

Part I: Introduction and Statement of Problem

The human fascination with beauty is and has always been a prominent aspect of our society, and of humanity as a whole. Beauty is broadly defined as a collection of qualities in a person or element that gives pleasure to the senses, mind or spirit or a particularly graceful, ornamental, or excellent quality by Merriam Webster's dictionary. These qualities reflect many facets of society beyond just physical appearance. Anything from a work of art, to an imperfection, to personality can fall under this definition, and be embraced by it. Intelligence, characteristics, situations and any tangible or intangible thing that one finds to be pleasing can be considered beautiful on this definition.

We have historical, sexual, artistic, and natural ideas about beauty that drive our interpretations. These are all aspects of beauty and they help to form our definition. The society we have built embraces beauty as perfection, not as a conglomerate of these rich aspects. Perfection is defined by Merriam Webster's dictionary as the quality or state of being free from fault or an unsurpassable degree of accuracy or excellence. This definition seems much less attainable than that of beauty, despite the fact that they have become synonymous. In the natural world beauty and attraction play a crucial role in sexual selection and therefore reproduction. However in the context of society we lose the depth that beauty offers, and focus upon perfection. Beauty, and therefore perfection, signifies positivity and status to humans. Over time we have created an expectation of perfection, this is what drives our interpretations of and desire for beauty.

Impossible expectations drive and distort beauty. This type of principle is harmful mentally as well as physically. Pressures to meet our standard of perfection can lower self esteem and push people to utilize physically or mentally harmful means to "beauty" such as steroids,

plastic surgery, anorexia, bulimia, and the like. Though we target both men and women, the pressure to be perfect, and the features required for this “perfection” are prominent and concerning in their effects on women. Our obsession has led us down a road, whose reality is not nearly as pretty as the face it presents, the faces that we can only dream to possess. Society pressures us to be perfect, but this is an unattainable goal that has a negative impact on us all.

Part II: Review of Literature and Past Research

Our fascination with beauty stems from biology and nature. Instinct drives us to find the most ideal mate and reproduce. Despite some controversy related to the evolution of humans, it is important to consider how we act in a naturalistic sense. Humans are animals, and research by scientists such as Charles Darwin shows how our actions are closely related to the biological need to reproduce. Sexual selection is the process in nature through which animals compete for mates. In many animals this is done through showy displays on the part of the males, in hopes of attracting a female. Charles Darwin explains the role of sexual selection, “This depends, not on a struggle for existence, but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females.” (Darwin) Possession of, and therefore reproduction with females is the aim. This extends beyond just males; females are equally driven to reproduce by natural instinct and equally competitive.

The struggle for reproduction is the basis for our appreciation of beauty. Dennis Dutton, a philosophy professor and author of “The Art Instinct” explored how humans are attracted to beauty and how beauty and art help us to survive because they are an aspect of sexual selection. “Now, I personally have no doubt whatsoever that 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.” (Dutton) Beauty and our desire and appreciation for it stems from our natural instinct to mate. The process through which we select

mates, and the way that we perceive beauty can be closely linked to sexual selection. Through sexual selection comes the struggle to present oneself in the most appealing way to members of the opposite sex. Over time this selection and presentation have greatly evolved. Humans of both sexes constantly struggle to prove themselves to the opposite sex as successful and capable. We strive to prove this to members of our own sex as well as another show of our sexual success. This change over time has expanded to encompass not only sexual selection, but our overall ideals regarding beauty. (Dutton)

