

Adolescent Females and the Beauty Obsession

by

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the opinions and perceptions of a probability sample of adolescent females living in east central Kansas. Subjects were asked to list the qualities that make a young woman popular at their school, a question about what is the most difficult thing about being female in contemporary society, and a question about what they would change about themselves if they could. They were also asked to rate themselves on fourteen characteristics, one of which was attractiveness. These results strongly support the importance of physical attractiveness in their lives. The most frequently occurring quality associated with popularity of females listed by these respondents was physical attractiveness, the second most frequently occurring complaint about being female was being judged by others based on attractiveness, and the most frequently occurring change respondents would make with themselves was to be more attractive. Finally, subjects rated themselves lower on the attractiveness quality that they did for any of the other thirteen qualities. Possible reasons for the persistence of the "beauty obsession" even after several decades of feminism are presented and strategies for resistance and change are discussed.

A stubborn and disturbing reality of American culture is the continued and pervasive emphasis placed on female beauty. That this emphasis with its harmful consequences continues to exist despite the progressive changes in gender

roles that have occurred in areas such as education, employment, and law is a problem that deserves scrutiny. This paper will explore some of the literature related to female attractiveness. It will also report the results of a survey administered to a random sample of adolescent females living in the Flint Hills region of east central Kansas documenting the heightened importance of physical attractiveness for these young women. The paper will conclude by listing possible explanations for the persistent importance of female attractiveness even after decades of feminism and by suggesting action that can counter the harmful effects of a world obsessed with appearance.

The importance of physical attractiveness for women in American culture has been well-documented in the literature (Herman, Zanna, and Higgins 1986; Orenstein 1994; Wolf 1991). In her recent bestseller, Pipher (1994) argues that a ubiquitous and powerful media, combined with the relentless influences of school-based peer cultures, have hoisted on adolescent girls a narrow and obsessive view of beauty. She argues, based on years of clinical practice with adolescent girls that this definition of beauty and the pressure to achieve it undermines their physical and psychological health and circumvents their ability to achieve a diversity of potentials, restricting them to a confined definition of what it means to be female.

The researchers mentioned above have documented a portrayal of beauty that depicts the ideal female as young, long-legged, tall, and very slender. Fashion models that adorn many teen's and women's magazines, TV shows, and movies, set a standard of beauty and thinness that is unhealthy, if not impossible to attain (See Levine and Smolak 1996). Unger and Crawford (1996, p. 116) state, "A look at current issues of magazines or an evening in front of your TV will show you how much sexism persists

in spite of twenty years of feminism." They lament an increased media focus on female beauty, a narrowing of the definition of what it means to be beautiful, and the commodification of the female body for commercial gain.

Reporting the results of their field research, Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) find that physical attractiveness is one of the most powerful forms of "social currency" that allows school-aged females to purchase the youth subculture's most prized commodity, popularity. This finding supports not only the observations of others about the realities of the American youth subculture (Eder and Parker 1987), but cross-cultural research documenting the importance of attractiveness for females throughout much of the world (See Robertson 1987, p. 225-6).

Pipher argues that the pressure to accept a definition of femininity based not only on a narrow and difficult-to-achieve standard of beauty, but also on the premise that girls should be pleasing to others at the expense of being true to themselves, intensifies at the onset of puberty. At this time young women are confronted with the contradictory pressures to be either authentic or scripted. She states:

With puberty, girls face enormous cultural pressure to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements and movies. It comes from peers. Girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by peers, or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable. Most girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public they become who they are supposed to be. (p. 38)

This description corresponds with Mead's (1934) claim that the human self consists of two components: the *me* and the *I*, where the *me* represents the socially constructed component of self that results from the socialization process and conforms to societal expectations. The *I*, on the other hand, represents the spontaneous, creative, and unrestrained component of self that is unique and authentic. Mead argued that both are important, and that achieving a healthy balance between the two is essential for both personal development and social stability. Without the *me* society would not be possible; without the *I* individuality would not be possible. In this regard, the research suggests that cultural pressures often impose an unbalanced self on adolescent girls with the *me* overwhelming the *I*.

