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# In the Eye of the Beholder: How Women Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired Define and Navigate Beauty

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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER:  
HOW WOMEN WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED DEFINE AND  
NAVIGATE BEAUTY

by

Bernice M. Nisbett

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by

Bernice M. Nisbett

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to anyone who has ever believed that they were not beautiful.

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The space on this page cannot hold the tremendous amount of gratitude I have for the individuals who shared this academic journey with me, but I will try nonetheless:

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To the 10 women who agreed to share their stories—you are the substance of this thesis. The current body of knowledge on beauty, gender, visual impairment, and identity has much more to gain from you. Thank you for your patience and your willingness to be part of this journey. I am eternally grateful for your words and continue to be in awe of your beauty.

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Abstract

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2018

Beauty defined by nonvisual means is an area of exploration long overdue. The question on what or whom is considered beautiful or attractive is often left up to each individual, and dependent on the culture in which said beauty is visually seen. This research identified the physical characteristics of Western standards of beauty among women who are visually impaired. The main objective was to explore how women who are visually impaired or blind defined both physical and non-physical beauty, in addition to how they navigated ocularcentric standards of beauty. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 women who are visually impaired or blind that live within the United States. Their interviews were transcribed and analyzed to critique the components of beauty within the cultural lens of women who are visually impaired or blind. What was taken from the data was then used to consider ways in which women can empower themselves without using visual means to define and describe who they are.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It has been my experience that physical appearance may convey who we are without words or introduction. At times, it can reinforce stereotypes, both positive and negative, sometimes based on common misconceptions. It also seems that physical appearance and its preoccupation with beauty has been a topic often focused solely on women. Is it possible that what we see and gather from visual cues may have very little to do with the behavior or personality of the individual in focus?

Five years ago, I was introduced to a man named Sam, who lived in Portland as a business consultant and motivational speaker. Sam is also visually impaired. When I first spoke to him over the phone, I did not tell him about my physical appearance or ethnicity, which I believed was unnecessary, given that the encounter was professional and strictly academic. I explained to Sam that I was curious about how individuals who are visual impaired or blind perceive beauty. He agreed to meet with me and we talked for several hours about his experience with being blind. Towards the end of our meeting, I asked him if he knew what race or ethnicity I was. He replied, "Well, white." For the first time in my life, I felt as if I had been wearing a shroud of inauthenticity. My external attributes, the way I spoke, my personality, and my demeanor, did not match with my physical, ethnic characteristics, or at least the ethnic characteristics that Sam perceived to belong to an individual that was white. The visually unadulterated sense of myself, did not match with the identity that I had thought was unique and culturally accurate for me.

Huang's (2003) Identity Formation Model outlines the identity formation process. His model begins with two major components that form a cohesive identity, personal internal identity and social external identity. The personal internal identity comprises ethnic and non-ethnic identifications that are internalized during early adolescence. This is the part of my identity that I felt I had worked hard to make my own, without feeling the pressure to assimilate to the predominately white, middle class culture in communication style and demeanor, even though I had grown up primarily among white, middle class, U.S. Americans. Huang believes that the personal internal identity is integral in forming a positive, integrated self.

The second component of Huang's (2003) Identity Formation Model is the social external identity. This involves the intergroup dynamics of the "ascribed reference group (one's in-group) to the out-group (society at large)" in the sociocultural world (p. 49). This is the part of my identity that did not correspond with what Sam believed, or perceived, my social external identity to be. I was obviously not white. My second observation about his assumption about me made me wonder if my way of interacting and communicating, my academic motivation and inquiry were attributes automatically prescribed to whites. If so, why? What one perceives without visual cues, intertwined with cultural identity perception, visual impairment, and identity has led me to the research I am doing now. If race has non-visual cues, how are our other attributes that are also related to our identity, elicited?

There are many complexities to being a woman, let alone a woman of color. I am biracial; therefore, my initial encounter with any individual on any given day is usually confusing because of my ambiguous appearance. To the seeing world, I stand 64 inches

tall with a small, yet sturdy build. My wildly curly, ebony hair runs beyond my shoulders, parted to the right. From my father, I have inherited a wide nose and two irises the color of rich chocolate. From my mother, I have often mistaken the shadow of my profile as hers; slanted features set upon a petite oval face. The corner of my eyes turn up when I smile, just like hers. My skin color varies in tones of café au lait to cinnamon; lightest during long Alaskan winters, and darkest when traveling in tropical, sunny locations. From this visual description a person may assume what race or ethnicity I may be, making a mental list of all the possible mixtures, unless it was explicitly stated.

On any given initial encounter, it is difficult for an individual to determine the group to which I belong, therefore, people often feel the need to ask where I am from, or even more, “What are you?” 9 out of 10 initial encounters with strangers begin with what I am before my name is asked. From this, I began to believe that what I was seemed to be more important to others than who I was internally. By internally, I mean my personality and character; what was under the tip of my identity iceberg. I admit that I grew up conflicted about my appearance, which then led to a fragmented internal and external identity until almost two decades later. My physical appearance and how others viewed me had a significant impact on my formative years, which may have contributed to my fragmented identity. Had I forfeited my ethnicity to fit into a perceived identity that was accepted and comfortable for everyone else around me? His “you’re white” comment bewildered me; it piqued my curiosity about physical appearance and how it influences one’s perception of others. That is where my journey began, exploring the concept of physical attributes related to beauty and attractiveness and its connection to positive identity formation and visual impairment.

## Research Purpose

This research begins by recognizing and establishing my position as a woman and the embodiment of these physical characteristics and attributes. By stating my position as a woman, this allows mobility within several contexts: gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and able-bodiedism. This also gives me the ability to choose which position to speak from, or what lens I am using to see the world. According to Alcoff (2006), the social identity of being a person operates on bodily markers and cannot be studied apart from their physical manifestations because *they are* physical manifestations. Being a woman cannot be studied without “the attentiveness to the role of the body and of the body’s visible identity” (p. 102). Therefore, it seems that my visible identity contrasted with what I believed my internal identity was. Furthermore, and, Alcoff writes that women themselves have designated their bodies as “objects to be seen rather than tools for their own use” (p. 107). This may have been why my identity was fragmented in my younger years.

As a woman, it appears that we share the enormous pressure to fit the societal standards of beauty, while maintaining ourselves aesthetically. Given this assumption, it is widely understood that many women, at one point or another and consistently throughout their lives, encounter similar struggles and connect on shared experiences regarding beauty and attractiveness. Fortunately, the woman narrative has the capability of encompassing a variety of topics and themes. The history of the female corporeal, and its prominence in social media and countless displays of images and information focused on its sexual and physical appeal, have made women highly critical of themselves. There

is probably no corner of the Earth in which women do not battle with the fatigue of physical beauty and attractiveness.

There are three important goals within this research. The first is it to explore the definition of beauty, as well as the practice of achieving beauty among women who are visually impaired. Key terms such as ocularcentric, beauty, attractiveness, and visually impaired will be defined in detail in the following paragraphs. Eight pivotal pieces of literature related to beauty and attractiveness will examine several different groups of women within the United States and outside of the United States. The second goal is to examine how women who are visually impaired, or blind, navigate standards of physical and non-physical beauty and attractiveness that extend beyond the ocularcentric. The third and final goal will be to consolidate the 10 interviews into a small composite of information on how non-physical beauty characteristics are elicited.

There have been investigations that are similar to this particular research on visual impairment or blindness in the consideration of the definition and practices of physical and non-physical beauty and attractiveness. Burke's (2009) research articulating aesthetic blindness challenged the ocularcentric stance "in which visual experience is privileged as the primary site of aesthetic appreciation" (p. 209). Researching visual impairment and aesthetic blindness opens a new way of thinking and experiencing beauty and attractiveness beyond physical criteria. Alcoff's (2006) investigation considered the perspective from the ideology of visibility. Her claim is visible attributes should be stripped of gender and race. In doing so, this could reflect an individual's sense of self, "their actions, choices, their humanity, rather than mere physical attributes that were accidents of birth" (p. 103).

A question that rarely comes up, but is most certainly worthy of investigation is: how do individuals who are visually impaired or blind describe and define physical and non-physical beauty? Feeney (as cited in 2009) continued to ask a similar question regarding the accessibility of beauty for those who are visually impaired or blind, and other ways in which the nonvisual aesthetic can be constructed. The characteristics elicited that cannot be distinguished by our most practiced way of perceiving individuals, our sense of sight, may help to inform an increased sense of self and offer an unconventional way to increase our sense of self-worth not related to aesthetics of the body.

### **Definitions of Beauty and Attractiveness**

The concept of beauty is extremely vast, and the definition even more elusive. Depending on the country, culture, social group, generation, fashion era, or academic paradigm, beauty is defined and described in many ways. For the purposes of this study, we will only focus on the beauty and attractiveness: what is seen and experienced as one's external features. Due to the uniqueness of those that were interviewed, we will also evaluate characteristics of beauty and attractiveness that are non-physical, such as one's personality and physical capabilities.

Psychiatrist and cognitive researcher, Nancy Etcoff (1999), maintains that our inclination to objects that are beautiful starts early. Yet, even in our adulthood, no definition seems to entirely capture the definition of beauty. Those who work within areas where beauty is exploited and critiqued discuss beauty as an experience. Modeling agencies confirm that beauty is felt, rather than seen (Etcoff, 1999). Merriam-Webster (2015) defines beauty as the quality of being physically attractive; the qualities in a

person or a thing that give pleasure to the senses or the mind. The word attractive is defined as having a pleasing appearance that causes romantic or sexual feelings in someone or having a feature or quality that people like. Being attractive could also mean having or relating to the power to attract, arousing interest or pleasure (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2015).

Saltzberg and Chrisler (as cited in Yan & Bissell, 2016) state the beauty is not quantifiable or measured objectively, but rather, a result of how others judge you. Beauty may be more related to facial characteristics, whereas attractiveness can include dress, make up, grooming, hairstyle, nonverbal behavior, conversation skills, and an individual's sense of humor. If we take beauty and put it on a body, Liew, Wu, Chan et. al (2016) would describe beauty as universal, and that beautiful people show similar facial characteristics, such as having an oval shaped face.

Physical beauty can only extend so far and should not be a means to an end. What has been known historically, and what has been gathered from other research on the topic related to beauty and attractiveness, is that women place a significant amount of value on achieving a certain beauty and body aesthetic. This study is not to contradict the beauty notion or disprove that we should do away with physical beauty altogether. In fact, Etoff (1999) believes that our infatuation with beauty will never go away. On the contrary, this thesis is the act of taking the focus off the external body for a moment to shed light on the other parts of the self that are vitally important to our sense of worth and identity.

Each person is entitled to his or her own definition of beauty and every culture expresses it in a distinct way. Alcott (2006) makes a case for women to affirm their



position to define for themselves what is beautiful, both physically and non-physically. This may be a salient issue, particularly for women, where attention sometimes focuses on how women look instead of what they are capable of. The overarching objective in conducting this research was to explore the physicalities, or external attributes, related to beauty and attractiveness to see if they have greater value in regard to one's sense of self and identity.

Today, there is significant importance and judgment placed on external features of the body, with the focus sometimes pointed specifically towards women. It is no wonder that less attention is given to internal features such as personality, spirit, and drive. Identifying and examining the components of beauty and attractiveness, both physically and non-physically, provided by the cultural lens of women who are visually impaired or blind, may highlight the non-physical beauty components that we otherwise might neglect.

Being a woman is intertwined with the societal expectation of external bodily perfection and its appeal to others. Examining this generalization, when one cannot visualize physical beauty, how else can beauty, both physical and non-physical, be defined and embodied? Furthermore, how do women who are visually impaired or blind participate in the practices and standards of ocularcentric beauty? Do any of these physical beauty traits conflict with what is believed to be beautiful by the visually impaired or blind?

If physical beauty perceived from the lens of visual impairment is to be considered and taken seriously, it would be imperative to accept the notion that few individuals possess "any original authority as a source of truth but only this relative

authority in knowing” (Feeney, 2014, p. 3). The original authority would be those who are sighted and believe that they hold the most reliable source of information on what is considered beautiful and relative authority being those who are visually impaired or blind who have a corresponding authority in knowing what is also beautiful and attractive.

Alcoff (2006) suggests that an effective way to approach the experience of being a woman is to incorporate the reflective process of experience and identity politics. Identity politics is the act of “choosing one’s identity as a member of one or more groups as point of political departure” (p. 147). Alternately stated, one’s positionality offers a way to be “part of the historicized, fluid movement...actively contributing to the context within which her position can be delineated” (p. 148). Identity is not just about the self and the subjects surrounding the self, but recognizing and valuing our bodily differences (Alcoff, 2006). The formation of a woman’s identity is a process in which she interprets her history and reconstructs what she learns through the cultural context that she has access to.

This research asks how women who are visually impaired or blind are able to access such information. Individuals with visual impairments are expected to have complete confidence in the descriptions, instructions, and values presented to them by their sighted companion or wing person (Feeney, 2014). Meinzer (2015) discusses with Georgina Kleege this exact method in a podcast called *Beauty in the Eye of the Sightless Beholder* in which the sighted person verbalizes and directs the person who is blind to attractive people close by. It is important to point out that the sighted person verbalizes the attractiveness of the people in the room by his own definition and standard, not by the definition and standard by his or her friend that is visually impaired or sighted. This

phenomenon is worth considering, given that every person has his or her unique perspective on what is considered beautiful and attractive.