Our attraction to beauty is clear, but why exactly do we perceive some faces or some people as more attractive than others? Discovery Chanel's Science of Sex Appeal discusses an array of studies that look at this in depth. Scientist Lisa Debrine of the University of Aberdeen, Scotland discusses how humans are more attracted to symmetrical faces and bodies because they indicate good genetics and health. When babies are exposed to any infection or small genetic imperfections in the womb they can develop slightly asymmetrical features. People are imperfect; the two sides of our faces are never quite the same. However the closer we are to symmetry the more attractive we are perceived to be. Humans genetically and instinctually prefer people who are more symmetrical because of the link to health. In a study performed at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland in one of the leading face research labs in the world, a man and a women were photographed and digitally altered so that one image was perfectly symmetrical, and one image was exaggeratedly asymmetrical. 8 out of 10 men and women preferred the symmetrical faces. They found these faces more pleasant to look at, attributed more positive personalities to these faces, thought they were in better health and took better care of themselves than the exaggeratedly asymmetrical faces. (Discovery Channel)

There is an apparent link between overall health and fertility, and this is what we are in search of on a biological level. When someone has clearer skin, we view them as more attractive because this is such a good display of health. Ben Jones from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and Karl Grammer from the University of Vienna in Austria have both done extensive research into skin health and how it portrays overall health. Jones notes that subjects prefer blemish free skin, with an even skin tone and a healthy glow, rather than an unhealthy looking pallor. Grammer's research has shown that higher levels of hormones create more feminine or masculine features, but also increase susceptibility to infection. Therefore, in order for an adult to have clear skin, their immune system must be very strong. (Discovery Channel)

Our basic perceptions of beauty rely on many factors driven by the need to reproduce with the best mate. This is shown through studies that focus on the femininity and masculinity of how people look, and how it changes others perceptions of their attractiveness. Lisa Debrine of the University of Aberdeen digitally combined 60 female and 60 male faces to find commonalities in each gender. Women who produce more estrogen have more feminine features, their eyes are higher on their faces, their jaws are smaller and more rounded, their hairlines are more rounded, their eyes are larger, and their eyebrows are higher and thinner. This is more attractive for a woman because she looks more feminine which is caused by higher levels of hormones, and her being fertile. This is attractive to men because it symbolizes a good potential mate. Conversely, men who produce more testosterone look more masculine. This includes lower and thicker eyebrows, more squared jaws and hairlines, longer faces, and more muscular builds. A stronger dose of sexual hormones during puberty is what leads to good health and fertility, and visual displays of this health such as symmetry and more masculinity or femininity. (Discovery Channel) Just as a more feminine female is seen as more attractive and a better mate, a more

masculine male is also more attractive, and more appealing as someone to reproduce with.

Douglas Kenrick of Arizona State University explains that what we view as attractive is good genes, and reproductively healthy individuals. (Discovery Channel)

Beauty and aesthetics have been linked to many aspects of the human existence such as sex, love, and status. (Beigel) Beauty is of a sexual nature, and human relationships encompass both sex and love. Status, on the other hand is much more variable. “It is the interpretation of bodily features in ideological terms that accounts also for the variability of beauty. For all its multiformity, the human appearance has remained fairly stable over the centuries. The prevailing ideology of the ruling class-to the extent to which ideas can be represented by the flesh, its coverings, and its ornamentation-the standard of beauty underwent modifications as new elements infiltrated the top stratum.” (Beigel) Status extends beyond just the natural. We expect and portray those with status to be beautiful. Our celebrities are portrayed as perfect, and as the aspiration we should all hold. Status is a symbol of beauty and beauty is a symbol of status.

Beauty is not only associated with reproduction, but also with the perceptions we have of people and how we treat them. In nearly every situation the beautiful are preferred. “In large part, the beautiful person can attribute his or her idyllic life to a puzzling phenomenon that social scientists have dubbed the “halo effect.” It defies human reason, but if you resemble Jane Fonda or Paul Newman in their prime it’s assumed that you’re more generous, trustworthy, sociable, modest, sensitive, interesting, and sexually responsive than the rest of us. Conversely, if you’re somewhat physically unattractive, because of the “horns effect” you’re stigmatized as being mean, sneaky, dishonest, antisocial, and a poor sport to boot.” (Henslin) Beauty not only brings opportunity, but a whole host of assumptions about one’s personality. In fact, a study was conducted in which people were shown photographs of either typically unattractive or attractive

