6). Looking Good: The Psychology and Biology of Beauty.” *Journal of Young Investigators*, (6). <https://www.legacy.jyi.org>

In the peer-reviewed science journal article, “Looking Good: The Psychology and Biology of Beauty,” an undergraduate of Human Biology at Stanford University, Feng, gives a historic and scientific look into the perceptions of beauty. First, Feng (2002) suggests that beauty has serious implications, stating that the Trojan War was instigated by Helen of Troy, a very beautiful Spartan queen who was celebrated for her physical perfection. The prominent philosopher, Plato, devoted a great deal of time investigating the definitions of physical attraction, and thus came up with the “golden proportions,” in which “the width of an ideal face would be two-thirds its length, while a nose would be no longer than the distance between the eyes” (Feng). Although these “golden proportions” are not applicable to the definitions of beauty in modern times, the Greeks were not too far off. Today, it has been scientifically proven that symmetry is seen as physically attractive. These scientific studies have even been applied to animals. Feng explains that “[t]he rationale behind symmetry preference in both humans and animals is that symmetric individuals have a higher mate-value; scientists believe that this symmetry is equated with a strong immune system. Thus, beauty is indicative of more robust genes, improving the likelihood that an individual's offspring will survive” (“Symmetry is Attractive,” para. 5). Feng delves deeper by stating that along with symmetry in the face, there is a particular ratio in women’s bodies that a majority of men prefer. However, many of these scientific studies mostly apply to Western culture, and not enough cross-cultural studies have been performed.

However, other studies also show that physical appearance and genes are not the only things that play a role in our view of beauty:

In one study, 70% of college students deemed an instructor physically attractive when he acted in a friendly manner, while only 30% found him attractive when he was cold and distant. Indeed, when surveyed for attributes in selecting a mate, both males and females felt kindness and an exciting personality were more important in a mate than good looks. Thus, to a certain degree, beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. (Feng, 2002, "Beauty and Choosing a Mate," para. 2).

In fact, our views of beauty are also swayed by many factors. He points out a study done by one researcher who pointed out "that [his research] showed that the hourglass-body standard of beauty in women, previously thought to be 'universally' preferred, was in fact likely swayed by advertising" (Feng, 2002, "Beauty and Choosing a Mate," para. 3). This article will be helpful when I talk about both cultural and evolutionary ways in which beauty is judged. (444 words)

James, E.L. (2015). *Grey: Fifty Shades of Grey as Told by Christian*. New York: Vintage.

James is a best-selling, English author. Her notable works are the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels, which have sold over 100 million copies worldwide and set the record in the United Kingdom as the fastest selling paperback of all time. *Grey: Fifty Shades of Grey as Told by Christian* is James' fourth installment of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series. It is a retelling of the events of the first book in the series by the male character, Christian Grey. While the first three installments were known for their controversial themes, such as sexual and domestic abuse, *Grey* introduces a whole new spectrum of offensive themes. Although this insight into the male character's point of view is meant to justify his obsessive, controlling, and manipulative behavior

by revealing a troubled and traumatic childhood, it fails to explain away Christian Grey's attitude toward women. Upon first meeting Anastasia "Ana" Steele, the female protagonist of the series, the superficial judgements toward her outward appearance are laid right out on the table. The most prominent of these observations are the ones that are most frequently mentioned: Ana's flawless, pale skin. In modern mainstream media, Eurocentric beauty standards are what dominate everything from Hollywood films to the covers of magazines. Eurocentric features are typically described as pale or white skin; long, flowing, usually light colored hair; light colored eyes; a long, straight nose; small face; and a slight, thin body. James encompasses these ideas and applies them to her main character, alienating a large majority of her audience. James' novels have been scrutinized for themes that are physically harmful to women, but they should also be criticized for the psychological harm they cause women by perpetuating mainstream media beauty standards and Anglo-centric ideas of beauty. (291 words)

Komar, M. (2016 January 26). *100 years of shaving ads show how we've been tricked into going hairless – photos*. Bustle. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/137072-100-years-of-shaving-ads-show-how-weve-been-tricked-into-going-hairless-photos>.

Komar, a freelance writer who specializes in travel and body positivity, in her article, "100 Years Of Shaving Ads Show How We've Been Tricked Into Going Hairless," sought out to answer the question, "why exactly [do women] spend so much time shaving?" (Komar, 2016). She accomplishes this by going over the history of hair removal ads from the past century. Komar (2016) states that "ads often rely on the emotions of their consumers to sell their ideas, and they pull on strings attached to fear, love, and vanity to create problems that you previously didn't know you had." When old, Victorian dresses went out of style and the Roaring 20s

brought the hem lines of the flappers, “a lot more seemingly-innocent hair was exposed. And with that, an idea of a new problem arose.” The answer to that problem would be the lady razor, which was invented in 1915 by Gillette. In 1922, women’s magazines began to run hair removal ads, advocating that women should protect themselves from embarrassment.

Komar (2016) also points out that in the 1930s, ads preyed on the fears of loneliness, “calling body hair the source of ugliness and lonely misery.” In the 1960s, marketers had to come up with a new, more aggressive approach to advertising, since “this was the age of second-wave [feminism] and free-loving, hairy hippies.” Present day ads focus on a women’s sexuality and make suggestions that a woman should make herself as attractive as she can for a man. Komar states that “even though the notion that women and feminine people don’t *have* to shave should they not want to is getting some mainstream traction in 2016, it’s taken us over a century to get back to this point.” (emphasis original). This article will be useful when I discuss different ways that society pressures women to conform to a specific beauty standard. (311 words)

Sasso, M. (2016 April 11). *Why the skinny body challenges are harmful*. Odyssey.