It seems that social media, technology is advancing faster than we can keep up. Platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, have become part of the norm in how we communicate and interact with those around us. Even more, it may be that a significant number of individuals are posting “selfies” or full-body photos online; opening themselves up to scrutiny and critique. Simultaneously, visual images of professional models in advertisements, television shows, and marketing materials seem to be ubiquitous, showcasing airbrushed mannequin-like women. When consider the visually impaired or blind community, these beauty images are obviously intended for the sighted. Women who are visually impaired or blind cannot partake in these images of beauty, or of the social media-selves (e.g. Facebook and Instagram). Those who are visually impaired or blind do have mechanisms to participate in social media via Screen Readers and such. To actively question how beauty is navigated and defined in a world dominated by visuals for those who are sighted, we can try to position ourselves to view beauty from a non-ocularcentric perspective.

According to Guthrie (1999), it is a constant challenge to attain “a positive self-identity in a culture that maintains perfectionistic body-beauty ideals” (p. 369). Identity, an awareness of who we are as individuals and as part of our social environment, is a navigational process in which our behavioral expectations are balanced with the roles that others assume for us and how others expect us to behave with the roles that we assume for ourselves (Huang, 2003). Alcoff’s (2006) interpretation of identity is that of a fluid, ever-changing sense of ourselves and how we “choose to identify ourselves on various

forms and how to deal with a host of other small and large issues” (p. 147). The concept of identity is important; knowing who we are and why we behave the way we do lays the groundwork for enduring much more complicated life-work. It would be in vain to continue believing after this research that most of our external features make up the entire iceberg of our truth, when so much of who we really are is beneath the surface. Huang’s (2003) model of identity formation serves to identify other personal attributes, internal and external, in constructing a positive sense of self-worth.

The navigation process of beauty and attractiveness will begin with how physical beauty and attractiveness are seen and defined among women who are sighted, and then how non-physical beauty and attractiveness are perceived and defined among women who are visually impaired or blind. The practices, characteristics, and the culture of women are the effects of one’s social and cultural identity; it is far more complex than simply subscribing to a specific gender role or sex. Teresa de Lauretis’s (as cited in Alcoff, 2006) wrote a pivotal book titled *Alice Doesn’t* that spoke on the interlocking of gender, social constructs, subjectivity, and human agency. Subjectivity is “produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance [value, meaning, affect] to the events of the world” (as cited in Alcoff, 2006, p. 145). Alcoff goes further, stating that it is also the experience which “one defines from using the interaction of the social world and one’s internal world, and the ‘continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality’” (p. 145).

Women may be susceptible to the notion that being prettier will make them happier, given the ubiquitous, unobtainable ideals of bodily perfection shown in digital

“advertising campaigns by multinational companies competing in a global market” (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 352). Many of these visual images focus on women and their bodies, and the perfect body constructed by advertisements creates what Huang and Brittain believe to be an oppressive overtone. When considering those who are visually impaired or blind, it seems that their visible disability is not considered ideal, let alone beautiful.

Chapter 2 will be a review of the literature. I chose specific articles that discussed the nature of conversations surrounding beauty and attractiveness among three different groups of women: sorority women in a United States university system, Japanese women living in pluralistic Japan, and women with disabilities. The articles will also unveil areas in which this particular research could help fill in what is missing in the conversation of beauty and attractiveness. The analysis portion of this research will investigate physical and non-physical beauty and attractiveness through the lens of women who are visually impaired or blind. In the analysis section, information gathered from the ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews regarding beauty and attractiveness will be reviewed and coded for underlying themes. The goal is to extract empirical information concerning non-physical, non-visual characteristics concerning beauty and attractiveness from a small sample of women over the age of 18 who are visually impaired or blind.

Chapter 3 will review the methods used to extract and produce the information needed for the analysis of beauty characteristics elicited from a non-visual lens. The final part of this research will discuss the two components of Huang’s (2003) model of identity formation, personal internal identity and social external identity, which consider an

amalgamation of physical attributes, such as race and ethnicity, as well as physical capabilities, and in-group and out-group dynamics. Personal internal identity and social external identity acknowledge race and ethnicity as criteria for eliciting a positive or negative sense of self, it only recognizes the prescribed racial attributes related to an ethnic group which does not account for the value of beauty or attractiveness by purely nonvisual means. This does not mean that racial groups do not prescribe to beauty standard norms; a significant amount of research has proven for the argument that it does.

For the purposes of this research, a modest examination of minority groups and their standards for a certain physical aesthetic to achieve a higher quality of life will be considered. Various studies included in this research question whether looking a certain way or having certain physical characteristics gives you an advantage in finding a job, making more money, and receiving better grades. The focus will be specifically on the physical attributes related to Huang's (2003) identity model. It may be suggested that further research and inquiry continues with this aspect of defining beauty within minority groups. There may be an interesting cache of knowledge and information surrounding beauty via nonvisual means that provide further definitions, standards, and interpretations.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The literature reviewed suggests the notion that the constructs of beauty are generally White European-focused, in terms of facial features and physical characteristics. Three additional articles were chosen to make up a comprehensive body of work associated with beauty within the U.S. and Japan, disability and visual impairment, and its recent link to positive identity formation. The objective of this study was to examine beauty, both physical and non-physical attributes and characteristics, from the lens of visual impairment.

The data gathered from the ten interviews with women who are blind or visually impaired will elicit the non-physical characteristics. These non-physical characteristics will then be viewed alongside the beauty literature from women who are not visually impaired or blind. Some of this information is then collected and examined in light of Huang's (2003) identity formation model. Several of the articles speak specifically on beauty within two cultural groups: Japanese women and sorority women in the U.S. Two other articles speak to identity formation within the disabled communities. The remaining articles assist in unveiling and critiquing how women go about defining, navigating, and negotiating social standards of U.S. Western beauty.

The vantage points of visual impairment in unpacking and exploring the definition of beauty both physical and non-physical, is to provide a basis for identifying ways in which women are influenced by their social surroundings by means of agency. Alcott (2006) speaks of agency as "the process of interpretation, such that identities are

not simply...produced by external structures of meaning...[and] is also placed within ‘particular discursive configurations’” (p. 145). The process of interpretation, the navigation of beauty of women who are visually impaired or blind, in this research is not being produced by external structures of meaning, that is visual definitions and venues in which beauty and attractiveness are interpreted.

Three articles in the literature review examined what has already been discussed regarding the physical attributes that display beauty qualities from the lens of the sighted world. These specific articles support the connections between attractive qualities elicited that are not physically distinguishable, visual impairment, and positive identity formation. Additional literature taken from popular articles, seminars, and podcasts speak to the topic of beauty and attractiveness in the media from the lens of both the visually impaired and the sighted population.

There is also a significant gap that this research aims to fill in regarding the construct of beauty standards, identity, and visual impairment. The questions that arise in the beauty conversation are: how do those for whom beauty and attractiveness is not explicit define and navigate ocularcentric standards of beauty? How do individuals who are visually impaired or blind define, navigate, and participate in the standards of beauty that are set by those who are visually able?

### **Body Politics**

Huang and Brittain (2006) emphasize the importance of recognizing the politics of the body to begin the development of one’s identity. The female body is consistently perceived and judged initially, and often exclusively, on its physical attractiveness and beauty. Of course, men’s bodies have been subjected to scrutiny as well, although,



women and their bodies have become more vulnerable “to dominant social texts and images within the context of patriarchy” (Moore & Kosut, 2010, p. 347).

According to Moore and Kosut (2010), the body is not neutral territory without meaning, but “the entry point into cultural and structural relationships, [and] emotional and subjective experiences” (p. 2). To support my research, I have chosen several studies that investigate the concept of beauty. This includes Oram’s (2003) dissertation on the culture of sorority systems, which reflect what Moore and Kosut (2010) believe about the body: an entity inculcated with meaning that is then used to navigate the world. Women who join a sorority use their bodies as a status symbol and are critiqued on their beauty in relation to each other. This lends itself to the notion of agency, that bodies are the initial introduction to the performance of self and identity within a structured location in a stratified world (Moore & Kosut, 2010).

The female body can be enabling and limiting; they are our possession and our prison, and do not always belong to us (as cited in Moore & Kosut, 2010). It is the aim of social science researchers to make sense of the body in conflicting social contexts. Witz believes we must continue thinking about the body in new ways so as to be helpful to researchers working in other disciplines. Placing the narratives of ten women who are visually impaired or blind at the center of my analysis will provide a novel way of thinking about the body, particularly female beauty, or as Oram (2003) describes, the body beautiful.

Kosut and Moore (2010) see the body as a raw material that navigates the world. Speaking about, speaking through, and speaking of the body is:

Not only a subjective individual act but is also a political and cultural act. This is the case because bodies can convey a range of statuses, ranks, and relationships.

Bodies may be read aesthetically, as things to be beautiful, fixed, fetishized, and adorned. Our bodies can be registered bureaucratically and demographically via binary categories like male or female, black or white, and straight or gay. (p. 1).

It is clear to Kosut and Moore (2010) that the body is not neutral or unadulterated.

They write that the body “is the entry point into cultural and structural relationships, emotional and subjective experiences, and the biological realms of flesh and bone” (p. 2).

Other researchers within sociology have proposed that the embodiment theory be approached from lived bodies to understand how flesh is subjected and holds unspoken knowledge. Another notable sociologist, Anne Witz (as cited in Kosut & Moore, 2010) extended the importance of making new ways of thinking about the body to “recognize the somatic, subjective, and social components of embodiment and how they interrelate” (p. 2). Kosut and Moore (2010) describe the body as the initial introduction to the performance of the self and identity, “our expression agency, while at the same time its structural location in stratified worlds that limit that very agency” (p. 2).

### **Beauty in Cultural Groups**

There may be some influence from European Americans on the characterization of beauty in different countries. It was explicit in Darling-Wolf’s (2004) article linking the colonization and conquest of Japan during World War II, and its effect on its people that have embedded itself through generations into what is now displayed and called hybridization. Darling-Wolf’s (2004) ethnographic study in Japan captured the pervasiveness of the media and its fascination with Western culture and fashion. White women and their facial features were drastically different than the Japanese women; before the two countries were introduced to each other, single eyelids and small noses were the beauty standard. After colonization, Japanese women negotiated both the local

influence and the global influence in regard to beauty and what was considered attractive. The Japanese women in Darling-Wolf's research agreed that there was a shift from what used to be attractive to what is currently considered attractive: rounder eyes and a high nose. The Western look became the new standard.

Within the U.S., it is even harder to escape the beauty images that women are overwhelmed with every day. It is felt in sororities, in the professional workplace, and in schools. Beauty may be important to many people, and women sometimes traverse a set of ideals that, even though they do not agree, they may feel compelled to follow. To suggest that people choose not to prescribe to these ideals is to say that someone is rarely an active, contributing, and influenced member of their environment and social surroundings (Oram, 2003). Many individuals are influenced by family, friends, and their social environment including, social media, advertisements. In doing so, they are choosing to fit in and blend in with their surroundings and community.

Etcoff (2000) believes that the dominant group, in any culture you choose to explore, is usually at an economic advantage and have more say and influence on what is defined as beautiful. Her research states that individuals that have the ability to move between the dominant group and the nondominant group are considered attractive and experience a rise in social status because they physically resemble and embody the characteristics elicited from the dominant group. White European standards of beauty may marginalize other ethnic beauty types that stray from what the norm is. Minority members who do not embody specific characteristics have contested the hegemonic Western standards of beauty for decades, and many women may believe that they fall short in meeting the normative, European beauty standard.

Western occupation may have had some influence on Japanese culture and its cultural transformation. The integration, assimilation, and influence of Western ideals led to the modernization of the Japan social culture, and as a result, a hybridity of Japanese-Western aesthetics. Darling-Wolf (2004) suggests that there is a connection between the nature of gender, class, and cultural identity, and aims to study the effects of negotiating the “Westernized nature of constructions of feminine physical beauty” (p. 328) that several scholars believe is a “side-effect of Japan’s relationship to the West” (as cited in Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 328).

The gap in research that Darling-Wolf aims to fill is the lack of literature on “how Japanese women negotiate the tensions Western influence introduces in their cultural environment” (Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 328). What she also aims to find out are how Japanese women, as media consumers, negotiate and interpret popular cultural representations of women, who are mostly Western models. It becomes apparent in her research that the constructions of feminine physical beauty were identified as a significant side effect of Japan’s relationship to the West” (as cited in Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 328).

Furthermore, Darling-Wolf discovered that there was a great amount of Western constructs of female beauty represented in the Japanese media. The beauty constructs meshing Japanese and Western ideals were “intricately embedded in the complex interactions between gender, globalization, nationalism, and class status” (Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 328). The representations of Western individuals were used within Japanese media to create “visual quotations of what Japan and Japanese are not” (p. 328). This was an effect of the U.S. cosmetic industry due to globalization. The cultural lifestyle in

Japan post-World War I transformed many aspects of the Japanese culture including the physical transformation of what was considered beautiful for Japanese women.

According to the women interviewed by Darling-Wolf (2004), what the women considered beautiful within the Japanese culture were the following: they took care of others, had a positive attitude, were fun to be with, and were calm and easy to be around. There was also a difference between beauty and attractiveness; attractiveness could be defined as having inner beauty, whereas, beauty was strictly related to physical appearance. For instance, Darling-Wolf's (2004) work suggests that the "cultural environment is a particularly rich terrain on which negotiations...take place" (p. 340). The participants in her study negotiated global and local influences on a regular basis, in addition to engaging with the media (Darling-Wolf, 2004). This suggests that our social environment is where we negotiate what is and what is not. Individuals from the United States are in the center of where "representations are constructed and distributed" (Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 340). Darling-Wolf's informants were Japanese women; their appearance is drastically different than Western women as far as physical attributes are considered.