children, and then told about some bad action that the child had committed. They were then asked to describe how they would deal with the situation, how bad it was, etc. The results were definitive. The people with photographs of typically attractive children were forgiving, understanding, and less likely to have harsh consequences, if any for the child's behavior. The people with unattractive photos, on the other hand responded in nearly the opposite manner. They were unforgiving, unkind, and much more likely to enforce punishment. (Henslin) If we are willing to treat children in this way, we are likely to treat everyone this way. "Good-looking people are more readily admitted to social circles, they are preferred for employment over others with equal abilities, they are often judged less severely." (Beigel)

Beauty has intermingled so extensively with our culture that there is barely a distinction between the natural and the social pieces to this puzzle. We are socialized to want and value beauty. Women are pressured to be excruciatingly thin, and to enhance their natural features to the point of surgical alteration. Men are socialized to be muscular and thoroughly masculine. (Henslin) In addition, both sexes are socialized to expect these traits in each other. We prefer people of the opposite sex who are attractive, and who seem to meet the expectations of society.

Naomi Wolf brings the struggle with perfection and sexism in relation to the working environment into perspective, "So women dress to be businesslike yet feminine-walk the moving line, and inevitably fail: from two thirds to almost nine tenths of them experience sexual harassment that they blame on themselves and their poor control of their appearance. Can women say, by way of their appearance at work, what they mean? No." (Wolf) Our perfection oriented ideals are not only distorted representations of beauty itself, but they are also an opportunity to objectify women and sexually harass them. This uniform perfection that we strive

for is not really “perfection” in itself. Perhaps the image seems flawless, but it opens doors for objectification and magnification of sexual inequalities. (Wolf, Brumberg, Faludi)

Our societal demands for perfection affect every aspect of life, and begin early on. It is clear that even middle school aged children are affected by this, and pressure one another to be perfect. An instance of this enforcement can be seen in cheerleading. At tryouts for a squad girls were judged harshly based upon appearance, and some turned down for not looking good enough, or being thin enough. This clearly pressures young, barely developed, or undeveloped girls to feel the pressure to look like models. (Henslin)

Although perhaps our perceptions of beauty are changing, they are still nearly impossible to meet. They still call for perfection. “The U.S. population is growing, changing, mixing in new ways - more people are in interracial relationships and more identify as multiracial than ever. Those realities change the way women, especially, look at others, themselves and the idea of the “all-American beauty,” if there is such a thing.” (Springer) We have simply moved on to include a wider variety of impossible characteristics that will still never naturally exist together. “Out of 2,000 people who responded to an Allure Magazine poll in 2011, 73% of women said they find curvier bodies more attractive now than they did over the last 10 years. People polled said they wanted larger lips, butts and hips.” (Springer) Despite this slight positive change, women still tend to idolize young teen models. Women should not be idolizing teens. The body types of women and the body types of pre-teens are clearly different, we should not be idolizing something we cannot go back to. “Using 15-year-old girls to represent the ideal woman makes me think that a woman of 25, 30, 40 years old looks at those billboards and at a magazine and is looking at girls ... disguised as women promoting clothing for women,” she said. “You can’t ever go back to being 15.” States model, Rachel Blais in an interview with CNN. (Springer)

The distorted standards that we hold ourselves to are becoming increasingly illusive as cultures merge. There are standards of beauty in every culture; different people will always judge you a little differently. “There was no way to get it right, if you can walk through many different worlds at once, you can be judged by many different standards at once,” says Maya Poran in an interview with CNN. (Springer) We hold ourselves to the standard of looking like a perfect pre-teen, and a multitude of races each with their own opinions of beauty judge us daily. Why are our visions of beauty so narrow? We have developed a societal preference for a Caucasian standard of beauty. This is equally wrong, as different races have different body types. Beauty is complex, and our definitions of it have grown so twisted that they exclude everyone somehow. Even models are nothing in the eyes of our standard without Photoshop and makeup. (Springer)