<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/skinny-body-challenges-harmful>.

In Sasso’s article, “Why The Skinny Body Challenges Are Harmful,” published by *Odyssey*, a social media platform which seeks to democratize media by publishing articles that contain multiple viewpoints and perspectives, she briefly highlights a few of the skinny body challenges, the controversy they have caused, and explains the lack of merit they hold. These skinny body challenges, which are largely aimed at girls through the Internet and social media, are harmful because they have the potential to cause body negativity and self-esteem issues. By accomplishing these challenges, girls can prove their worth and skinniness over the Internet. On

the other hand, if girls are not able to accomplish a challenge, they are meant to believe that they have an undesirable body type. Although there are many body challenges, Sasso (2016) explains the three most commonly shared over social media. The first Sasso describes is the belly button challenge, which “is done by trying to wrap your arm around your waist and touching your belly button.” The collarbone challenge “is done by balancing as many coins as you can fit on your collarbone” (Sasso, 2016). Finally, the iPhone challenge is done by “putting an iPhone across your knees to cover them. If the phone covers both knees, then you pass the skinny challenge” (Sasso, 2016). Sasso goes on to explain that being able to accomplish these challenges has nothing to do with skinniness, but some challenges, like the belly button challenge, largely rely on flexibility. Sasso stresses multiple times in her article that “whether you can or can't do these challenges, these have no correlation with body weight, height, muscle mass, etc.” This article points out a number of ways that young women use to measure themselves in terms of beauty that are both unhealthy and often unreachable, and will be helpful as I discuss the impact of social media in terms of this. (314 words)

TED. (2014, May 8). Jean Kilbourne: *The Dangerous Ways Ads See Women*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8yLaoWybk>.

Kilbourne is internationally recognized for her groundbreaking work on the image of women in advertising and has been studying the subject for over forty years. Although women have been targeted by marketers through advertising since the 1920s, in her lecture, “The Dangerous Ways Ads See Women,” she points out that the image of women in advertising today is worse than ever. According to Kilbourne (2014), “the pressure on women to be thin, young, and beautiful is more intense than ever before” (3:33) Because of tools like Photoshop, women

are constantly faced with unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards. Much like women, men are photoshopped also, but when men are photoshopped, they are made bigger. Kilbourne states that the obsession with thinness is worse than ever because of Photoshop (3:38). Another aspect of Kilbourne's research is the sexual objectification of young women in advertisements. Children are getting a very powerful and very damaging kind of sex education from the media and popular culture, even though "the United States is only developed nation in the world that doesn't teach sex education in its schools" (Kilbourne, 2014, 10:40). Media messages about sex and sexuality often exploit women's bodies and glamorize sexual violence. Girls are encouraged to objectify themselves and to obsess about their sex appeal and appearance at very young ages. These messages shape their gender identity, sexual attitudes and behavior, values, and their capacity for love, connection, and healthy relationships well into adulthood. (237 words)

TED. (2013, October 21). Renee Engeln: *An Epidemic of Beauty Sickness*. [Video file].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63XsokRPV_Y

Engeln, a psychologist and body image researcher at Northwestern University, admits that her inspiration for her research was brought to fruition after listening to her undergraduate students who would obsess over their appearances and their quest to modify their bodies. In her TED Talk, "An Epidemic of Beauty Sickness," Engeln (2013) explains that although there is a legitimate scientific perspective of beauty, which is based largely on symmetry, modern perceptions of beauty have changed drastically. A majority of American women today suffer from, what Engeln has termed, "beauty sickness" (3:47). It can be described as an obsession with appearance, a persistent lack of self-satisfaction with body image, and a strong and relentless drive to achieve beauty, as it is defined by American society. Engeln notes that beauty

sickness is not an affliction specific to women; men are just as susceptible as women, “but women are much more likely to hate their bodies. Women spend more money on beauty, they spend more time on beauty, they are at 10 times greater risk for anorexia and bulimia” (3:53). Engeln claims that it is impossible to engage with the world while chronically monitoring one’s body’s appearance: “When you are beauty sick, you cannot engage with the world, because between you and the world is a mirror. And it’s a mirror that travels with you everywhere; you can’t seem to put it down” (11:10).

Finally, Engeln’s (2013) suggestion to turn the tide against beauty sickness is to invest less in beauty. For example, if watching shows like *America’s Next Top Model* or reading magazines like *Cosmo* makes people think more about their appearance, stop watching/reading. She also suggests limiting mirror time, much like a parent limits their child’s screen time, and “[s]top worrying about the size of your thighs, and think about the strength of your thighs, because those legs, after all, are the legs that walk you around in the world. And stop talking about your upper arms as though they are *‘diseased’*. Those are the arms that reach out and bring the things you love close to you” (emphasis original, Elgin, 2013, 13:31). This article provides support for the idea that there is a dark side to the desire for beauty and will be helpful in defining some of the terms and in explaining both what can go wrong as well as ways to combat that. (472 words)