Some Japanese women consider the postwar Western invasion and its influence on the Japanese cultural text to be a part of their cultural environment (Darling-Wolf). Japanese women still recognize the foreign influence and the shift in Japanese cultural standards, and two informants were able to remember the change in beauty standards because of the Western influence. There was a noticeable shift of standards with regards to what was once considered attractive to what was now the "new" attractive. The aesthetic of beauty within Japan went from the almond-shaped single eyelid-eyes and

small nose to rounder eyes and a “high” nose. Now the Western look became the new standard.

Key examples from the article that introduced this beauty novelty: “teachers told us students that it was OK,” (p. 338), “...adopting a more Western look....I wanted to be like” (p. 338-339). “Western texts clearly had an impact on Japanese cultural constructions of female attractiveness” (p. 339). There was a new hybridity forming. Being Japanese was no longer enough; incorporating characteristics that were also Western was the preferred beauty standard. Darling-Wolf’s informants “overwhelmingly pointed to Westernized traits when asked what characteristics were considered important features of female attractiveness in Japan” (p. 340). Saying that “they preferred Japanese media figures exhibiting Westernized features” (p. 340), and that women who have both Japanese and Western features are unique and “a bit ambiguous” (p. 340).

In Japan, the way in which women define physical beauty “cannot be considered outside the larger ideological and cultural environment in which each individual is located. Nor can it be separated from the constructionists of other identities and subjectivities. Darling-Wolf’s (2004) interest in the sites of attractiveness among Japanese women was motivated by the lack of research conducted on the Japanese cultural text and its focus on the negotiation of media and representation of gender. Another motivation was her concern with an “increasing emphasis in academic circles on individuals’ ability to ‘resist’ dominant popular discourses” (p. 330), especially those focusing on the female body. Her decision to interview only female women came from her interest in “exploring the media-promoted female culture that has developed around popular representations of attractiveness in Japan” (p. 330).

According to Darling-Wolf (2004), capitalist media perpetuates predominately Western standards of physical attractiveness and beauty. Investigating the definition of attractiveness and how one who is visually impaired navigates through said standards is important because being attractive may create advantages for some and disadvantages for others. Studies have shown that individuals who hold physical characteristics that are considered attractive or beautiful display a better quality of life in several areas such as: economic, social, and political. Individuals see the agency, the way in which people with the set of physical characteristics and attributes considered beautiful, and begin to mimic these standards, internalize them, and incorporate them in their lives via beauty rituals. These beauty rituals include plastic surgery, skin bleaching, and the stigmatizing of the unattractive physical features towards the people who hold these.

Darling-Wolf (2004) brought to surface the assumption that beauty standards are not implicit. In other sociocultural systems across the Atlantic Ocean, South Korean teenage girls beg their parents for the double eyelid surgery as a gift for completing high school. This surgery, the epicanthic fold double eyelid surgery, has become popular in many Southeast Asian countries, especially Japan, China, and South Korea. Big eyes are seen as more attractive than having the smaller, ethnic eyelid of the Asian ethnic group. This is clarified by the fact that South Korea has become one of the hubs of cosmetic plastic surgery. Plastic surgery maybe a hot commodity, not for repairing disfigurements, but improving aesthetic details.

African American women are constantly challenging the dominant definitions of beauty. Patton (2006) argues that what people consider to be beauty or attractive changes depending on the culture and context. She argues that the idea of beauty comes from the

hegemonically defined expectations of the U.S. white standard which then marginalizes other beauty types that diverge from what is known as normal. What is considered to be beautiful will vary depending on the context and culture, yet, it is widely known that European beauty norms have historically set the standards for what physical characteristics, bodily and facial, are considered beautiful and what is not considered beautiful.

**Beauty in the media.** The media is the largest instrument in supplying images that recommend which bodies are normal, healthy, and worthy (as cited in Moore & Kosut, 2010). Television hosts numerous shows that critique the way individuals physically look. These shows, such as *MTV's Fat Camp*, and *NBC's Biggest Loser, E!: Entertainment Television's Botched*, and *ABC's Extreme Makeover*, are watched by millions of viewers worldwide. Representations of the body are ubiquitous, and the images we see every day everywhere may influence us. Children acquire more information about the body through the media than any other medium; the media are one of the primary agents of socialization and directs the cultural conversations about the body (Moore & Kosut, 2010). In Ward's (2015) book, *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability and Black Women in Reality TV*, she quotes Justin M. Jhally's argument on the social influence of watching television: "it provides us with pictures of the world, or our world, and the knowledge that most of these pictures are fictional does not immunize us from believing in them. The beliefs we form become part of the context within which we understand who we are" (as cited in Ward, 2015, p. 21).

Popular beauty brands, such as *Dove*®, use marketing commercials that showcase flawlessly beautiful women. Hoping to gain a wider audience by using real women with



real beauty issues, *Dove*© came out with a new campaign to promote “Real Beauty” (<http://www.dove.us/Our-Mission/Real-Beauty/default.aspx>). In one of the commercials, three women who were visually impaired were shown participating in every day beauty practices. Even though the purpose of the commercial was to positively portray the women finding pleasure and acceptance in partaking in a practice that all women do regardless of physical barriers, the beauty practices demonstrated were only expressed in visual terms. The advertisement was presented visually and without audible indications of the products advertised. As Bolt (2004) points out, beauty is often described as being superficial; this becomes apparent when the discussion and presentation of beauty is stripped of all but visible content.

*Dove*© may have missed the opportunity to use what was different than the norm by showing a “new set of understandings and meanings about what it means to have and be a body” (Moore & Kosut, 2010, p. 5). Our bodies are constantly mediated by cultural commentary by way of magazines, social media, the Internet, and television (Bolt, 2004). Reality television shows have become an unfiltered channel where people are listening and internalizing comments and critiques about what is being said, and sometimes not said, about the body. The fortunate side of beauty and body represented in the media is that it invites everyone into the conversation that then becomes an “embodied cultural blueprint that can take us beyond the confines of the flesh” (p. 5).

If beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder, the one who sees is then subjected to tremendous amounts of images displayed by the media and advertisements. These images and ads ubiquitously display specific types of individuals with even more distinct physical characteristics and facial attributes. Body scholars are arguing for another way

of considering the body that is being represented in the media, as well as consider what bodies are not being represented, “bodies that are outside the norm” (Moore & Kosut, 2010, p. 347). In understanding how individuals who are visually impaired elicit these standards of beauty from the dominant, seeing world, “we can learn a great deal about our culture through analyzing how bodies are mediated, but just as importantly, it is imperative to reflexively consider which bodies are missing in media representations” (p. 347) by reframing the position to a non-visual lens.

### **Beauty and Visual Impairment**

It would be imperative to reframe the current dialogue from those who are exempt to visual representations of beauty portrayed by media and advertising. There is a possibility that those who are visually impaired or blind may have a different concept of what is considered attractive. Even if those who are visually impaired or blind receive information from a friend or spouse describing said beauty, they do not have the means to visually see the spectrum of beauty, distorted or not, or visual propaganda. This particular research then begins with women who are not often asked how they define beauty.

The conversations on beauty perspectives are by and large from the able-bodied, seeing population, which are by default ocularcentric. Society may not regard women, or men, who are visually impaired or blind to be judges of what is aesthetic; a significant portion of the academic research on beauty and attractiveness has been one-sided. The seeing world defines and sets the standards of what is considered physically beautiful and what physical characteristics are seen as attractive. When I began this research, it was my hypothesis that the participants in this research who are visually impaired may have a

heightened, or more sensitive, sense of smell and auditory function to compensate for their loss of sight. In this thinking, I believed that the heightened sense of smell and hearing could contribute to a different way of defining and interpreting what may be considered beautiful or attractive.

Disability is defined as a bodily impairment, or the inability to fully function as an able-bodied individual. Blindness and visual impairment, according to Suttorp-Schulten and Rothova (1996) is measured by the visual acuity of the better eye, “since vision in this eye determines the actual maximum binocular visual acuity” (p. 844). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines blindness as “the best possible corrected visual acuity in the better eye of less than 0.05 or 20/400” (p. 844). An individual who is blind is unable to discern light from darkness or at worst, is unable to see at all. Legal blindness can also be defined as “the level of blindness that makes a person eligible for a reduction in tax and other benefits in certain countries” (p. 844). Within the United States, anyone who is legally blind has a visual acuity of 20/200. The National Federation of the Blind (2015) regard blindness as having to use other methods to participate in activities that individuals with vision could do using just their eyes.

In 1995, the estimated population of individuals considered blind was 38 million, 0.7% of the total population, and 110 million people worldwide were considered visually impaired (Suttorp-Schulten & Rothova, 1996). The estimation of visually impaired people worldwide is 285 million “39 million are blind and 246 have low vision” (World Health Organization website, August, 2014). According to the International Classification of Diseases (2006), visual function has a range of four levels: normal vision, which would be the majority of the seeing population, moderate visual

impairment, severe visual impairment, and blindness. Moderate and severe visual impairments are grouped together under the umbrella term low vision. Complete blindness with the aforementioned low vision would then be considered visual impairment. Having moderate and severe visual impairment and blindness are all under the umbrella of what is considered visual impairment.

Sacks (2003) interprets one individual's experience with becoming blind and found that it was similar to unveiling "a new way of living, of ordering one's world" (p. 1). Engaging with the participants in this study and asking how they view attractiveness and beauty will indeed reorder the world a little differently, and create a new way of considering ideas. Sacks (2003) described Hull's experience with being blind and how it led him to become a "whole-body seer," an escape from visual nostalgia, or "trying to pass as normal" (p. 2).

It was not until the early 1980s that people with disabilities were recognized as consumers, a part of the mainstream population, and social beings able to participate and engage in activities with those without disabilities. People with disabilities were represented in three ways: as objects for the sole purpose of receiving charitable donations, as being examples of courageous individuals, and as stereotypes in popular culture (Bolt, 2014). Beginning in the early 90s, more and more disabled individuals were advertised as "normal people doing things that normal people do" (as cited in Bolt, 2014). Although, individuals who had visible impairments continued to be less represented than the rest of the disabled population that did not have visible, bodily impairments. This was done as to not disturb the aesthetic consciousness of the able-

bodied viewer; individuals with highly visible and visually obstructive impairments were avoided at all costs.

### **Disability and Identity**

Huang and Brittain (2006) conducted 21 in-depth interviews with disabled athletes, both men and women, to “explore the multiplicity and complexity of identity construction” (p. 352). They claimed that “the ideal bodily perfection, emphasized almost globally in the postmodern era through glossy advertising campaigns by multinational companies competing in a global market, is central to the oppression of disabled people” (p. 352). To attain a positive self-identity in a culture that maintains perfectionist ideals of bodily beauty is challenging for most people, let alone those whose bodies are least aligned with such ideals (as cited in Hope & Brittain, 2006). The aim in their study was to emphasize that the elite athletes who were disabled held a positive self-identity because they did not focus on their disability, but gained value from their athletic ability and accomplishments.

The interview process in Huang and Brittain’s (2006) research used a traditionally qualitative method “based on humanistic concerns with individual lives and the importance of subjective perception” (p. 356). Oral accounts of each individual captured the subjective accounts of their lived experiences from their own perspectives (Huang & Brittain). This allowed each voice to be heard, and also acknowledged and highlighted the issues of the disabled community as a whole. The participants acquired a positive personal self-awareness by acknowledging their bodies as disabled and accepting the existence of the pressure to fit in too a society that sees the body as a symbol of meaning and identity. According to mainstream society, the bodies of the disabled were unworthy

and unattractive. Therefore, in order for those with visible body impairments to acquire a positive sense of self, the initial step, according to Huang and Brittain (2006), was to develop the politics of identity. “Identity is a creation of self-determination, autonomy, and choice” (p. 361). Several participants in this study showed that they were “able to confront stereotypes associated with disability, reject negative perceptions, and present themselves as active agents who can define disability on their own terms” (p. 361).

Similar to the objective of the research on physical beauty and attractiveness from the perspective of women who are visually impaired or blind, Huang and Brittain (2006) challenge the existing paradigm within the dominant, ocularcentric society. Their aim was to deconstruct the “negative societal perceptions of the impaired body...in order to reframe them in a more positive way” (p. 353). How the dominant, able-bodied construct their identities is through a process that socially excludes and marginalizes others who have bodies that are not “normal,” or who deviate from the portrayed ideal. Visible body impairment is considered a deviation from what is normal, an “undesirable personal attribute” (p. 354). The word normal was used to describe the nondisabled society, which reinforced the pervasiveness of societal norms and highlights the fact that disabled people clearly construct parts of their own identities in relation to these norms, even if they do not accept the labels that nondisabled society ascribes them (Huang & Brittain, 2006).

Individuals with disabilities, including those who are visually impaired, negotiate what society says about their bodies. For them, participating in a sport was a context for those with disabilities to assert their self-worth and power by identifying as an able athlete. The focus was no longer on their impairment, but on their spectacular, physical capabilities. Individuals feel empowered by asserting their identities and formulating for

themselves in a space where “the social struggle for control of the physical body occurs, processes of individual identity testing and formation are conducted, and multiple notions of identity are embodied” (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 353).

