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Eric Land discusses the perceptions of beauty.

- 1 Beauty. We know it when we see it, but what is it? In 1756, the philosopher Edmund Burke wrote, "We must conclude that beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses." Scientists are still on a quest to define what makes things and people beautiful. In some ways, it is like asking whether one's vision of "red" is the same as someone else's – there is just no way to know for sure. 5
- 2 A case in point is how our preferences for body shapes differ over time and space. In the West, people may prize longer legs in women while preferring less "lanky men", yet the nomadic Himba society in Namibia have the opposite tastes. Botticelli's Venus – once the Western ideal of beauty – has shorter legs, compared to her body, than the desired shape for models today. Plus-sized comedian Dawn French once quipped, "If I had been around when Botticelli was painting The Birth of Venus, I would have been revered as a fabulous model and supermodels like Kate Moss would have been the paintbrush." 10
- 3 When it comes to facial attractiveness however, there are reasons to believe that specific features and biologically based factors guide our assessment of beauty. Faces that are more symmetrical and average-looking tend to be rated as more attractive in scientific studies. Scientists say that the preference for symmetry is a highly evolved trait also seen in many different animals. Female swallows*, for example, prefer males with longer and more symmetric tails, while female zebra finches* mate with males with symmetrically coloured leg bands. The rationale behind symmetry preference in both humans and animals is that symmetric individuals are seen as more prolific mates. Further, 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. 15 20
- 4 In fact, even babies respond more positively to attractive, symmetrical faces. However, babies appear to respond more to faces deemed attractive than those that are purely symmetrical, suggesting there is something else going on. There are theories that specific proportions are the most naturally beautiful, with ratios of length and width being important. And with the help of computers, it has become apparent that morphing a lot of faces together typically produces an end product that is highly attractive. The reasoning goes that this blending gets closer to the face "prototype" that may underline attractiveness – the ultimate idea of an attractive face is ironically the most average one. Thus, it may be that babies are drawn to faces that are most like the most basic concept of a face – that is, they are average. 25 30
- 5 Beauty and attractiveness are often confused to be one and the same. Yet, women who have graced the covers of magazines tell us that they do not necessarily feel attractive. And there are women who are attractive who would never be cover girls. Beauty is a rigid, static, youth-oriented physical image which can be photoshopped or surgically attained. Attractiveness, however, is a fluid, variable psychological experience which develops naturally and can be ageless. One can simply feel attractive about oneself but beauty drives women toward the pursuit of the physical features associated with the word. 35 40
- 6 Be it beauty or attractiveness, people too often tie their self-worth to their physical appearance. Especially today, engulfed by a popular culture saturated with images of idealised, air-brushed and unattainable female physical beauty, many women and girls 45

* Swallows and finches are birds.

cannot escape feeling judged on the basis of their appearance. Moreover, the diet, cosmetic and fashion industries are often too willing to exploit these narrow beauty standards so women and girls will become cradle-to-grave consumers of beauty products, cosmetic surgery and diet programs.

- 7 The health implications that impact women on the never-ending treadmill of unrealistic beauty attainment are substantial. Through chronic and unhealthy dieting, taking unnecessary risks during cosmetic surgical procedures, and absorbing unsafe chemicals through cosmetics, women are placing themselves in precarious health situations to maintain some semblance of their idealised physical selves. Women and girls are at risk of lifelong health problems – and the problems start at an early age. When taken to the extreme, obsession over a particular aspect of one's appearance has a psychiatric diagnosis: body dysmorphic disorder. It is the reason some people get dozens of plastic surgeries, but are never satisfied with the outcomes. 50 55
- 8 Furthermore, the burden of unattainable beauty has far-reaching implications for women's economic well-being. Not only are women spending much of their money on cosmetics, but expectations of physical beauty even impacts women economically through their workplaces. "Lookism", or the prejudice based on physical appearance and attractiveness, is an increasing problem. One study found that employers believe that good looks contribute to the success of their companies. It is unsurprising that discrimination against overweight people in the workplace is a widespread practice. 60 65
- 9 Yet, studies have shown that people who are perceived as being more beautiful also appear more competent and successful. Other research has shown that physical attractiveness can also influence salary. The legal system may even take beauty into account – a variety of studies have found effects suggesting that attractiveness helps when it comes to verdicts and sentencing. It may be that there is a societal view that attractive people are less likely to commit crimes than unattractive people. In society, attractive people are also seen as more intelligent, better adjusted, and more popular. This is described as the halo effect – due to the perfection associated with angels. Research shows attractive people are perceived to have more occupational success and more dating experience than their unattractive counterparts. May it be that this halo effect is accurate since attractive people may indeed be more successful? Alternatively, self-fulfilling prophecies – in which an attractive person's confident self-perception, further perpetuated by healthy feedback from others – may play a role in success as well. 70 75
- 10 For better or worse, the bottom line is that research shows beauty matters; it pervades society and affects how we choose loved ones. Thus, being vain may not be such a vain endeavour after all. Among its other social benefits, attractiveness actually invites people to learn what one is made of, in other respects than just genetic fitness. According to a new study, attractive people are actually judged more accurately – at least, closer to a subject's own self-assessments – than are the less attractive, because it draws others to go beyond the initial impression. "People do judge a book by its cover," the researchers write, "but a beautiful cover prompts a closer reading." 80 85