Beauty has developed a narrow definition in our society. Nancy Etcoff elaborates, “The default definition of beauty has shriveled pitifully. The contributions of the ear, the intellect, the broader aesthetic faculty or the moral sensibilities are gone. Beauty is visual; in fact, it is the same visual – the eye popping features and stunning proportions of a few handpicked beauty icons” (Etcoff) Beauty is an impossible standard in society today, we have taken it beyond the attainable and created something we can only dream of in reality. “The last fifty years have witnessed an interesting paradox. Beauty – as an idea and an ideal – has moved away from being the exclusive province of the Hollywood dream factory, of fashion models and the young bride, to become an essential attribute to which women of all ages need to pay heed.” States Dr. Suzie Orbach in her introduction to the Dove study of beauty. (Etcoff) The transformation of our beauty ideals over time has brought us to the place we are now.

The problem we encounter with beauty is that we view it as perfection. People are well aware that they are not perfect, which lowers their self esteem. Beauty is something that very few

feel they possess to a full extent. (Etkoff) Dove conducted an extensive study of 3,200 women in 10 countries ranging in age from 18 to 64. The women were interviewed about their perceptions of beauty and how it applied to them. The concept of beauty that not only America, but the rest of the world has built is seen as unattainable, however it still seems to be our goal, especially in women. (Etkoff)

Beauty is not something that women identify with. Women strive for it, but very few feel that they have actually attained it, or that they are truly beautiful. “By an overwhelming majority, women around the world are most comfortable using the words natural (31%) or average (29%) to describe their looks. Only 2% of women around the world choose beautiful to describe their looks, fewer even than choose “attractive” (9%), “feminine” (8%), “good-looking” (7%) or “cute” (7%).” Analysis reveals that this lack of identification with “beautiful” holds across all age groups, with only 4% of 18-29 year-olds choosing “beautiful” as a word to describe their looks. (Etkoff) Women draw a clear connection between how attractive they feel, and generally how they feel about themselves. “Importantly, almost half of all women (48%) strongly agree (8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale) with the statement that: “When I feel less beautiful, I feel worse about myself in general,” clearly illustrating the impact these feelings can have on overall self-esteem and happiness.” (Etkoff)

Perceptions of one’s own beauty are certainly affected by society, and by the way we see beauty in relation to others. Mass media and popular culture give us a clear definition of beauty, and have a large impact on the way we all view it. Beauty and physical attractiveness are both a part of this. “Furthermore, both are seen as highly valued by society, but, at the same time, rendered almost impossible to attain.” (Etkoff) Beauty is socially mandated, and expected. Women agree that they are expected to be attractive, and to enhance their attractiveness. “45% of

all women strongly agree that women who are more beautiful have greater opportunities in life. And more than half of women (59%) strongly agree that physically attractive women are more valued by men.” (Etcoff) Beauty and our perceptions of it are based in ourselves, as well as in society, and relationships. Women who are more attractive are better off in status, relationships, jobs, self esteem and overall happiness. (Etcoff)

Women are challenged by the goal of perfection, and by the narrow definition of beauty that we have developed. “This idea of beauty appears to have been replaced by a narrower definition that is largely located in limited ideals of physical appearance. It appears that the word “beauty” has – in many ways – become functionally defined as “physical attractiveness.” This definition of beauty is powerfully communicated through the mass media and has been assimilated through popular culture. It is this ideal that many women measure themselves against and aspire to attain. However, because this ideal is extremely difficult to achieve, women find it difficult to think of themselves as beautiful.” (Etcoff)