Huang and Brittain believe that identities can be created and constructed through experience and intersubjectivity. Jenkins (as cited in Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 353) also contends that identities are formed in a dialectical relationship between internal factors (i.e., what we think our identities are) and external factors (i.e., how others see us and react to us), which may strengthen or contradict each other” (p. 353). This means that our identities, or what we identify with, are socially constructed and are by-products of our interactions with others and how they define us. Within the discourse of disability, the disabled are defined by what they can and cannot do.

Individuals who are disabled are expected to make an effort to conform to an able-bodied ideal and are under pressure to prove themselves, to convince others that they are doing their best to fit in (Huang & Brittain). What is different among those who are disabled is that they have an understanding that it is society, not them or their impairment, that is the problem. Disabled people can positively recognize their impairment as no longer a reason for self-disgust or something to be denied or hidden, but as a socially imposed oppressive category to be challenged or broken down” (p. 354). This may be similar to the gendered body, where the body of visible impairment is read, influenced, and constructed by various social, cultural, economic, and political factors, as well as by his or her own experiences (Huang & Brittain).

It is possible that gender and impairment play a part in determining a person’s sense of self and identity; similar to other bodies seen as different (e.g. race, sexual

orientation), disabled people cannot argue that their bodies are not physiologically different from the bodies of those who are able-bodied (as cited in Huang & Brittain, 2006).

Another critical aspect in Huang and Brittain's (2006) study was the complexity of the females that were disabled athletes having to deal with the inaccurate perceptions from others of being inadequate and weak, but "they also have the additional burden of being perceived as the weaker sex" (p. 363). A female participant in Huang and Brittain's (2006) study had "internalized the dominant perception about disability...and accepted the prescribed notion of self-identity" (p. 359). Elsa, a powerlifter, was an example of how there are a "number of issues surrounding the complexities of identity" (p. 365). Being a female powerlifter created a dualism in which she had to consider her gender as well as appearing feminine. To her, "her dominant identity is dictated by her situation at a particular moment" (p. 364).

What is interesting is that participants with physical impairments recognized their impairment as an important part of who they were. Identity for them is thus fundamentally embodied. Yet, they rejected the meaning that the able-bodied world attached to their impairment. For those with physical impairments, how they defined themselves was defined by what they were physically able to do with their bodies, regardless of their disability. According to Huang and Brittain (2006), their inability to perform an action executed by an able-bodied individual was "due to the environmental or social barriers instead of their impairment" (p. 361). Most importantly, the participants chose to "reject the negative implications that society attempts to place on those differences, the very fact that they are keenly aware of them implies that these



implications must play some part in their concept of self” (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 362). The participants associated themselves with a sport that gave them the “opportunity to exhibit key characteristics associated with able-bodied concepts...such as endurance, strength, and competitiveness” (p. 362). They did this in order to situate themselves with “dominant forms...[in order to demonstrate] their physical skills” (p. 362). This reinforces “the power of societal norms” as positive and desirable (p. 362).

Fawcett (as cited in Huang & Brittain, 2006) claims that individuals have a shifting core; they are able to transform themselves in order to relate or connect with different people in different situations in different ways. Another significant example from Huang and Brittain’s (2006) research is the way in which the athletes positioned themselves as athletes first, then affirmed their disability. Without denying the fact that they are disabled, there was a clear self-definition of their participation in an elite sport that provided a base for them to redefine themselves and think beyond the dualism of disabled-nondisabled in self-identity (Huang & Brittain). In 2005, Huang presented the biosocial model in his dissertation on disability and sports. This model offered a way for people with disabilities to interpret their own identity utilizing a perspective that considered other physical characteristics such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity in identity formation.

The achievement of success in a physical activity or sport enabled the participants who are disabled to challenge the dominant ideologies that described their bodies as defective and weak. In this case, physical activity or being a member of a sports group is a context that facilitates both resistance to their societal label as disabled and empowerment in owning their body as it is (Huang & Brittain, 2006). The participants in

Huang's and Brittan's (2006) study felt empowered by the feeling of being physically skilled and having a sense of control over their bodies, which contributed to their mental strength in taking charge of their own lives. Their confidence came from their physical abilities, and these abilities helped them feel good about themselves, and as an effect, enhanced their self-esteem. Self-actualization led to a greater sense of self-worth, indicating the idea that "when you are good at something you can feel that you actually exist because people take notice of you and you have something to be proud of" (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 369).

The critical point emphasized was that the participants in Huang and Brittain's (2006) research were influential in creating their own sense of self and were empowered by their identity as elite athletes. What they were able to do regarding their abilities versus their disability turned them into "somebody rather than just a disabled person" (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 365). As one participant stated: "Being an elite powerlifter is my major identity, definitely. I was nobody. I used to think so...But now I am one of the best powerlifters in Taiwan" (p. 365). There is a dualism being recognized in which the participants see themselves not just as athletes, but as athletes with a disability. It was also recognized that the elite athletes spend a significant amount of time and effort improving their abilities, which "demonstrates that it is also possible for disabled people to use some norms to positively enhance their own identities" (p. 365).

To facilitate this kind of environment for those wanting to have a positive sense of self-worth, it is important to discover for yourself an ability that enables shared identity. One of the researchers used in Huang and Brittain's (2006) work explained identity as a concept of belonging; it is "about what you have in common with some other people and

what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality” (p. 369). Huang and Brittain (2006) described the development of an increased sense of mind-body unity and interdependence that was created by challenging stereotypes related to physical disability. It is imperative that individuals “embrace a positive identity and define themselves on their own terms” (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 370).

### **Imperfection in a Perfectionist Society**

Guthrie (1999) interviewed 37 women from various ethnic and social backgrounds with visible and non-visible disabilities that acquired a mind-body balance using physical activity to achieve personal empowerment. Guthrie used her former research on disability and sports to construct the interview questions and prior to the main interviews, spoke to two women to pilot test the interview guide. The women were interviewed either in the privacy of their homes, over the phone, or at the researcher’s office. Each interview was over an hour and was recorded and transcribed verbatim at a later time. The transcriptions from the 37 interviews were then compiled and analyzed for obvious themes that were connected to the goals of the research; the management of physical activity for healthy perceptions and personal empowerment, and disability management and physical activity.

By examining the relationship between a woman’s ability to manage her disability with regular physical activity and exercise, Guthrie was able to connect their engagement with some sort of physical activity to the achievement of empowerment, both physically and psychologically, to manager their disability. Two ideas were investigated: the relationship between disability and physical activity to achieve empowerment and

positive self-perception, and how women with disabilities manage their disability with physical activity or exercise.

The women who were disabled in this study used physical activities and other non-physical identities to gain a greater sense of worth. These same women had a greater mind-body appreciation because they participated in physical activity, whether it was exercise or as part of a team sport and used their physical capabilities to manage their disability. Various studies regarding individuals with disabilities demonstrate that those with bodily impairments are fully capable navigating the able-bodied discourse and use certain points to facilitate their own growth (as cited in Guthrie, 1999). For example, one of the female participants with heart disease stated that exercising made her feel physically stronger and better. She felt more in charge of her body, and was able to manage her disability, along with other stresses in her life. Physical activity gave the participants a sense of self-worth and helped them accept their circumstances. The women felt empowered by their capability of “managing their disabilities via sport or exercise, they also felt more autonomous and in control of their lives” (Guthrie, 1999, p. 373). What was interesting about this study was that, according to Guthrie, women with impairments were “found to be more able than their able-bodied counterparts to negotiate living with mind-body imperfection” (p. 370).

There were three approaches the women in this study used to manage their disabilities. First, those with acquired disabilities managed their disabilities by focusing their attention on mental, social, and spiritual strategies such as reading, painting, performing and composing music, networking, joining a spiritual community, or becoming better students or employees. A few of the women were able to participate in

physical activities and exercise, and in some cases only participated because they were told to do so. The way in which the women navigated the world using their body and physical ability was to minimize the focus on the fact that they could not physically see.

The second approach was the management of disability by normalizing the body. This means that the women who are disabled used physical activity and exercise to align their bodies as much as possible with the feminine beauty ideal of the able-bodied. They also used non-physical means to manage their disability, such as professional aspirations, religious beliefs, and networking, but placed more value on the importance of physical appearance. For example, one of the women stated, “I have always been interested in keeping myself looking good and my body as sexually appealing as possible. Exercise helps me to feel better about my body and to feel more normal...I hate looking weird” (Guthrie, 1999, p. 376). These women differed from the first group in that they participated in physical activity to beautify the body and saw exercise as a means to an end.

The third and last management strategy for the women who are disabled was to balance the mind-body function. These women incorporated both mental and physical activities to successfully manage their disability and self-perception. In addition, Guthrie (1999) believed that they developed their own identities that steered away from the socially acceptable ideals of the able-bodied society. One of the female participants with a spinal cord injury stated that listening to her own intuition rather than what society determined to be ideal was her road to personal salvation. Physical activity was not only a crucial part of these women’s lives and personal identities, they thoroughly enjoyed exercising and found it to be intrinsically rewarding. In contrast to the first two groups of

women, the women in the third group continuously sought new ways to improve their skills and performances to become mentally and physically strong. The women in the first two groups also focused on their self-development, rather than as a collective group in which the latter felt psychologically empowered because they were also serving a political purpose in “deconstructing their own internalized ableism” (Guthrie, 1999, p. 377).

Guthrie’s (1999) research demonstrated that regular exercise and physical activity boosted women’s physical sense of self. When one’s body interacts with the surrounding environment, this stretches the body’s capabilities and plays a crucial part in developing an empowered female-self. Guthrie is not saying that physical activity is the only way to achieve female self-empowerment, or positive bodily perceptions. This study showed that some women also gained just as much from focusing on mental and spiritual activities to improve their sense of well-being. Physical activity can be used to “reify able-bodies norms and images and thus further the oppression of persons with disabilities” (p. 378). The goal is to create and maintain a healthy balance of the mind-body function, taking into account that there is an intrinsic reward for attaining a body that fits your personal preference and ability rather than the unrealistic and unachievable ideals of the dominant society.

Guthrie’s (1999) work showed that women with disabilities employ an array of mental, spiritual, social, and physical strategies “to manage their disabilities and ultimately empower themselves as individuals” (p. 379). The key point in her research was to gain individual empowerment, which served as the basis for identity development, and the first step in challenging the internalized ideals of an able-bodied society (Guthrie,

1999). To achieve this, the reconstruction of one's identity must be done as a personal and collective endeavor, "groups of women must recognize and commit themselves to work together to bring about social change. This requires support and validation that group activity can provide" (Guthrie, 1999, p. 379).

Elite athletes who are disabled affirm their cultural identity by challenging the stereotypes projected onto them, participating in some form of positive and productive solidarity, and telling their stories (Huang & Brittain, 2006). In agreement with Alcoff (2006), personal and collective identity politics are inextricably linked; the way in which we form a unique and empowered sense of ourselves is by participating in personal and political projects that build upon and adds to a resource of experience, ability, culture and social organization (as cited in Huang & Brittain, 2006).

### **Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory**

Guthrie's (1999) perspective in feminist theory states that the point of departure is the transformation of a woman's lived experience in current society and her ability to reevaluate social theory and practice from her point of view. On the contrary, Alcoff (2006) claims that feminists know what women are, she argues that almost every source of knowledge about women is sexist and misogynistic. Alcoff insists on approaching the concept of womanhood by combining the experience of being a woman as a reflective practice with the awareness of the institutions that support identity politics, and the concept of positionality.

For example, the feminist author, Teresa de Lauretis (as cited in Alcoff, 2006), attempted in her book *Alice Doesn't* by trying to connect the links between gender, social construct, and subjectivity, within human agency. De Lauretis' subjectivity is to perceive

and understand the subject through experience as they engage with the practices and institutions that offer meaning and value to what happens in the world. Subjectivity can also be interpreted as the experience in which one defines the complexity of habits that result from the interactions of the inner and outer world, all the while, as the self continues to engage with social reality.

De Lauretis (as cited in Alcoff, 2006) goes on to discuss the definition of identity as a process “in which one’s history is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle” (p. 145). One’s identity can be taken as a political starting point for critical self-reflection. Identity politics is acknowledging the “relevance of one’s identity and of the shifting and relational political effects” (p. 146). When the idea of being a woman is no longer defined by a set of attributes, but instead by one’s position, the internal characteristics identified, may align with the external context and situate itself firmly within what is happening in the social environment (Alcoff, 2006). Alcoff believes that when women can define themselves and have their own identity independent of the external situation, her position may become autonomous with respect to others and the general external historical and social conditions.

Moving to the definition of positionality, identity may be a constantly shifting context to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on. If it is possible to identify women by their positions within this network of relations, then it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument for women not on a claim that their



innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change. The position of women is relative...and yet it is not 'undecidable.' Through social critique and analysis, we can identify women via their position relative to an existing cultural and social network" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 148).

The identity construction from the departure of being a woman allows for her to be part of the "historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated. De Lauretis's point is that the identity of a woman is the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access (as cited in Alcoff, 2006, p. 148).