That this socially defined self is one that evaluates itself primarily on appearance reappears in Pipher's clinical studies. Consider her narrative about Cayenne, one of her clients:

When she says "Let's face it, I'm a dog," she is accepting society's right to define her solely on the basis of her appearance. She is even defining herself that way. . . . As she adopts a false self, Cayenne loses her confidence and calmness. She loses her clear, direct speech. She distances herself from her parents, who encourage her to remain true to her self. Her surface behavior and her deeper feelings are not congruent. She no longer behaves in a way that meets her true needs. (p. 38)

This statement reflects the fact that many young women evaluate themselves on appearance and, because they cannot live up to an impossible standard, they find themselves lacking.

Pipher connects abandoning the authentic self and internalizing the scripted self based on looks with mental health problems, particularly depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, promiscuity, and suicide. She argues that girls can achieve a healthy balance by reconnecting with their families and by neutralizing the cultural influences exerted by the media and peers.

The results of survey research on adolescent girls reported here lend support to the research cited previously indicating that above all else most young women wish to be beautiful (or more beautiful) even if they recognize and dislike the cultural pressure to be so, and that young women tend to evaluate themselves as unattractive. The results are consistent with Adler, Kless, and Adler's (1992) finding that variables associated with physical attractiveness among females (fashionable clothing and beauty) are among the most important determinants of popularity in the youth subculture. This study provides a look at the lives of adolescent girls living in Middle America. It explores some of the most prevalent yet disturbing characteristics of the youth subculture, a subculture that Hersch (1998) documents as harmful to adolescents and invisible to adults.

Methods

In the spring of 1996 a survey questionnaire was administered to a random sample of Flint-Hills-area adolescent young women ages twelve to eighteen. The author directed the design, construction, and administration of the survey project with assistance from students enrolled in his upper-division research methods course. It was done as a public service for an agency charged with meeting the needs of adolescent girls in the Flint Hills region of east

central Kansas in an effort to provide the agency with information about the young women who live there.

The sampling frame was obtained by contacting middle and high school administrators in the area and asking for their participation by providing rosters, with names and addresses of students who attend their schools. Six schools serving eleven communities throughout the region provided rosters, and a systematic random sample of 200 students was drawn from those rosters. Questionnaires, cover letters, and postage-paid return envelopes were mailed to the students' homes; they were urged to complete the questionnaires and return them in the mail. In the end, 111 completed and useful surveys were returned, reflecting a 56% return rate, a rate described as sufficient for analysis and reporting (Babbie p. 240, 1999).

While the questionnaire measured eighty-three variables on a wide range of topics, respondents' answers to three open-ended questions and one closed-ended semantic differentials self-assessment scale provide the core results for this paper. The three questions were as follows: *Some girls are more popular than others. Please tell us what makes a girl popular at your school? What, in your opinion, is the hardest thing about being a female in today's society? If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?*

Respondents were also asked to rate themselves on fourteen qualities using a semantic differential self-esteem scale developed by Gecas and Schwable (1986): powerful-powerless, honest-dishonest, good-bad, confident-lacks confidence, kind-cruel, strong-weak, dependable-undependable, tolerant-intolerant, wise-foolish, competent-incompetent, brave-cowardly, generous-selfish, worthy-unworthy, and attractive-unattractive. The respondents rated themselves on each of these qualities on a scale of one

to five with five being the desirable quality and one the undesirable quality. For example, a respondent who considered herself to be very attractive rated herself as a five, while a respondent who considered herself to be somewhat attractive rated herself a three, and a respondent who rated herself to be very unattractive rated herself as a one. Means were computed for all fourteen qualities. The lower the mean score, the lower the respondent rated herself on that quality.