Although the western ideal of beauty has negative impacts upon those of us living in a western culture, the extremity is made even clearer when a completely different culture is exposed to our beauty ideals. (Becker) In the 1990’s Fiji was still secluded from western culture and ideals, however when television was introduced and the women were exposed to western principles of beauty disturbing changes took place in their society. “In 1998 compared with 1995. In 1998, 74 percent of the girls reported feeling "too big or fat" at least sometimes. Those who watched TV at least three nights per week were 50 percent more likely to see themselves as too fat and 30 percent more likely to diet, although the more frequent TV watchers were not more overweight. And 62 percent of Fijian high school girls in 1998 reported dieting in the past month, a comparable or even higher proportion than reported in American samples.” (Becker) Prior to

this, Fiji's standards for beauty celebrated larger women, and embraced eating as a prevalent and important aspect of the culture. Within only 38 months of TV being introduced women in Fiji were drastically affected by western culture. (Becker)

Many people consider or utilize a multitude of ways to change their appearance and to enhance their natural assets. People strive to dress in a way that will get them noticed, and make them appear to be more physically attractive. This fight for perfection has extremes. Humans want so badly to have perfection that we are willing to do whatever it takes. (Dittmann, Henslin, MAYO Clinic) Both women and men in our society subject themselves to extremes such as eating disorders, steroids, and cosmetic surgeries in search of beauty.

Eating Disorders are a prominent issue in our society, and a connection can be made between this and our culture's obsession with perfection. About 8 million Americans have some sort of eating disorder, 7 million of these Americans are women. (Eating Disorders) These life threatening diseases stem from the want for a perfect body and for control, status, and respect from others. "According to the National Eating Disorders Association, the average American woman is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds. The average American model is 5 feet 11 inches tall and weighs 117 pounds. All too often, society associates being "thin", with "hard-working, beautiful, strong and self-disciplined." On the other hand, being "fat" is associated with being "lazy, ugly, weak and lacking will-power." (Body Image) Although many factors go into the development of eating disorders, expectations set by society encourage women and men to be thin. This constant social pressure can easily establish insecurities that can lead to eating disorders. Our idea of beauty should not be encouraging serious mental illnesses. (Body Image)

Recreational and cosmetic use of steroids tends to be based either in the want to perform better in athletics, or for the sake of looks alone. Men are encouraged to be muscular and fit,

which in turn encourages use of steroids and body building products. Although this can increase one's image of self, it is also illegal. Anabolic steroids are one of the most common steroids used for increasing muscle mass. They increase the user's production of testosterone, and so produce masculine traits. Both men and women taking steroids develop much more masculine traits such as deeper voice. Across the board use of steroids puts one at risk for infertility, high blood pressure, heart problems, aggression, depression, and dependence on the steroids along with a host of other possible physical and mental health problems. (MAYO Clinic)

When an individual has a physical imperfection that they feel gets in the way of perfection, and of beauty they want to change it. We have the option to change ourselves with cosmetic procedures, and many people do. Although cosmetic surgery can sometimes boost self esteem there are many negative health impacts that accompany it. 11.9 million cosmetic procedures were conducted in the last year in the United States alone. (Dittmann) The number of cosmetic procedures has only increased over time. It increased by 44% from 2003 to 2004, and continues to do so. (Dittmann) Cosmetic procedures are increasing in popularity due to the media. Women and men see images in magazines, on television, and everywhere around them. These images of what is ideal are not natural, this causes people to question the way that they look, and to want a procedure that will enhance their image.

Cosmetic surgeries and procedures are largely encouraged by the media, and are proven to increase self esteem and positive self image when they go well. However people can easily develop unrealistic expectations, and be disappointed with a procedure which leads to a decrease in self esteem and sometimes lower quality of life. "The National Cancer Institute found in 2001 that women with breast implants were four times more likely to commit suicide than other plastic surgery patients of the same age." (Dittmann) Cosmetic procedures can cause much more harm

than good. Complications include, but are not limited to extensive scarring, blood clots, and infection. (Ray) Though complications can be serious, such massive increases in suicide in relation to plastic surgery make it clear that these procedures are not safe, and are not positive influences physically or mentally.