The positionality perspective offers new perspectives, but also "necessitates a political change in perspective because the point of departure, the point from which all things are measure, has changed" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 149). Seen in this way, being a 'woman' is to take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context. As someone who is biracial, Alcoff (2006) believes that a biracial identity may be set by genealogy, social recognition, the objective social location that one inhabits in a stratified society. On the other hand, one makes choices about how to understand, negotiate, and live one's identity. Mixed race and bicultural persons may intuit this better because we sometimes must consciously choose how to identify ourselves on various forms and how to deal with a host of other small and large issues. Alcoff (2006) defined identity politics as choosing one's identity as a member of one or more groups as a heightened political point of

departure in order to become more reflective about the relation between one's identity and one's life.

### **An Advertising Aesthetic**

Currently, mainstream advertisements rarely represent individuals with disabilities, and there have been few studies done regarding advertising for and within the community of those who are disabled. Advertising has an early history of contributing to discrimination. First, people who had impairments were "excluded and in some instances deliberately ignored, and second, a distorted view of disability was presented in order to raise money" (Bolt, 2014, p. 26). Representation on American television has improved, yet it continues to underrepresent people who have impairments, as if "not to intrude on the viewer's aesthetic consciousness" (p. 27). The article points out is that being blind to aesthetics is similar to visual impairment as a way of being ignorant of things that are considered beautiful. Bolt believes that aesthetic blindness "designates the epistemological myth of blindness to aesthetic qualities, whereby visual impairment becomes synonymous with ignorance, and aesthetic qualities are perceived by other than visual means," although find expression through visual terms (p. 29).

Dove is a popular cosmetic entity that makes beauty products used by women. The company has been marketing itself as a brand that is building self-esteem and enhancing women's natural beauty. Dove became one of the first beauty institutions to shine the spotlight on the perpetuation of unattainable and inauthentic beauty standards. It started a campaign called Real Beauty (as cited in Bolt, 2014) that featured women who are visually impaired using Dove products. Unfortunately, the Dove campaign for

real beauty is part of the social aesthetic by which women become stereotyped and stigmatized.

Mitchell and Snyder (as cited in Bolt, 2014) claim, “advertisement for the Movement for Self-Esteem is similarly fixated on visions and employs what is sometimes called an overcoming narrative” (p. 30). The real women in the advertising commercials used visual references such as, “I started to see things clearly’ and ‘I don’t let my sight get in the way.” The women in the Dove commercials who were visually impaired were shown as perceiving their sense of self through non-visual means and their emotions were translated into visual terms. In addition, the commercials are “comparably inaccessible because there are no audible indications of the products being advertised...the product becomes apparent in the form of an image” (p. 30). “In the absence of an audible representation of these products names and slogans, the advertisements are essentially inaccessible for those of us who do not perceive by visual means, a scenario worsened by the fact that the advertisers employ people who have visual impairments and use visual impairments as a theme” (Bolt, 2014, p. 30).

***Beauty in the U.S. university system.*** Oram’s (2003) dissertation on the disciplining nature of sorority systems and how it deals with often impossible to obtain beauty standards uncover how and why women comply to the practices of achieving impossible beauty standards. Why do women try so hard to fit inside the narrowly defined standards of beauty set within the sorority system? Where does the pressure to be beautiful come from and what does beauty mean within the context of the sorority system? According to the participants in Oram’s (2003) dissertation, physical characteristics are more important when deciding what is truly beautiful.

Oram (2003) wrote her dissertation on the practice and agency of sorority systems in colleges. In belonging to a group culture of beauty within a college sorority system; one's appearance and physical beauty was the highest indicator of whether or not you were accepted into a specific sorority. Females were judged based on their beauty alone. When they became members, they worked even harder to fit into a mold that they may not have tried to prescribe to before. This was done in order to fit into a system and be like everyone else as to not stand out. Regardless of whether or not these college women believed that looking a certain way was beneficial or not, their social environment and the agency of the environment dictated to them that looking a specific way granted you access and inclusion into the sorority system, "It attempts to interpret and better understand the lives of the women it focuses on, center its women informants, gives them voice, often focuses on the female body, and ultimately places feminine concerns in a primary position through their placement at the center of all analytic investigations" (Oram, 2003, p. 19). My decision in keeping this research strictly among women compliments the feminist theory approach in that the experience, role, and perspective of women, by women should be the primary focus (as cited in Oram, 2003).

Through the narrative analysis within feminist interpretive theory, the expression of the body and disability can be discussed. According to Oram (2003), the narrative analysis is a method and research tool used to center the views of the participants as a way to make sense of their experience. Oram believes that using narrative analysis is an effective way to better understand the ways in which people experience their bodies and connect the personal experience to the cultural experience. Mattingly and Garro (as cited in Oram, 2003) also agree that narrative analysis can help the reader understand concrete

events; the inner world of observable actions. The narrative analysis also helps the reader understand how one's culture influences the stories they tell (Oram, 2003).

Oram's (2003) work focuses on the human body and how it is often the subject of culture and inscription of cultural values (as cited in Oram, 2003). Embodiment authors are working to connect the dots of cultural meaning and bodily experience in hopes to write from the body as opposed to writing about the body. Oram contributes to the medical anthropology field and her research takes the frame of interpretive feminist medical anthropology. Her research aims to inform readers about what the body can teach us about the placement of the body, women within our society, and how it relates to identity, emotion and meaning. Oram's dissertation on sorority women examines the experience of women's bodies and the role of agency, what Oram describes as the purposeful and reflective actions one undertakes.

***Biological lens of beauty.*** The initial writings regarding the question of beauty began with Darwin with the explanation that attractive human characteristics have evolved to increase fitness. Now that we no longer need physical attributes to make obvious our health and vitality, our beauty and attractiveness may be used for other means. Survival of the fittest no longer determines who will live on into old age or whether or not an individual can survive harsh climates. The contemporary survival of the fittest strategy lies in using our bodies and cues to get what we want that leads to a better life. A higher quality of life (HQL) means having an equally attractive partner to create attractive offspring, acquiring a steady job that provides an adequate yearly salary, which then leads to the finer things in social life such as a house, education, and material possessions.

From a biological lens, the physical qualities that displayed attractiveness and were preferred of chosen mate were: sexual dimorphism, averageness, and symmetry. These traits showed genetic fitness, reproductive success, ability to provide protection and food, fertility, and absence of disease. Clearly, none of these qualities can be depicted from an initial encounter and would take more than a conversation to conjecture whether an individual was genetically fit for successful reproduction. The message that this conveys may be that it takes more than a simple glance over of what an individual looks like based on physical attributes and characteristics to determine whether they are beautiful or not. Yet, how we perceive an individual is consistently and historically initiated through our perceptions on what we see standing in front of us.

Facial features that display human attractiveness give clues as to the individual's health and that "humans have evolved to view certain bodily features as attractive" (Fink & Neave, 2005, p. 317). Other visual aspects of beauty attributes and characteristics studied by biological evolutionists include facial symmetry and averageness, skin color and pigmentation, and body structure. How can those who are visually impaired or blind perceive these beauty characteristics? If biology tells us to mate with an individual who has a symmetrical face and body, in what ways does this influence those who cannot perceive that symmetry by visual means?

The theory of having multiple identities is "supported by the research participants' narratives [because they adopted] different identities depending on the specific situation in which they find themselves" (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 372). Their research builds upon the idea that one's identity is diverse and fluid and also supports Alcott's (2009) view of identity politics and positionality.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The research begins by stating the cultural position of being a woman, which was done in the beginning of the first chapter. The nuance of being a woman in any society is complex and complicated. From there, the women are divided into two cultural groups; those who are sighted and those who are visually impaired or blind. The sighted women are then divided again into two separate cultural groups; Japanese women and women in the U.S. attending a university in California. In the cultural group of women who are visually impaired or blind, the group is separated into female Asian athletes and U.S. American women. In each division, there is literature taken from the cultural group's perspective. The data from the interviews related to beauty and the way in which the two groups of women navigate beauty standards will be used to support or expound on what was found in the literature. The analysis of the literature will also be compared and contrasted to the responses collected from the 10 interviews with the women who are visually impaired or blind. Traits that are elicited physically versus non-physically will be noted and considered in order to develop a cohesive identity using Huang's (2003) identity formation model.

The concept and definition of beauty will be examined and explored among women who are visually impaired or blind, respectively. In addition, there will be an exploratory piece regarding how beauty characteristics are elicited. Ultimately, the characteristics that are elicited may help to inform and construct a positive identity. Included in this chapter will be the research design divided into five sections:

participants, research questions, methods, data collection, and data analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the method of descriptive narrative and qualitative inquiry.

### **Background**

The concept of beauty proved to be an elusive and extremely broad topic to investigate. The definition of physical beauty varied from person to person, as well as culture to culture. Within the group of women, white women hold different ideas of beauty than Japanese women which is also different to what black women identify as beautiful. Within this study, two of the women who were visually impaired referred to the physical beauty characteristics of Katharine Hepburn and Cleopatra. The other eight women referenced men that were physically beautiful.

Over the past 10 months, many attempts were made to redefine what aspects of beauty this research would focus on. It came down to focusing on physical beauty and attractiveness defined by the 10 subjects who were visually impaired comparing the beauty characteristics distinguished by women who were visually impaired or blind. The two elements to consider were the ways in which women who are visually impaired navigate the physical beauty standards of the ocularcentric world, and how the women in this study who are visually impaired define standards of beauty and attractiveness with little to no visual cues. This thesis explored beauty through the lens of women who are visually impaired or blind, and where physical beauty intersects, if at all, to beauty elicited non-visually.



## **Research Design**

Many researchers use the narrative analysis as a way of thinking about one's story or lived experience. Employing this research tool in this thesis will produce a better understanding of the narratives of my participants, which will in turn give a clearer picture of the navigation process of beauty and attractiveness of the women who are blind or visually impaired, while at the same time presenting how the stories that people tell are influenced by culture (Oram, 2003).

Darling-Wolf's (2004) and Oram (2003) approached their research using participate observation and semi-structured interviews. Darling-Wolf connected with her Japanese participants by word of mouth and networking with the participants she interviewed. Over the course of eight months, she interviewed over 40 women. Oram (2003) spent 10 months contacting sorority women within the California university system. She was able to build contacts by asking the young women she interviewed if they had other contacts interested in speaking with her. In doing this, she was able to avoid associating with one specific sorority group. The information gathered from both studies resulted from the relationships that both Darling-Wolf (2004) and Oram (2003) built during the interview process. As a result, the informational data were informative and empirically rich.

### **Research questions.**

1. How is beauty defined and navigated by women who are sighted?
2. How is beauty defined by women who are visually impaired or blind?

3. How are women who are visually impaired or blind influenced by the physical, ocularcentric beauty standards in which they navigate and practice?
4. How can beauty characteristics elicited non-visually or non-physically be utilized to build a positive identity formation for women?

**Participants.** The 10 women interviewed were over the age of 18. The average age was 54; the oldest female was 71 years old, and the youngest female was 22 years old. The women were from various socio-economic backgrounds, well educated, and currently employed or retired. Each participant is identified by initials unrelated to their given full name. The first participant, HS, was currently attending the university in Anchorage, Alaska. ES and EL were previous acquaintances through interactions at community events within Anchorage, Alaska. Nine of the women were European-American and from different parts of the United States. There was one participant that was originally from Ecuador, South America and had relocated to the United States in her early 20s to continue higher education in special education.

**Procedure.** The initial step in reaching out to this particular community was to contact agencies that provided services for people who were blind or visually impaired. These agencies included Alaska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ACBVI), National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and the State of Alaska's Department Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). In each of these agencies, contact was made through e-mail or telephone. The first individual that responded was with the director of disability support services at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). He gave ample contacts within the agencies listed above, as well as contacts he imagined would be interested in this

research. In addition, he provided insight on how to approach the disabled community and current projects related to the community of the visually impaired or blind. Due to confidentiality, he was not able to connect me with students that utilized the disability services on campus but agreed to contact the students and pass on my information.

It became apparent after four months of attempting to recruit 10 women who were visually impaired or blind that Alaska, diverse in ethnicity, race, gender, and age, could not provide this sample population. It became apparent later on in the research that individuals who have a disability infrequently socialize with other individuals who have a disability. This may have been part of the reason why it was difficult to contact more than 10 women within Alaska that were visually impaired or blind. Two of the participants were kind enough to help recruit acquaintances who were female and visually impaired or blind. Thankfully, the women that were contacted were more than willing to participate.

The names of the participants were kept anonymous to protect the identities of the 10 women interviewed. Initials were used that corresponded with each of the women only distinguishable by the researcher and conductor of interviews. Three of the women, NY, HR, and AK, were living in Massachusetts, New York, and Utah, respectively. The interviews that took place within Anchorage, Alaska were conducted either at the homes of the female participants or their places of employment. The interviews for YL and AN were conducted over the phone even though they physically lived in Alaska. They were unable to meet in-person due to their schedule or location within Alaska.

The main forms of communication prior to the interviews were done through e-mail and telephone. After obtaining the necessary contact information, such as email

address and telephone number, individual email messages were delivered to each participant. Each email included the research objective and purpose statement, the reason for my interest in this particular research, and an invitation for them to participate. If they agreed to become involved with the research and take part in a one-hour interview, a second email was sent that included the Institutional Review Board Consent Form and the list of 10 interview questions. To make sure each participant had enough time to review and reflect on the 10 interview questions, a minimum of three to five days were given before the scheduled interview.