An important consideration in survey research involves the possible influence of question ordering. Concerns about question ordering center on whether or not the content of previous questions prompted or influenced the responses to the questions asked. Subsequent analysis allowed for the dismissal of these concerns. The question immediately preceding the question about popularity was *How do you rate yourself as a student?* The question preceding that of the difficulties of being female and that of desirable self-change was *Is transportation to and from after-school activities a problem for you?* Finally, with the exception of the semantic differential item *attractive-unattractive* that appeared at the end of the questionnaire, no questions or statements made any reference to beauty, sexism, or harassment, issues featured prominently in the responses provided by participants.

Results

The results of this study support the works of Adler, Kless, and Adler and of Pipher cited earlier. For the first three questions inquiring about the qualities that make a girl popular, the difficulties of being female, and things about themselves that these adolescent girls would like to change, the participants' responses centered on physical

attractiveness. Their responses supported Adler, Kless, and Adler's finding that attractiveness and factors related to family background, including social class, are determinants of popularity. (For the first three questions, some respondents provided more than one response. When this happened, each response was included in the results.)

For the question, *Some girls are more popular than others. Please tell us what makes a girl popular at your school?* the most commonly occurring response was the desirability of being physically attractive, with thirty-six percent of the respondents listing this quality. (See Table 1 for a complete list.)

The second most common response—having a pleasant personality—appeared substantially less often (22%). The third most common response—wearing the right clothes, could arguably be included with physical attractiveness. I decided to code it as a separate variable because it was evidently a separate issue in the minds of the respondents who seemed to make distinctions between physical attractiveness and wearing the right clothes. Having a good attitude was fourth (18%) and coming from a family with money was a close fifth (17%).

Consider some of the following answers to the question about what makes a girl popular:

Pretty, skinny, rich, nice hair, clothes, etc. (15-year-old)

Pretty and they all seem like snobs. Their family has to be rich. (12-year-old)

If a girl wears nice clothes and if she's pretty to the boys and got money. (15-year-old)

Looks, Money, popularity with guys. (13-year-old)
How pretty she looks. What kind of clothes she wears. (17-year-old)

A positive attitude was included by some respondents. The following two comments are typical:

Attitude towards life, other people. (18-year-old)

A girl who is warm in attitude, can participate well in sports, has decent grades, and who wears stylish clothes of each group is usually popular by my school's standards. (14-year-old)

Many responses focused exclusively on the importance of material things:

They got nice clothes and live in good homes. (15-year-old)

Being a prep. Most well known girls in our school are preps. (16-year-old)

Having the right last name—Kissing butt. Wearing expensive clothes. Having a nice house. (15-year-old)

Other qualities listed in descending frequency of occurrence included ability at sports, earning good grades, participation in extracurricular activities, having the right friends, having a boyfriend, family name, partying and drinking, willingness to have sex, being a cheerleader, having a sense of humor, and being yourself. These data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Adolescent Females' Perceptions of Qualities that Determine Popularity.

Quality	Frequency of Occurrence	Percent % Listing Quality
Attractiveness	39	36
Personality	24	22
Clothes	23	21
Attitude	19	18
Money	18	17
Sports	16	15
Smart/Grades	15	14
Extra-Curricular Activities	12	11
Right Friends	10	9
Having a Boyfriend	9	8
Family Name	8	7
Don't Know	7	6
Partying and Drinking	6	6
Willingness to Have Sex	5	5
Sense of Humor	2	2
Being Yourself	1	1
Having a Talent	1	1

In response to the question, *What, in your opinion, is the hardest thing about being a female in today's society?* answers were sorted into sixteen categories, with the most common response centering on the negative ways that the respondents reported they are treated by male peers (24%). A young lady wrote:

The pressure put on you from guys for you to have sex with them. And also people think you can't do something just because you're a female. (15-year-old)

The pressure to have sex mentioned above was a recurring theme among the responses. Furthermore, several young women wrote that sexual harassment was a common occurrence, particularly at school:

In my opinion, I believe the hardest thing about being female in today's society is directly confronting some obscene and unnecessary comments of males when you are in a construction class or any class traditionally taken by a large number of males. (14-year-old)

The way you are treated by some guys. They don't realize it can hurt when they tease and insult you. Some guys don't think females can be as good as them in sports or other things. (15-year-old)

Boys making fun of you or what you wear or why you wear it. (12-year-old)

Men treat you like a piece of meat. (15-year-old)

These results support Lee's (1993) findings of English schools that girls experience extensive verbal abuse by boys.