Part III: Methodology

A survey was distributed in order to further understanding of the way that our culture perceives beauty and strives for perfection. This survey was comprised of two photographs of women. The first displayed a woman who represents the classical idea of beauty. She had a symmetrical face, feminine features, a healthy appearance, looked like she took good care of herself, and was Caucasian. The second photograph was a Caucasian woman as well; however her features were much less symmetrical, her skin looked unhealthy, she was slightly overweight, had on no makeup, and looked like she took less care of herself.

The general American public was the population focused on through this research. Although the majority of subjects were from Durango, Colorado simply because they were more accessible, the remainder were from other regions of the United States of America. The population varied in age, level of education, ethnicity, and gender. The sample size was 100, and the first respondents to the survey were used for the research. This sample is representative of the population because of the variety in subjects. This research was random because it was conducted anonymously online. The issues with this research are the small sample size, and the opportunity for respondents to not take the survey seriously. This sample will show a fairly accurate representation of the American population; however it is variable.

The tool that was used to gather this data was an online survey, conducted using Survey Monkey. This allowed for a wider variety of individuals reached, and so a better representation

of the population. The survey was designed to measure people's perceptions of personality based upon beauty. Five questions were multiple choice or open ended with a clear answer. Each of these questions allowed me to gather the demographics of gender, age, level of education, ethnicity, and location. The final two questions however were open ended, and simply asked for personality descriptions of two individuals. Open ended questions have a much larger margin for error, but can still gather useful data. It asked, "Please describe the personality of the person in the photograph. Please include your general feelings about the subjects and describe personality and character traits such as kindness, disrespectfulness, trustworthiness etc." This was strong in its specificity to personality, but weak in that it would be easy to answer in a way that is not applicable or helpful to the research. Furthermore, the research was analyzed simply by classifying responses as positive or negative based on the number of positive or negative traits they listed for each image. This allowed for consideration of all thoughtful and complete responses.

This research posed minimal ethical concerns, as it was comprised only of asking questions. The risk of participants was minimized further since it was online, and therefore required voluntarily participation. Subjects were informed of the nature of the research before the survey, and could terminate it at any time. Informed consent was also mandated by the online format. Risk of physical harm was impossible, and risk of psychological harm was very low. No questions in the survey target participants personally, they merely ask for an opinion which keeps risk of harm minimal. Furthermore, confidentiality and anonymity were utilized since the survey took place online. The most information gathered about any individual was basic demographics, which cannot be traced to one individual.

Because all of the data collected was through an online survey, all participants are equal in the level of reliability that can be expected from them. Taking the survey at all, however, requires a time commitment which signifies some reliability, and reason that participants took the survey seriously. Furthermore, only fully complete surveys were used, so no participant whose data was used skipped any of the questions which also increases reliability. There are not realistic reasons to lie about any of the information given in this survey, so the validity of this data is fairly high.

The research process was straightforward and dependent mostly upon distribution of the survey. Firstly, creation of the survey itself was key. The demographic questions were simple to include, and the phrasing of the other questions was easy as well. Finding two photographs that accurately represent an ideally beautiful person and an unattractive person was a challenge. Stock photography websites are the best sources to find photographs of this kind without additional distracting factors. This survey was distributed through personal websites, email, Facebook, and teachers directly to students. The vast majority were reached via email.

Part IV: Results

The 100 respondents to this survey provided demographics as well as their responses to the content questions included in the survey. These demographics showed the majorities in each category. Out of 100 participants 57% were female, and 43% were male. 57% of participants were under 18, but at least high school age. The remaining participants were spread out across age groups to more of an extent. 19% were aged 18 to 24, 8% were 25 to 34, 6% were 35 to 44, 4% were 45 to 54, 5% were 55 to 64 and 1% were aged 75 or older. This was expected, as a majority of subjects were in high school. 70% of participants had completed some high school, 3% had graduated from high school, 1% had completed one year of college, 1% had completed 3 years of

college, 8% had graduated from college, 3% had completed some graduate school, and 14% had completed graduate school. Race was much less varied, which was likely to happen because of the population exposed to the survey. 96% of participants were Caucasian, and 4% were another race. 89% of subjects were from Durango, Colorado, United States, and 11% were from a variety of other locations. See graphs of all data in relation to perception in the Appendix.