There were several advantages of conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In agreement with Bailey (1994), having the flexibility to go beyond in provided the opportunity to have the participants expand further on a question and provided a better response rate versus sending a braille questionnaire. Most of the participants were also excited to speak in person. The only disadvantage was the lack of accessibility to women who were visually impaired or blind. Five of the women either lived out of state or more than three hours away by vehicle. Bailey found that telephone interviews had more advantages; they were quick, cost effective, and provided some anonymity. When reflecting on all 10 of the interviews, it was evident that the telephone interviews provided less of a visual bias. The only information provided about the participant during the telephone interviews was the tone of voice. No other means disrupted the interpretation of the participant in relation to how they responded.

At the beginning of each interview, the signed IRB Consent Form was signed. If the interview was conducted in person, a copy was made and given to the participant. If they interview was over the telephone, the signed consent form was returned through e-

mail the day of the interview or prior to the scheduled time and date. Whether over the telephone or in person, each interview lasted about an hour and was recorded using an audio recorder. Immediately after the interviews were completed, the recorded interviews were transcribed and archived in a password-encrypted file on a secured laptop. The interviews began with a reiteration of the background of the researcher and the objective for completing the thesis. The researcher and the participant also spent some time discussing the history of the impairment, both personal and in general. There was also dialogue on the concept of beauty, how it was defined, and how the women experienced it growing up. When the interview questions were completed, an additional five minutes, or more if needed, were given to the participants for any after thoughts or questions. Emails were sent out four to six months later, stating that if any of the participants had any additional comments, they could respond via email or telephone.

According to Bailey (1994), individuals who are visibly impaired in some fashion are often excluded from research. It was imperative that the same process in this study be employed when conducting the interviews with the women who were visually impaired or blind. The only difference in this study from those of Darling-Wolf (2004) was not the way in which the participants were selected, but the selected participants themselves. Bailey (1999) suggested mailing braille questionnaires. Although, a new screen reader and magnification technology made the effort of contacting these individuals through e-mail quick and effortless.

Using the transcribed data gathered from the 10 interviews, two forms of analysis were used. The first was a cross form item analysis incorporating three overt themes or patterns discussed regarding physical and non-physical aspects of beauty. The other form

of analysis was the narrative form. Numerous studies within feminist theory, disability studies, and identity politics, as well as sociocultural studies, have linked disability and identity formation, and displayed the falsity of ocularcentrism as the only avenue towards visual aesthetics.

**Data Collection.** One way to do social science research is to collect personal narratives and life histories through spoken or written forms. An objective during the interviews were to showcase the diversity among the women within a community rarely given the opportunity to participate in a discussion on what beauty looks like and how it is defined by them. No interview was the same, and the answers given by each person varied in content and complexity. To add to this, Denzin & Lincoln (2008) push the importance of “rendering the different facets of culture and social action and of reflecting” respective forms. As an analyst of a specific social culture, Denzin & Lincoln (2008) believe that it is imperative to focus on “socially shared codes, conventions, and structures” (p. 289). The analytical portion of this research used informational data from transcribed interviews to review various aspects of beauty through the lens of visual impairment and its definition and standards regarding what is beautiful.

I first analyzed the social perceptions of beauty and attractiveness among different groups of women who are not visually impaired within mainstream society. The groups included sorority women within the University of California system and Japanese women. I also considered theories proposed within evolutionary biology related to the topic of beauty and attractiveness. According to the literature on biological evolution and physical attractiveness, it was possible that humans have evolved to scan human faces for characteristics that are attractive.

During this investigation, I wished to clarify key problems. The first: what physical attributes are exclusive to the idea of beauty? Second, how are these attributes related to beauty elicited by women who are visually impaired or blind? Finally, if these elicited attributes from women who are visually impaired, or blind are, in fact, similar to the characteristics considered attractive by women who can see, how are they transferred? It is the assumption that what women believed to be beautiful may be similar to what the media defines as beautiful? Social media and television, with the help of technology and globalization, provide countless images and depictions of women that are admired because of their explicit beauty and sexual attraction.

There are articles written about third world countries in which photos of people with blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin cover countless buildings and windows of grocery stores. Assuming with caution that there is nothing inherently wrong with displaying marketing campaigns to promote industry and commercialism, in what ways does this influence those that view bodies significantly dissimilar to themselves?

As part of the qualitative research, using Denzin and Lincoln's (2008) perspective, it was important to look at the relationship between the socially constructed nature of reality and the situational constraints that shape one's inquiry, specifically from a non-visual lens. The aim was to use the 10 questions to draw out individual experiences with how social constructs may influence how the definition of beauty is created and given meaning. The information from this research can be best understood by, using Durkheim's (as cited in Bailey, 1994) method: be aware that social phenomenon is orderly and can be generalized. It must follow underlying social laws. In

asking these questions, I explored how women who cannot visually see identified beauty characteristics.

Prior to this research, I had little knowledge about how women who are visually impaired or blind navigated defined beauty and navigated beauty practices among an ocularcentric society. If they have never visualized beauty through visual means, what means do these women use to define beauty without visual cues? It is likely that this research may not be able to answer the questions asked in this research, although the effort has been made to start the conversation on beauty and visual impairment when considering non-visual lens.



## Chapter 4: Findings

After the 10 interviews were transcribed and edited, the answers were then inserted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet as informational data. The 10 questions were then rephrased into a statement and each listed as a heading in its respective column. The 10 answers were inserted into their corresponding column number and were not matched with the participant who responded. The first three columns were the definition of beauty, how attractiveness may be defined, and beauty defined by non-visual cues. What I noticed was that the answers in the first three columns were similar. In fact, columns one and two often repeated itself, containing within each box an almost identical answer. Even more, columns two and three also had similar answers, and were both related to personality and external features.

For example, the ten women defined beauty as being physical or external, such as having nice hair, attractive facial characteristics, and body shape, in addition to also having desirable personality traits, such as cheerful, intelligent, and confident. How beauty was defined was rarely ever 100% about external, physical features. In all of the interviews, attractiveness and its qualities were also discussed and examined. For the ten women, they felt that in order to be considered attractive, a person had to embody both physical attributes, such as clear skin and a healthy body shape, as well as a personality that others would be attracted to, such as intelligence and confidence. It was perceived as being an external feature, whereas attractiveness appealed to all five senses. According to the results, attractiveness is captivating and leaves a lasting effect. This sort of appeal

seemed to leave a more permanent impression not simply based on external features, which may be strictly based on physical beauty.

Qualitative researchers argue against the collection and interpretation of qualitative data and personal narratives seen as privileged. Although, I would argue that the conversations among women who are visually impaired are not necessarily privileged because the members of the community of the blind are often disenfranchised. The information gathered from the dialogue provides an interesting perspective into a particular culture that is rarely included in beauty conversation. Their 10 personal narratives were analyzed as “instances of social action, that is, speech acts or events with common properties, recurrent structures, cultural conventions” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 290). What follows are statements taken from the 10 women who are visually impaired or blind and their thoughts based on their experience with physical and non-physical beauty and attractiveness. The order of the comments began with congenital blindness, which is blind from birth, to partial blindness, or acquired blindness, and finally to visual impairment with some vision.

### **The Whole Beauty Thing**

HR, who has congenital blindness began with her initial thoughts on beauty:

So much of what you think of beauty are learned for me, because not being able to see the color of what I'm wearing, how people look, a lot of that is learned. To learn how to put on makeup, people who I go shopping with I select very carefully, I want to make sure I wear something visually appropriate. To me the whole beauty thing has a lot to do with integrity.

Considering the literature relevant to beauty and attractiveness, social constructs, and the identity of being a woman, HR's statement gives you some perspective of her lived reality. Much of what we learn in our social environment is due to our ability to

pick up on visual cues from those around us so that we may be able to function successfully. The point of contention lies in the fact that the 10 women interviewed process the social cues within their environment non-visually. A “wing-person,” whether it is a close friend, spouse or partner, must then interpret the social environment surrounding the person who is visually impaired or blind. Feeney (2014) brings up a crucial point in his research that our society is ocularcentric, meaning that the things we perceive are mostly through visual means. There may be other perspectives as valuable as what we see with our eyes.

### **The Interviews**

The definition of beauty, according to HR, is dynamic:

Depending on what I’m really talking about, whether it’s a person, an object, a thing, I think that probably in general terms, [it’s] something that is, it’s aesthetically pleasing. It’s got integrity. For example, a piece of music, it might sound good, but there’s a clang in the middle of it.

For her, beauty and attractiveness are a variable of three things: the individual, the context, and the culture. HR adds that beauty is different than attractiveness, in that:

Beauty can stand on its own, attractiveness has an effect on people, it [has the] ability to draw, want. For instance, if there’s someone that’s attractive to you, you want to spend more time with them. Beauty can stand on its own, attractiveness is the ability to draw something or someone closer.

HR is in her 60s, retiring years ago as the director of personnel in an organization in New York. I spoke with HR over the phone. Right away, HR touched on a key concept; “there’s somewhat of an implicit pressure to meet or exceed beauty standards of the general population.” If she were to walk outside her home with two different pairs of shoes on, she believes that she would be judged not by being forgetful or distracted, but that her mismatch of shoes was due to the fact that she was blind. “There’s already

enough stereotypical baggage. I would say that I would probably go more the extra mile to make sure that, you know, I was wearing clothes that were appropriate.”

When asked what her attractive qualities were, HR explained that her best features were what other people verbalized to her, “because most of that is visual, that will mostly come from the comments of other people.” Although for her, she personally believed that her most attractive quality is “when something goes really well...in terms of performance.” She believes herself to be good at intellectual activities because she is well read. HR also focuses on the things she does well to minimize the qualities that she believes are unattractive. For example, she is aware that her eyes are not her greatest feature. She made an attempt to wear shaded glasses to cover her eyes, although, “It’s just something that...it didn’t work for me. You can get obsessed with the weakest part and it can take over your whole world.”

I met EL at her home in Anchorage, Alaska. I had known EL for almost a year from seeing her in leadership positions in the community and speaking with her about our interests in projects related to perceptions and visual impairment. EL was also born premature; she is blind and also has a twin. I was intrigued by EL’s quick wit and inquisitive nature and her interest in human behavior and its relation to perceptions, identity, and visual impairment. She was enthused to meet with me and talk about her experiences with beauty and attractiveness.

EL defined beauty as being very colorful, or someone who has an interesting color, bright or drab. Because she could not see color, EL’s definition of color was similar to someone’s aura. She also considers a person’s enthusiasm, tone of voice, and their cadence, as well as how open an individual is:

The quality of the interaction, how interested you are and how interesting you are, and how inquisitive you are. I like people who like to ask questions, reflective, and who are interested in lot of . . . versatility, and curious about things both like themselves and not like themselves.

EL values intelligence and how much someone cares about others. EL immediately declared that her sense of humor is one of her attractive qualities. She also cares about others and is always willing to help and be available. “My attractiveness is caring about people, seeing between the lines.”

EL recalls the earliest memories and conversations about beauty and attractiveness existed outside herself. The first recollection is that EL was rarely included in the conversation about beauty. People would make comments about her beauty to her mother, but the comments were seldom directed *to* EL. She cannot recall a time in which she asked if she looked nice. The second observation is that EL thought of beauty in terms of objects, “I loved, loved, loved the water. The sounds of the waves, the ocean. I thought it was beautiful.” Other objects she believed were beautiful were flowered, crinkling skirts, petty coats, colors, and beautiful places. These objects could not be internalized, she explained, “I never understood what that meant exactly. I think that I always got confused [about] what was beauty and what wasn’t.”

ES is in her 60s and was blind from birth. She lives in Anchorage, Alaska, and works with the visually impaired. Her thoughts on beauty:

Beauty for me has more to do with personality. I think someone, to me, is smart. Being able to speak well, that to me in a way is beautiful. I go on what other people say to a fair degree. For example, when I was growing up, I remember I had friends who would say, “Oh, he is handsome,” like Robert Redford. For women, I always went on Cleopatra, since I have Lebanese heritage.

Friends and strangers would compliment ES on her high cheekbones, and nice complexion. ES is petite, well kept, and soft-spoken. Her demeanor is calm and welcoming, and I instantly felt at ease with her. A few months ago, she invited me over for dinner to meet her family. We talked mostly about my background and my interest in doing this study, and I got to know her family, and got a glimpse of her personal life.

In ES's earlier years, pre-marriage, when she would date other men, she would ask her roommates if the individual in question was attractive or not:

If they said, "Oh, he is ugly, and I said, Ok, I'm not even interested. But if they said, "Man, he is so cute," then I was really interested. If his personality made him cute, if he's not that cute, I would overlook that.

When I asked her about her own beauty, ES stated that in her family, eyes played a big role, "that always made me feel bad because I knew my eyes weren't beautiful because they had Glaucoma in them. My mom always said how beautiful [my sister] was, my brother always said how beautiful she was." Regardless of her experience growing up with a sister that appeared to be attractive, ES believes that beauty is partly related to one's physical appearance, even though she has never visually seen someone, and is not related to how one looks. Reflecting on her experience, she realized that beauty was important when she was younger.

Currently, ES is more influenced by an individual's body shape and whether they are obese or thin:

To me, that makes you beautiful or not beautiful, but I try really hard just to ignore that. Even most of the time, I don't know if a person is heavy or thin. The only time I know is if I take their arm to go somewhere. I try not to do that as much because I like to be more independent or use my cane. But every now and again, I take someone's arm and go, "Oh, she's fat."

ES considers health to be part of the equation of what is and is not attractive. Voice is also included by a person who is visually impaired or blind. ES explains: “Voice really does play a lot into it, [and] diction. I’m really into education, studying grammar and English.”

