



EVERYDAY LOOKISM AND THE DEMANDS OF BEAUTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Beauty has become an ethical ideal to live by and the moral pressure to 'do' beauty is growing. This has caused an epidemic of body image anxiety and should therefore be treated as an issue of public health, argues Professor Heather Widdows.
- The #everydaylookism campaign asks people to share their common experiences of facing prejudice on the grounds of their appearance. The aim is to get people talking about this issue and spreading the message that body shaming is never acceptable.

Introduction

The demand to be beautiful is increasingly important in today's visual and virtual culture. Conforming to beauty ideals is becoming ever more demanding and defining of women, and increasingly men, irrespective of their professions. Rightly or wrongly, being perfect, or just good enough, has become an ethical ideal to live by, and according to which we judge ourselves good or bad, a success or a failure.

Perfect me

We are so used to people commenting on beauty that the harshness of their moral judgement can pass us by: you should 'make the best of yourself', you're worth it, you deserve it and, whatever else you do, you should not 'let yourself go'.

The moral pressure to 'do' beauty is growing. Increasingly being perfect – or trying to be – is what we value most. It is what we think about, talk about and what we spend our time and hard-earned cash on.

If we are good at beauty we feel we are good, virtuous, and if we are bad at beauty we feel we are

no good almost no matter what else we do. In a very real sense our bodies are now ourselves. We might tell our daughters that "it's what's on the inside that counts", but a look at the evidence tells us that they would not believe us.

In her book, *Perfect Me*, Professor Heather Widdows explores this radical transformation of the status of beauty, of the beauty ideal and of what this means for how we understand human beings. She makes four key arguments:

1. For very many of us beauty has become an ethical ideal. In this brave new world to fail to attain a 'perfect', 'good enough' or 'normal' body is to fail across the board. It is to be a failure.
2. The beauty ideal is more dominant than previous ideals and for the first time a global ideal is emerging - it is not simply a Western ideal. It is applying to more women, more of the time and increasingly to men.
3. Under the beauty ideal we identify ourselves with our bodies. We locate ourselves in our current, flawed bodies, in our transforming bodies, which feel powerful and full of potential, and in our imagined perfect self.
4. The old arguments no longer work. We are not coerced to engage, but nor is this all about choice, as non-engagement is 'not an option'. Nor is this gender exploitation – men too are engaging in body work and striving to conform to unrealistic appearance norms.

Everyday lookism campaign

Lookism is prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's appearance. In our visual culture, our bodies are ourselves. So, when we shame bodies, we shame people. Yet we do this

all the time and think it is normal. Negative comments about other people's bodies do matter and cut deeply. We need to stop doing this ourselves and we need to call others out when they do it.

The #everydaylookism campaign asks people to share their own experiences of lookism. What it was, how it made them feel, and to say that it should not happen. What the campaign has shown already is that very many of us are unhappy with some part of our bodies and often because of a nasty comment from a partner, family member or stranger.

Body positivity is not the sole answer. Messages such as 'be resilient', 'be confident' and 'love your body' may work for some, but for those who don't feel body positive it can make us feel even worse. We feel bad we don't measure up and then even worse that we've got the wrong attitude. We are not resilient or positive enough.

What makes beauty an ethical ideal?

- Believing that succeeding in beauty will give us the goods of the 'good life' – employment success, relationship success and above all happiness.
- Ordering our lives around beauty success. Increasingly, long term goals are about appearance (how many of your New Year's resolutions were about the body?) and on a daily basis we are 'good' when we stick to our diet or go to the gym and 'bad' when we slip, when we eat that 'naughty' piece of cake.
- Moral emotions of shame and disgust attach to beauty failure – whether fat-shaming, shame of body hair, or embarrassment about supposedly abnormal body parts.
- Engagement is required as beauty practices become recast as hygiene practices – necessary to be 'normal' or 'just good enough' – from the daily application of lotions and potions, to hair dye, body hair removal, and for some cosmetic surgery.
- Beauty work and body work are believed to be good to do – not just good for us in prudential terms – but morally good.

Implications for public policy

Beauty practices can be beneficial, life enhancing and positive. It is just as false to claim there are no benefits of beauty as to claim there are no harms. There are individual benefits which we recognise and experience and social benefits as beauty practices are often shared with others.

But there are significant harms and not just, as policy makers seem to assume, to engaging individuals. If we continue in current trajectories, where the modified body is increasingly the normal body, and body work is increasingly regarded as required not to be perfect but just to be normal, the future will be bleak indeed.

To address the beauty ideal we need to recognise it for what it is, an ethical ideal, which is dominant and influential. It is not an exaggeration to say that the beauty ideal is reshaping our selves and our society and dramatically. We can only see the extent of its influence – particularly the communal harms – if beauty is reframed as an issue of public health rather than individual choice.

Lead academic

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Find out more

- Everyday lookism campaign <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/philosophy/research/projects/duty-to-be-beautiful/everyday-lookism.aspx>
- <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/strategic-framework/Research/perfect-me.aspx>
- <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/quest/towards-a-better-society/beauty.aspx>
- Body Negativity: What's wrong with body positivity? <http://beautydemands.blogspot.com/2019/06/body-negativity-whats-wrong-with-body.html>

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