The second-most-commonly-occurring response was being judged based on appearance (19%). As with popularity, the importance of physical appearance for these young women is substantial. One young woman lamented the stereotypes people have about her because of her appearance:

I'm a 5'4" thin blonde and it's hard to get some people to believe I'm not stupid. Some people (especially men) don't take me seriously just because of how I look. I'm very intelligent and I wish some people would learn to accept that. (16-year old)

Another young women commented in a similar fashion:

I hate how the world concentrates so much on appearance. If Your (sic) not super skinny, pretty, long legs, big bust, your not good enough. It's more important what a person is on the inside and I wish the world would put more emphasis on personality. (18-year-old)

One of the youngest respondent in the study describes her memory of the sixth grade as follows:

Every boy in the 6th grade likes big boobs and big butts. They are always looking at them. (12-year-old)

Finally, the most searing comment comes from a young lady who writes:

If you're beautiful, you're a sex object. If you're ugly, you're nonexistent. (14-year-old)

A complete review of the responses provided for this question is listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Adolescent Females' Perceptions about What Is Most Difficult about Being Female.

Difficulty	Frequency of Occurrence	% Listing Difficulty
Treatment by Male Peers	25	24
Judged Based on Appearance	20	19
Social Inequality	19	18
Rigid Gender Expectations	12	11
Fear of Crime	5	5
No Problem Being Female	4	4
Gender Role Confusion	3	3
Ability to Get Good Job	3	3
Peer Pressure	2	2
Proving Yourself	2	2
Not Being Taken Seriously	2	2
Biological/Menstruation	2	2
Being Made Fun Of	1	1
Not Being Liked	1	1
Problems With Other Female	1	1
Everything	1	1

The third question, asking what changes young women would like to make in themselves, produced the most one-sided results in this study, with 51% responding that, above all else, they would improve their physical appearance. Some typical responses are as follows:

I would change my weight . . . And probably my attitude towards my step dad. (16-year-old)

Go on a diet and lose weight. (15-year-old)

I would like to be 10 pounds lighter and not be so jealous. (17-year-old)

My weight and my religious outlook. (15-year-old)

My legs. (18-year-old)

Body, looks, and attitude. (15-year-old)

[I would like to be] thinner and smarter. (16-year-old)

I would like to be thinner. I'm far from overweight, but I would like to lose a little weight. When it comes to emotions, I need to relax a little more and not get so stressed out. (15-year-old)

I would like to be three inches taller. (All of that length in my legs.) (17-year-old)

I would make myself model-skinny and get a nose job. (17-year-old)

Be more attractive, different hair color, more intelligent. (18-year-old)

I know this is selfish, but I would want to be thin. I get made fun of because of my weight. (17-year-old)

I wish I had a better body, better figure. (16-year-old)

The next-most-common response centered on personality-related changes the young women would like to make with themselves (25%). Many of these focused on not "stressing out" so much, being friendlier, and having a higher level of self-esteem. Some of the responses reflecting desired personality-related changes are listed below:

I would like to have a higher self-esteem. I am always getting yelled at by my friends for making negative comments about myself. (18-year-old)

I wished I wasn't so shy. (15-year-old)

I would be more friendly, open. (17-year-old)

I would not be preoccupied with myself so much. Stop thinking about food/weight. (17-year-old)

I would like to seem to be a more warm, likeable and down-to-earth person rather than to seem so critical

towards people when trying to help people. (14-year-old)

My attitude and temper. I usually have a bad attitude toward people I don't know very well. Also my temper can get out of control. I really wish I could control it more. (15-year-old)

I cuss and sometimes judge other people. (17-year-old)

The third-most-common response, expressed by some confident, self-assured young women, was that they like themselves the way they are. When asked what they would change about themselves they responded:

Nothing, I'm comfortable with the way I am. I like myself. (14-year-old)

Nothing. (16-year-old)

Nothing, I like everything about me. (15-year-old)
It has taken a lot for me to come this far, so I really don't want to change myself. (18-year-old)

Nothing because I am happy with myself. (15-year-old)

I'm happy with myself, and I wouldn't change anything. (16-year-old)

Other changes that were mentioned included having a better attitude, being smarter/earning better grades, not

procrastinating, being less jealous, being more faithful to religious beliefs, having more friends, having more courage, being neater, more athletic, or better behaved, and having nicer clothes; a single despairing young woman wrote "everything." Table 3 contains a complete listing of the responses to this question.

Table 3. What Would You Change about Yourself?

Desired Change	Frequency of Occurrence	% Listed Desired Change
Physical Appearance	55	51
Personality	27	25
Nothing	13	12
Attitude	9	8
Smarter/Grades	8	7
Not Procrastinate	3	3
Less Jealous	3	3
More Faithful to Religion	2	2
More Friends	2	2
More Courage	1	1
Neater/Cleaner	1	1
More Athletic	1	1
Better Behavior	1	1

Desired Change	Frequency of Occurrence	% Listed Desired Change
Nicer Clothing	1	1
Stop Thinking About Weight	1	1
Everything	1	1

Results of the self-evaluation of the fourteen qualities related to self-concept indicated that respondents rated themselves lower on the attractive-unattractive quality than on any other. Moreover, the difference between the attractive-unattractive mean and the means for the other qualities was substantial (See Table 4). These results support Pipher's finding that many adolescent females dislike their bodies and believe they are unattractive.

Table 4. Self-Evaluation of 14 Qualities Related to Self-Concept

Quality	Number Responding	Mean
Powerful-Powerless	108	3.5093
Honest-Dishonest	109	4.2569
Good-Bad	108	4.1481
Confident-Lacks Confidence	109	3.8073
Kind-Cruel	109	4.1560
Strong-Weak	109	3.6422

Quality	Number Responding	Mean
Dependable-Undependable	108	4.3519
Tolerant-Intolerant	109	3.5596
Wise-Foolish	109	3.7431
Competent-Incompetent	109	4.0092
Brave-Cowardly	108	3.7315
Generous-Selfish	109	3.8532
Worthy-Unworthy	109	4.1560
Attractive-Unattractive	108	3.2778

Discussion

Social scientists have often been accused of discovering the obvious. The results of this study will seem to some like another example of doing just that. The obvious, however, can become so routine, ingrained, and taken-for-granted that it becomes invisible and as a result does not receive the scrutiny it deserves. What are the social and psychological consequences for members of a society that places such an extraordinary premium on female physical attractiveness and then socializes its females to value it so highly themselves?

The results of this study confirm that attractiveness is the most frequently mentioned quality that influences the social status of females in school-based peer cultures; that being more physically attractive than they are is by far the most important change adolescent females would make

with themselves if they could; that the second most difficult thing that young women report about being female is the perception that their worth in the eyes of other people is based on how physically attractive they're considered to be; and, finally, that most young women tend to consider themselves unattractive. All of these results suggest a culture with distorted and damaging values.

Consider this sample of schoolgirls cited in this paper, a sample where improving their grades or being smarter was listed only eight times as a change adolescent female respondents would like to make in themselves. Being more faithful to religious principles was listed only twice, developing the courage to stand up for one's ideals was listed only once, behaving "more appropriately" was listed only once, and being prettier was listed fifty-five times. That these realities exist despite the influences of the Women's Movement and its accompanying gender role changes is telling.