In order to gauge how the women perceived themselves, they were asked to refer to attractive qualities they believed they possessed. Many of them believed that social influence was very strong in their formation of how they viewed themselves. ES explains, “I can only go on what people have told me, partly, for me, I’ve come to think some things that are attractive about myself [are] from the information that people have told me.” Individuals compliment ES on her small frame, thinness, and her figure. People also compliment her on her nice smile, and her dimples.

Participating in the beauty standards set by the predominately seeing population, ES describes how she conforms:

I try to dress nice. I try to comb my hair. I’m always [asking], ‘So what’s in now?’ I don’t want to wear the latest trendy style, but I want to wear things that people will notice. I don’t wear much make-up. I’m thinking about wearing tinted foundation that’s a moisturizer and rouge lipstick for other people.

ES explained that she joins this beautification practice, like so many women in our society. As a woman who is blind, she explains:

We do things because we want people to notice that we look nice. I feel good when people compliment me. I want people to think I’m professional. When I look nice, maybe I know what I’m talking about. Looks become integrated in your everyday life. Vision is there, and I understand and I accept that. I know people are looking at me, and if I could I’d be looking at them as well.

ES’s visual impairment does not keep her from participating, contributing, and living as part of society. It does not matter to her that she cannot see herself visually; “I

want to participate in society. I want to look nice and presentable, it doesn't matter that I cannot see myself.”

It is hard to imagine anyone who is wholly excluded from social influences. EL admits that, stating:

I live in this society, so obviously you are influenced by what the general population sees, but it is very difficult for me. I think that some of the ways that the standard society has definitely takes a toll on you, and yet, if I dress up, I still think I like feeling good about myself. I like when people compliment me on what I bought. I try to figure things out.

ER lives in Alaska and is legally blind. When I met her at the door of her home, she was friendly and wore a bright colored shirt that matched the radiance of her smile. She was spry, cheerful, and in her late 40s. ER was convinced that I would receive the purest definition of beauty from those who are visually impaired or blind from birth, despite that, “even if a person is blind, they're still exposed to the definition, listening to the TV or asking someone.” ER was born blind. She had congenital cataracts until the age of 7 when she had them removed. Since then her sight has deteriorated over the last 20 years. Almost simultaneously, the older she becomes the more value she gives to her inner beauty, “beauty is a thing that is positive, true, and wholesome. As far as physical appearance, I think it has a lot to do with how a woman carries herself with confidence.” Attractiveness, to ER, spoke more to the act of putting effort into what other people think of her. She stated that an attractive person is someone that has a sense of humor, and is confident, articulate, and “enthralled by the things of the world. They can speak about what are the important issues of the world.”

The physical attributes defined as beautiful or attractive, according to ER, were youth, clear eyes, symmetry between the sides of the face and body. When asked to



recall an individual she considered beautiful or attractive, and a description of that individual, ER named Sophia Loren:

She's exotic. I think she's Italian, you know, she's just exotic. She had big, flowing, thick hair, and the accent. This is part of my problem with being blind at birth. I can't picture people's faces. I remember thinking the whole package [of Sophia Loren] was beautiful.

Clearly, those who are visually impaired or blind do not have visual access to these physical characteristics. In this case, ER was born blind, became sighted during her earlier years, but slowly began losing her sight the older she became. Even so, she was able to experience visually what youth, clear eyes, and symmetry looked like. In addition to these physical attributes, personal attributes that she considered attractive were character, confidence, and intelligence. Another individual named was Katharine Hepburn; "She seemed really smart, like a strong woman. She described herself as a mighty oak tree and she acted that way too. She was strong and bold. Things that I aspire to be."

ER was also aware of the biases people pass on to her when she asks someone to describe an individual. "I ask for more detail. Well what do you mean by, 'He's not attractive?' Is it his teeth, his skin? So I try to get at what they're referring to that is not attractive." The attractive qualities ER believed she embodied were her sense of humor, confidence, sense of adventure, and listening abilities:

I do have really good hearing, I mean, my hearing, I pay lot of attention to my hearing, so they always tease me in my office. I'll be in the bathroom with the fan running, and I can hear the conversation going on up front. I have a hard time shutting out conversations.

YL was one of the only women I spoke to that was currently employed in a position not associated with a visual impairment service agency in Alaska. She is a

computer programmer in her mid-60s and is partially blind. YL is mostly calm and straight to the point. She is also fond of a famous Irish singer that she has seen several times at his concerts, “not only is he really attractive, but he’s really nice, and that Irish accent doesn’t hurt either.” YL goes on to describe in depth the allure the singer exhibits, “He’s thoughtful. When he finds out that someone’s had a loss in their family, he’ll call and write to them. He seems like a sincere, nice person, and he’s funny as heck.” YL believes that someone who is considerate, sincere, and goes out of his or her way to make another individual feel special is a sign of attractiveness. Physical beauty is completely left out of the definition of beauty, according to YL. She regards honesty, someone who can easily laugh, and provides a sense of ease when talking with another person to be her main standards.

The youngest individual interviewed was in her mid-20s. HS was an undergraduate attending the university in Anchorage, Alaska. She is visually impaired, but can see with high prescription eyeglasses. HS is completing her undergraduate degree in disability studies and has conducted research on visual impairment and discrimination. She defines beauty in both visual and non-visual terms. Non-visually, HS believed that confidence is a significant part of beauty, in addition to how someone presents himself or herself, “how comfortable someone is in who they are, those are really big things to me. But I also recognize that a lot of times I’ll make snap judgments about somebody [that’s] definitely related to what I see.” HS is able to see facial features, such as smiling, and can also see if someone has what she considers to be beautiful facial features. The times when she does consider someone to not be attractive,

she thinks, “Oh, why did I just think that? I try to examine that it might be because they don’t fit the standard. I know that if I got to know them, I would see them differently.”

The characteristics HS described above, clear skin, symmetry of the face and body, and a nice body shape, and make-up, are only discernable by those who are sighted. Interestingly, HS also referenced Tess Munster (Holliday), a plus-size model that recently received a modeling contract as someone who fit the criteria listed above, except she was not skinny. To negotiate this, she affirmed that confidence and being comfortable in one’s skin provides greater attraction.

AK, born with retinosis pigmentosa, a deterioration of the retina, could see shapes and colors until she was 5 years old. Now in her 70s, and over the phone, AK’s vision is at 10%; she can virtually see nothing. She appears to be thoughtful and ready to laugh at a moment’s notice. Her voice was melodic and kind. She lives in Utah with her family and worked as a Massage Therapist.

A firm handshake can determine for AK whether that person is attractive or not. She often will ask her husband what someone looks like after she has met someone new. When she is having a conversation with an individual she is not familiar with, she will simultaneously construct a mental picture of them in her head. If she has known the person for a while, she will allow further connection and engagement by accepting the touch and squeeze of her arm. According to AK, this is the way in which she sees beauty; someone who makes the effort to connect with you both in genuine conversation and physical touch. The act of touching, specifically for those who are visually impaired or blind, may be a misconception. ES states:

I think people think blind people have to touch. People have this mistaken notion that blind people want to touch everyone’s face. That’s not really true. I never

encourage it because I just think it doesn't fit with standard behavior. There are things we have to do different, but touching someone's face is just like, too private, and so I don't ever encourage it.

AK believes that touching material and fabric that is soft evokes a sense of beauty. When she goes shopping with her husband she'll have him describe the clothing to her and if she does not find them appealing to her senses, if the material is rough, she will not take it. "I do have my own tastes of what I like and what I don't like." AK's husband also assists her when they are "looking" at paintings together, "He'll take the index finger of my right hand, looking at the painting, he'll draw that picture for me and I can make a mental note of that and I can determine whether I like the picture or not." Her husband will also guide her hands when touching flowers, and her close friend will describe things in nature such as birds, sunsets, and landscapes. When asked about the attractive qualities she embodies, AK exclaimed:

I don't like to talk about myself!" But went on to say, "I try to be very sincere with people. Oh dear, I guess I'm fun loving, I like to kid around. I can joke about being blind, it doesn't bother me.

AK uses her personality and the ability to not take herself seriously as an attractive non-visual attribute.

ES mentioned having a small body, and nice, pretty, shiny, healthy looking hair was as only attractive or beautiful from a visual lens. Along the lines of visual perception that is influenced by what others have said, ES explains that her daughter struggles with acne, "people really notice, it should be important . . . it's a distraction or a hindrance to what people think of you. I mean a broken-out face is distracting, it looks unhealthy, it looks like something's wrong, that you have some disease." Evolutionary biology, as discussed earlier, postulates that mates look for partners with good genes. Obvious traits

for good genes and signs of health would be thick, full hair, an even complexion, and a healthy body. For the individual who is visually impaired, these traits can only be accessed verbally, otherwise, how can these physical attributes be known without access to physically touching the individual? ES explains this from the perception that she is considering what others are seeing. This idea may not be specifically related to beauty, but an overall awareness of keeping oneself presentable to others.

At times attractiveness and beauty were interchangeable. The way in which attractiveness and beauty were described by the interviewees, gave an underlying sense that it was embodied, rather than attributed to physical facial or bodily features. Yet, while HS described beauty as being external, the collective group expressed genuine beauty as existing in one's inner self. For AN, beauty is internal. She believes that "internal value comes outside and people can see it." AN, who became blind at the age of 21, defined attractiveness as:

Appealing, something that appeals to you, comes close to you. I've been told that I have a very attractive personality. People are attracted to me. It's not my looks, it's who I am . . . being attractive means that you appeal to the senses. To inner self too.

Attractive characteristics elicited non-visually were qualities such as caring, speaking softly, and having leadership. AN's husband was someone she considered to be beautiful, and is strong, caring, and "always looking for helping somebody else."

EL defined attractiveness as literal. Someone who is attractive can attract you to them, "It's a quality that someone's attracted to your charisma or charm. I consider attractiveness a part of a person. Attractiveness is a human, sentient thing. It's the personality too." To her, beauty could be found in objects, whereas attractiveness was a

human quality. For example, EL believed that her dog could be described as beautiful, but not attractive.

HS, who is visually impaired, but wears prescription eyeglasses, also believes that attractiveness is internal, whereas beauty changes over time and across cultures, attractiveness is confidence, feeling comfortable with who you are, intelligence, and humor. Ignoring what someone looks like, the qualities listed above are qualities that transcend physical features. When asked what attractive qualities HS embodied, she revealed, “That’s a hard one. I think that I’m intelligent, and I think that’s attractive. I’m very determined. I also I guess I’m adaptable and resilient....I think I have a nice smile. I think it’s a good smile.”

EL uses the broadcasting radio network NPR as an example of how, although, she cannot see beauty, she can hear when someone is smiling. For her, it is almost like a sixth sense, “I may not see, but I can hear it, I can feel it.” If she is imagining something beautiful, she imagines it as something very colorful. EL was born blind and described smiling as being a characteristic that is attractive. Regardless of whether she is standing in front of someone or while she is listening to commentators over the radio, she can feel and hear when someone is smiling. Both EL and HS, who is visually impaired and wore prescription eyeglasses, agreed on separate occasions that smiling was a beautiful characteristic.

At this point, it is unknown whether smiling is strictly accessed through visual means or if it can be sensed non-visually. According to several of the participants, the voice is used to determine various notions about an individual. EL is able to discern when something else was going on during a conversation or encounter by listening to

their tone of voice, what they were saying, and how they were saying it. Supplementing this, EL believed that being visually impaired or blind has the potential of being extremely resourceful:

I understand people. I think you have to understand the majority world, because that's the world that's judging you. I understand [people] a lot more...then they understand about me. I think I have an advantage [over] a broad sense of things. I don't think every blind person does. I'm a very big picture thinker.

The tone, cadence, accent, and volume are all considered when determining if someone is attractive or not. If one can make an assumption based on voice, and if voice can give away whether someone is smiling or not, it may very well be that smiling is both non-visually and visually accessible when considering someone's attractiveness.

Beauty can be captured in the sound of an individual's voice. AK maintains that, "being blind, you tend to listen very carefully so I can pick up a lot about their personality." The way in which she defines attractiveness was initially done by considering the voice of the individual, "some people have wonderful voices, other people do not. I listen to a lot of talking books, and the narrators in the books, if they have a good voice, they can make or break the book."

### **Participating in the Beauty Process**

AN, who became blind at the age of 21, has her eyebrows tattooed on. She believes in looking nice and puts an effort into dressing nice. In the Hispanic culture, N states:

Women always look pretty. My mom always was clean and pretty, she always makes sure that she looked good. That's the way I grew up, I always like to look nice when I'm at work or at home. . . . You need to look presentable.

Following this same process, YL allows others to tell her what to wear to work, "my mom or my sister taught me what kind of clothes to wear at different times, for

different situations.” She does not wear makeup, and gets her hair cut when “it starts getting a little shaggy.” YL rarely dresses in fancy clothing; she believes comfort is the best policy. YL pays even less attention to what others look like and pays more attention to how someone may act.

I’m an observer. I listen to the stuff people talk about so I get to know them that way. When you listen to what people say you get a pretty good idea, the way they act with other people. It’s another way of getting to know them, by seeing how they interact with other people.

She believed that because she cannot see very well, she relies more on her auditory ability.

EL, who was born blind, believed that women place a lot of pressure on themselves instead of accepting themselves as who they are, adding that “we need to have a gang of girls, it doesn’t matter how old you are because we have to have that woman power.”