Overall when the data based upon perception was isolated it showed that generally the attractive woman was generally rated positively, while the more unattractive woman was generally rated more negatively. The attractive image was rated positively by 75% of participants, and negatively by 25% of participants. The unattractive image, on the other hand, was rated positively by only 5% of participants, and rated negatively by the remaining 95% of participants.

When analyzed in relation to one another the demographics of gender, age, and level of education all showed trends in relation to positive and negative responses to the two photographs. However, over 90% of subjects were Caucasian and lived in La Plata County, for this reason trends were less likely to be accurate in these categories, although they were present.

The category of gender showed clear distinctions between male and female perceptions of the two images. Females rated the first image nearly half negatively and half positively, while 100% of males rated it positively. Conversely, nearly 100% of females rated the second image negatively, and 90% of males rated it negatively. See figure 1.

Age varied from under 18 to older than 75, and this range showed clear difference in ratings of the two images. Participants aged older than 24 were far fewer than younger participants, which made trends harder to determine, and less accurate. However, the age categories of under 18, and 18 to 24 were much larger. Of the 18 and under age bracket, 74% rated the first image as positive, and 96% of participants rated the second image as negative. The

age bracket of 18 to 24 was decisive as well with 75% of participants rating the first image positively, and nearly 100% rating the second image negatively. See figure 2.

Although participants were given a wide range of options for level of education these were pooled into the categories of High School, College, and Graduate School. Participants marked their highest level of education, so each category includes subjects who have completed some High School, College, or Graduate school as well as those who have completed a given category fully. Students in the high school category rated image one 100% positively, and image two 93% negatively. College students, on the other hand rated image one and image two 100% negatively. Graduate school students rated image one about 75% negatively, and image two 100% negatively. See figure 3.

Although the category of race was less conclusive because of the vast majority of Caucasian respondents, there were still apparent trends. Of the Caucasian participants 90% rated image one positively, and nearly 90% rated image two negatively. Subjects of other races varied widely and so were combined into one “other” category in order to simplify analysis and comprehension of data. This category rated image one and two 90% negatively. See figure 4.

Location had a vast majority of participants from the Durango and La Plata County areas, of 96%, the remaining 4% of participants were from other locations, these were compiled into one category to simplify data analysis. Of the La Plata County participants 74% rated image one positively, and 100% rated image two negatively. The participants from other locations rated both image one and two 100% positively. See figure 5.

Part V: Discussion and Analysis of Findings

Of the many factors that contribute to our perceptions of beauty and expectations for perfection our natural instincts and reproductive impulses contribute greatly to our basic desire

for beauty. Sexual selection drives these basic instinctual desires for beauty in ourselves and others. Beauty and our appreciation for it are rooted in this intuition, so it is a part of us. This visual cue of health and fertility is the basis of beauty. It is because of this natural tendency to appreciate beauty, and to see it as appealing that we have such complex views of beauty and such a position for it within society.

Our natural desire to find the best partner and reproduce fuels a desire for beauty, and certainly encourages an endeavor for perfection. We all display cues of reproductive health, or unhealthiness. These factors such as good skin, symmetrical features, and more masculine or feminine traits are what we look for, and what we aim for. Modern society allows us to enhance the natural traits we have in hopes of looking our best. This is where we advance beyond the naturalistic.