What can account for the contradiction between increased gender equality that has come about over the past few decades and the continued persistence and perhaps intensification of the obsession with appearance? First, media and market forces must be taken into account. The pervasiveness and impact of the electronic media continue to expand. The purpose of the media is to capture viewers' attention long enough to show them commercials and thus market products. The ability of sexually attractive images to accomplish this goal is substantial. While gender equality has increased, so has the motivation to use the media to sell products using attention-grabbing images. Thus the desire for profit often negates the goal of gender equality and female (and male) well being. Consider the following excerpt from an editorial that recently appeared in the *Boston Globe*:

It's no secret that women and girls in this culture are bombarded with unrealistic images of ideal body shapes . . . , messages [that] are so pervasive that even otherwise successful, well-adjusted women can succumb to crash diets, bulimia, cosmetic surgery, or just a nagging sense of inadequacy. Sex still sells, and even manipulative advertising cannot be censored in a free society. What is needed are counter images and messages—from parents, peers, doctors, schools, responsible businesses, *and* men and boys—to inoculate girls and young women from the fevers of the market. (*Boston Globe* Editorial, September 18, 1998)

Second, interaction at the interpersonal level prods us to over-emphasize physical appearance. It is apparent that people are treated differently based on how attractive they are (see Aronson, Wilson, and Akert, 1999, pp 380-386). Attractive people often get more attention and are treated better by teachers, employers, peers, and strangers. People are aware of this favorable treatment and wish to be the recipients of it. The results of this study and other studies cited in this paper confirm that the interaction that takes place in teenage peer groups reinforces and perpetuates the obsession with appearance.

Third, long-standing cultural stereotypes equating beauty with being good and unattractiveness with being bad are embedded in our culture (Dion, Berscheid and Walster, 1972). These stereotypes have been passed on from generation to generation through the socialization process. Stories of beautiful, benevolent princesses and ugly, malevolent stepmothers, witches, and the like have been a part of Western culture for hundreds of years.

Fourth, an image-oriented, transient world of fleeting encounters and secondary relationships likely compounds

the importance of first impressions and the pivotal role of appearance. The valuing of image over substance is perhaps on the increase.

What is to be done? Critics will undoubtedly contend that the kind of large-scale cultural change that would emancipate women from these forces may never occur at the societal level because it would be too radical, that current cultural ideals and practices about attractiveness are too deeply entrenched. These critics are probably correct. However, as Walker Percy once remarked, "A fish does not reflect on water. He cannot imagine its absence, so he cannot consider its presence" (cited in Kohn, p.1, 1986). Like Percy's fish, most contemporary members of society, male and female, place a high value on female attractiveness without considering thoughtfully and critically what they are doing to themselves and others. They are after all immersed in a culture where this value is routine and ingrained.

Bellah and his colleagues (1991, p. 283) argue that responsible citizens must look beyond the official versions and the taken-for-granted values and ideals of our culture to the realities and consequences that lie beyond. They state, "Responsibility must begin with attention. To act responsibly we must ask: What is happening?" For Bellah and his colleagues, the need to "pay attention" is critical. Their thoughts would inspire us to focus our attention on the realities of the cultural representations of females in contemporary society and to become aware of the destructive results of these representations. Only after we notice what is happening are we able to respond personally and collectively in thoughtful and appropriate ways.

[H]ooks (1994) urges us to become "enlightened witnesses." By that she means that we should "engage

with the representations of cultural life with knowledge and vigilance." While, she would argue, we can't change the images and ideals that the culture presents to us, we can, however, respond to those images in proactive and constructive ways, ways that enable us to be active participants engaged in a dialogue about their nature and impact rather than passive recipients.

Pipher (1994) urges young women to spend solitary time each day reflecting on their own feelings, ideas, and values and by so doing to construct their own images and values free from the influence of the crowd. She also encourages young women to limit their exposure to the media. Finally, she encourages parents to become more involved in the lives of their children and not to abandon them to the vicissitudes of a media- and peer-saturated world. Most parents, after all, love their children, want what is best for them, and see their inner worth and potential in ways that few others do.

Failure to engage in this struggle will result in the perpetuation of a society where half of its members have been denied opportunity on one basis of outward appearance and the reward structure of which motivates young women to disregard many types of meaningful personal development in favor of the superficial. Imagine the contribution to society as well as the increased physical and psychological well-being and personal fulfillment of females that could result if things were different.

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