HS wore what others have termed “coke bottle glasses” for most of her life. To an extent, she believes she cannot participate in the beauty practices of the mainstream:

I’ve tried wearing contacts but they just aren’t practical. When I did wear contacts, I would often times wear makeup. I make sure that my appearance is very presentable. When I wear my glasses I feel that no matter what I do I’m going to obviously be somebody who is disabled which is not something that not often equates with beauty.

HS does wear some make up, but only for fun. She was adamant about not participating in mainstream beauty practices, but wanted to make sure she dressed well, “I would definitely say my disability changes the way I feel about beauty.” HS stated that because her disability is visible people treat her differently, “I’ve seen that sometimes people talk down to me. I didn’t encounter that when I wear my contacts. I always felt that when I wear my glasses people treat me like I’m less intelligent.” She



was aware that people with disabilities, or physical markers of disability, do not often receive consideration for being attractive or beautiful. It became apparent that HS' background in disability studies and her experience with visual impairment correlated with a key issue in this research, "it's all about how bodies look and operate in society," stating that this was one way that those with disabilities are discriminated against. A body that deviates from the standard able-body, is labeled as a-typical; there is something wrong with their body.

HS and ER both felt that it was important for them to encourage the younger female family members not to focus on external beauty. HR explained her relationship with her daughter:

I try not to focus on that...I try not to focus on dressing her a certain way because she's a girl. It can be one way we spread those beauty standards. I make sure [my daughter] has options . . . It's all about what makes her feel happy.

ER admitted she had already started having conversations with her niece, who is in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, on beauty and where it lies on their value system, "Her mom's pretty good about not having her watch too much [television] . . . where the girls are . . . ultra-sexualized. . . . I don't think that it's, unless you're totally out in the woods, it's possible to avoid that." HS also believed in starting the body discussion at an early age, "I'm hopeful that with that kind of foundation she'll see how beauty standards don't matter."

Personalities played held more weight in perceiving attractiveness and beauty in an individual. Women who were born blind or became blind later in life still followed ocularcentric standards of beauty in regards to how one should physically look. There was mention of long, thick hair, nice complexions, and straight teeth. Even an individual's weight was a factor in determining whether someone was beautiful or not.

YL's first memories from her parents were conversations on people who were overweight, "they'd turn their noses up at them, so I guess until I got a little older, I gained that prejudice." YL no longer holds that prejudice:

I've known a lot of people that I like that were overweight, but it didn't matter to me because they had nice personalities. After a while it didn't matter. My best friend was overweight when I first met her. I just noticed that she was a nice, friendly person.

ER is adamant on fostering the notion to never let disability hold her back, "Within your ability, I think people should push themselves to try everything and not hold themselves back. You get this one life, as far as we know, so live it fully."

AN believes that she is a very charismatic speaker with personality. Her ability to speak in front of people gives her a sense of empowerment. In addition, she is very caring, very organized, and is an effective planner. She took great pride in explaining these characteristics in relation to her professional work. AN went on to say "I wish people would put more emphasis on the values from inside. But I do understand the world that we live in...I haven't felt the need to change who I am to fit in this society."

For some of the women, particularly HR, visual impairment may create somewhat of a short circuit when initially meeting someone for the first time. For example, HR explains, "it's easier for me to get beyond the initial physical trait impression...I focus in on different personality characteristics as opposed to physical characteristics." HR is also cautious about the belief that people who are blind are able to decrease the time it takes to get to know someone personally. This is not entirely true, although, she does think "that if someone's going to get hung up on first impressions, it might take them longer to figure it out." If an individual has to make a quick impression, HR believes that people are going to look at physicalities.

ER stated that her identity was not based on her visual impairment, but her sense of humor during high school and the reinforcement of others telling her that she was intelligent during college. She also sees herself as a therapist, the wife to a great husband she goes on adventures with. ER adds at the end:

Being visually impaired is also part of my identity, but I really try to minimize it. I never wanted to focus on that...and I'm looking forward to the day when I'm not. I see myself as being a counselor way above seeing myself as being the blind services coordinator. I say, the bigger your life is, the smaller your disability is.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Chapter five will discuss the limitations, meanings and values of physical and non-physical beauty and attractiveness from the non-visual lens, and how it informs one's identity. The ability to perceive an individual's beauty and attractiveness through non-visual means has been a fascinating topic to explore. Visual impairment and non-visual perspectives regarding the definition and navigation process of beauty and attractiveness is a unique lens from which to consider the perceptions of others and inherent biases strictly based on physical characteristics. This is essential, considering that current literature on beauty and attractiveness often focus on facial features and body shape. To offer women other avenues or ways of defining themselves and who they are may be important when considering alternatives to how and who we are by means other than our outer appearance.

The objective in this study was to find how beauty is elicited through non-visual cues. The 10 women who are blind or visually impaired answered 10 questions from the interview related to beauty and attractiveness that helped to interpret what is invisible to them and how it is manifested through non-visual means. These elicited traits were subjective, their actions and choices, were considered to be personality traits. In exploring these characteristics, a person may identify other layers of the self to inform a better sense of self-worth that is non-comparable to the predominant standards of visual and physical beauty.

## **Overarching Themes**

According to the women who participated in this study, being physically beautiful and attractive is a combination of having physical and non-physical beauty and attractive characteristics. Some of the women acknowledged that beauty can stand on its own. What made it distinct from attractiveness was its lasting effect and the ability to continue to draw others to them. Looks can only do so much, which leaves personality to fill in the blanks and create a holistic image. This also added to HR's concept of aesthetics and the importance of an object or person to have integrity. For her, something that is considered beautiful and attractive cannot have holes.

Among the subjects I interviewed who were blind or visually impaired, 10 of them suggested that personality traits are the primary indicators of physical beauty and attractiveness after an initial encounter. Because an individual who is blind or visually impaired cannot determine whether someone is physically beautiful from across the room, it is widely known that they are given assistance in seeking out physically beautiful and attractive individuals by close friends.

## **Beauty Defined**

Almost identical to what was experienced between Huang and Brittain's (2006) participants and the 10 women in this research was the difficulty in defining themselves in relation to identity. The 10 women who are visually impaired found it difficult to answer questions about how they defined beauty, especially when asked what they believed to be beautiful about themselves. Prior to the interviews in Huang and Brittain's study, the elite athletes who were disabled had a difficult time defining themselves outside of their disability because they had never been asked how else they could

envision themselves (2006). The women who are visually impaired were excited, and almost overwhelmed, for the opportunity to answer questions related to beauty and attractiveness. Rarely had they participated in a dialogue regarding physical beauty and attractiveness. If anything, this research was a small way to challenge the dominant perceptions of beauty that make women especially feel incapable, powerless, passive, and unattractive (Huang & Brittain, 2006).

All 10 of the primary questions were answered, and towards the end of each individual interview some time was given for secondary comments or thoughts that had surfaced during the discussion. Only four of the women spoke further about their personal experiences with beauty that they was not related specifically to any of the questions asked, but were more impromptu regarding the memories stirred because of the reflective process. It was interesting to discuss with them their experiences with beauty and attractiveness and learn that these types of questions or even the topic of defining beauty had rarely been asked of them. To my delight, the women who participated enjoyed the discussion of the questions and sharing with me their experience with interacting with people they believed were beautiful in their opinion.

Here are the questions I asked: How do you define beauty? How do you define attractiveness? Are there certain characteristics that are exclusively attractive and/or beautiful? Are there certain characteristics that are exclusively unattractive and/or ugly? Are there characteristics that are immediately identified as being black, white, Asian, or Hispanic? How do you participate in beauty standards of the general population? Does your opinion or perception of someone change if you perceive them in a different or negative light? What are the attractive qualities you see in yourself? When you are

asked to picture an individual who is attractive or beautiful what individual comes to mind? What are the traits that are attractive about this individual? What are some things you think you have that give you an advantage or insight that people who have vision don't necessarily consider or use? What are your first experiences and memories with talking about and conceptualizing things and people that were beautiful or attractive?

A few of the questions could have been worded differently. Instead of asking, "Are there certain characteristics that are exclusively beautiful?" I would have asked, "What are the traits that characterize beauty?" as an example. Given that this was my first thesis project and my first experience engaging with women who are visually impaired or blind. The fifth question: "Are there characteristics that are immediately identified as being black, white, Asian, or Hispanic?" could have been asked in two parts: describe someone of a race or ethnicity you interact with on regular basis or describe another person of a race or ethnicity you rarely encounter. In reframing this question, it would have given the participants more freedom in describing racial or ethnic characteristics and a greater variety in the answers given. After completing two interviews, it became apparent that combining question three and four would be more efficient and create less confusion.

Another question asked the ten women to consider attractive and unattractive characteristics elicited by people they interact with. Having the two separated was unnecessary and created a short lull in the dialogue. In addition, using the word ugly in the question was redundant since unattractive was already listed. Ugly is also a word that is usually directed towards the physicalities of an individual; it is rarely used to define someone's personality but is likely to still happen. I wanted to refrain from using words

that are colloquially used by the seeing population when defining something or someone that is not pleasant looking or pleasant in their behavior.

### **Conclusion**

It was an honor and extremely rewarding to learn from these ten women. The only morsel of regret, and maybe regret would be an unsuitable word choice, was not speaking with the 10 women on multiple occasions, or widening the number of female participants. Although, not having more than ten participants added depth to each interview. The entire interview process did not feel rushed or overwhelming with all the information given in a short amount of time. Adding this research to the body of knowledge on beauty, identity formation, visual impairment, and disability studies will hopefully create more curiosity in how beauty, both physically and non-physically, is perceived through other senses.

This research was important to me; I wanted to examine how identity can be defined by what people are physically capable of doing with their hands, bodies, and intellect. The kind of research is needed because the appearance of someone is given more weight than finding out who they are and where they come from. I learned that society has a significant influence on how we perceive people, and it is mostly not our fault. In the future, I hope that this small bit of research can extend to the field of identity studies and ways to be resilience using attributes not defined by skin color, hair texture, or body composition.



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## APPENDIX A. IRB CONSENT FORM

**INFORMED CONSENT*****In the Eyes Of the Beholder: How Women Who Are Visually Impaired or Blind Define and Navigate Beauty***

You are invited to be a part of a research study that would like to explore your experience with the Western society's idea of beauty and perspectives of attractiveness. The discussion will be done in the form of a one-on-one interview that will last 1 to 2 hours, and will be audio recorded.

My name is Bernice M. Nisbett and I am a graduate student at the University of the Pacific, Master of Arts in Intercultural Relations program. You were invited to be a possible participant in this study so that I may learn and understand how you define beauty and attractiveness, and how you process the ideas of what is considered attractive here in the United States by those who are sighted.

The purpose of this research is to write a thesis to receive a Master's Degree in Intercultural Relations through the University of the Pacific. The research I am doing is about the current standards of beauty and attractiveness within the United States. I would like to explore the ways in which females who are visually impaired navigate and define attractiveness and beauty. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to discuss and describe your beliefs about what makes an individual beautiful. Your participation in this study will last one hour, but can go up to two hours, if needed. With your approval, you will be asked in advance if more time is needed to talk with you.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. These risks include: bodily injury while walking to and from the location where the interview will be held, and psychological injury when talking about your experience as an individual who is visually impaired. This may bring up feelings of anxiety or emotional hardships. It is my job to protect your identity and keep your information confidential, although it is possible that the data gathered for this research could be lost. I will take every precaution to make sure that this does not happen. I will set up a secure password and keep the information in a locked place. There are also benefits to this research, particularly that of sharing your unique experience and adding to the growing sociocultural anthropological study of how standards of beauty are formed, and how this may be linked to race, gender, class, and identity formation.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at (907) 715-2134, or you can reach my Academic Advisor, Dr. Chris Cartwright at (503) 297-4622. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Research & Graduate Studies Office, University of the Pacific (209) 946-3903. In the event of a research-related injury, please contact your regular medical provider and bill through your normal insurance carrier, then contact the Office of Research & Graduate Studies.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality such as physical descriptions of your identity and location will not be given. Your birth name will also not be used in the thesis. The data obtained will be maintained in a locked location and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the Thesis (May 1, 2018).

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time with out penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

By completing and submitting this consent form you indicate that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

At the end of my research, I will submit my thesis in order to graduate in December 2015 with a Master of Arts Degree in Intercultural Relations. If you would like to obtain the results of my study, please leave me your contact information so that I can connect with you at the end of my study.

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep. You will also be offered a \$20 giftcard from a place of your choosing to demonstrate my appreciation of your time and experiencing shared with me and this research. If you choose not to continue with the interview, you will still be gifted for your time and interest.

Signature

Date

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## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you define beauty?
2. How do you define attractiveness?
3. Are there certain characteristics that are exclusively attractive and/or beautiful? Are there certain characteristics that are exclusively unattractive and/or ugly?
4. Are there characteristics that are immediately identified as being black, white, Asian, or Hispanic?
5. How do you participate in beauty standards of the general population?
6. Does your opinion or perception of someone change if you perceive them in a different or negative light?
7. What are the attractive qualities you see in yourself?
8. When you are asked to picture an individual who is attractive or beautiful what individual comes to mind? And what are the traits that are attractive about this individual?
9. What are some things or issues you think you have that give you an advantage or insight that people who have vision don't necessarily consider or use?
10. What are your first experiences and memories with talking about and conceptualizing things and people that were beautiful or attractive