Socialization plays a large role in how we perceive beauty, and what we expect of ourselves and others. Our society imposes beauty as perfection, and the roles we are pressured to fill are present because of socialization. Throughout life we are all socialized through media and social situations. Young girls being exposed to an expectation of perfection are not benefited in any way by this. Middle school aged girls are routinely exposed to this and expected to look like models. This is unhealthy to developing young women as it lowers self esteem and encourages unhealthy behavior. As women age there is an increased expectation to look perfect, and feminine. However, this becomes nearly impossible in professional life where women are simultaneously encouraged to be feminine, and sexually harassed. This causes women to devalue themselves and can discourage them in their work.

Although expectations of women are much more diverse racially than they were in the past, there is still the issue of perfection. We now have conflicting views from different races,

which is not only confusing for women, but even more impossible to meet. This tension is prevalent; however there are still majorities that pose their own problems. The bulk of media portrayal of ideal women shows extremely thin, Caucasian women. Not only are these images an impossible standard because of race and the fact that they are photo-shopped and altered, but they portray models. Most models are in their teens, many between 13 and 15. At this age girls are not fully developed, but fully developed women are comparing themselves to these girls dressed up like women. This is unnatural, and an unsafe standard.

The definition of beauty that we hold today is too narrow. It holds us all to an impossible standard of perfection. Beauty is the goal we are given, however it is unattainable which leads to low self esteem. We are well aware of the impossibility of perfection, but this only increases the mental toll it takes on us.

When television was introduced in Fiji in the mid 90s girls developed eating disorders and negative body images in a very short period of time. The extent to which this damaged their culture was substantial. This should show us that there is something very wrong in our own society. Perfection is not a human trait, and when we pressure people to attain it we encourage negative impacts like eating disorders and negative body image. This is apparent in our acceptance of steroids, cosmetic procedures and even eating disorders. Perfection as an aim lowers self esteem, which is negative for all of society.

Beauty and aesthetics are a large aspect of status in our society. Beauty is seen as positive not only because it shows that we are reproductively and generally healthy, but also because it has been associated with status. The rich, famous, and powerful are portrayed as beautiful, and as perfect. This aspect of status is based upon how we portray natural beauty, as well as how we

surround ourselves with beautiful things. We have come to associate beauty with success, and so we strive for a level of perfection that is impossible, even with the help of unnatural procedures.

Beauty is associated with status and with positivity. More attractive individuals provoke more positive responses in others, and are thought to be better than others and more deserving of good treatment simply because of their physical appearance. This has a negative impact upon society because it encourages us to focus only on physical appearance, and less on important features such as intelligence.

Based upon the survey conducted for this paper it is clear that, overall, people think positively of a more “attractive” individual, and both men and women seem to judge “less attractive” individuals in a negative way. However, men were much less judgmental of the attractive individual. Age showed roughly the same trends as the overall data except in the 18-24 age bracket for image one. In this category a large majority rated the first image negatively. Education showed similar results: both the high school category and the graduate school category were in line with the general results, however the college and graduate school groups rated image one almost 100% negatively. Race and Location had such large majorities that the trends they showed were not significant enough to draw conclusions.

Part VI: Conclusion

Humans want to be as beautiful as possible, however this obsession has gone too far. We strive for success, status, power, and acceptance. Because we allow beauty to govern us to such an extent, it has a powerful position in our society. This influence we have given to beauty, along with our definition of what it is, has brought us to the conclusion that beauty is perfection.

Although throughout history humans have always tried to be beautiful, we have now distorted its meaning. We do celebrate beauty, but it is not a broad enough appreciation. Beauty should not

just be a measure of how perfect someone looks. It should be a celebration of the unique and imperfect, and it should not be a comparison to others. We do not simply accept it and commemorate it, we are obsessed with it. Infatuated with perfection, with the narrow, impossible standards we have set, we are in a constant fight with nature to be more than perfect: to reach the unattainable.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Gender

Figure 2

Age

Figure 3

Level of Education

Figure 4

Race

Figure 5

Location