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Resiliency Project

## Women and Appearance

### Introduction

When I think of resiliency, a plethora of different forms come to mind. There is resiliency within the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a person's life. When I was talking to the people whom I wanted to interview for the resiliency project, I told them that they all have been resilient in some form or another in their lives. Everyone has faced some sort of hardship in their lives, whether it be a dramatic, individualized tragedy that society normally assumes one to have shown resiliency through (for example, the death of someone close to you), or a seemingly less serious, maybe systematic obstacle that one has overcome.

After talking to the women around me about their stories of resilience, I realized that I wanted to research how the pressure society puts on women affects us. Every woman has faced some degree of pressure to appear beautiful and feminine, but also strong and professional. Gregory Stone, in *Appearance and the Self*, writes that "appearance establishes identification of participants and the development of a sense of self in a social interaction" (Tariq-Munir). This sense of self is established typically through non-verbal forms of communication like clothing and body language. Therefore, a woman's opinion of her own appearance becomes very important to her sense of self and mental wellbeing.

Women are given mixed messages about their appearance. We are told to prioritize professionalism, but are expected to look attractive. Even in professional settings there are standards set for women to appear and act feminine. This literature review and essay will explore

how women are expected to look and act, and the effects that has on our mental health and wellbeing.

### Growing up in an Appearance-based Society

There has been substantial evidence to support that the pressure put on women to be beautiful and feminine has negative effects on our mental health. A study published by Girlguiding has revealed that “half of girls feel stifled by gender stereotyping, with children as young as seven believing they are valued more for their appearance than for their achievements or character” (Devon). Another study by Turner shows that starting at age 10 or 11 there starts to be cultural pressure on girls to be ladylike and dependent. This limits their sense of autonomy and mastery, and results in a loss of self-esteem for many (Turner). Young girls are being affected at a young age from the pressure to conform to standards of femininity. Justin Healey, author of *Body Image and Self Esteem*, found that "concern about how their body looks is now the biggest worry for the nation's 11 to 24-year-olds" compared to 2006, where body image ranked third after family and alcohol/drug related conflicts (Ospina). The influence of the media and now so even more through social media is perpetuating this problem. It seems as though the celebrities and social media influencers are getting more and more perfect. Young girls are exposed to an endless supply of seemingly perfect-looking people with perfect lives, and at a young age it is hard to decipher the difference between Instagram-life and reality.

Patterns of mental-health-affecting behavior happens at a young age for most women. Turner in “Recognizing and Enhancing Natural Resiliency in Boys and Girls” claims that a person’s childhood years are “imperative to adult resiliency” (Turner). She found that growing up in an affluent household has shown to improve resiliency later in a woman’s life. This could

be tied to wealthier families being able to afford the needs and wants of their child at a young age. Obviously affluent people have the resources to buy the trendiest clothing, have the best hair and makeup, get their nails painted, and when they are older they can get cosmetic surgery. It may seem presumptuous to assume that wealthy people are all getting cosmetic surgery, but cosmetic surgery has been on the rise in the United States for the past 5 years, and more young women are participating (Townley). A 2019 study found that 18 million Americans underwent cosmetic surgery in 2018, and over 200,000 of them were teenage girls (Paul). The 2018 National Plastic Surgery Statistics show a 48% increase in breast augmentation procedures, a 108% increase in breast lift procedures, and a 107% increase in tummy tuck procedures from 2000 to 2018 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons). Similarly, they reported an 845% increase in Botox procedures, a 248% increase in laser skin resurfacing, and a 55% increase in cellulite removal procedures from 2000 to 2018 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons). The report distinguishes that these statistics are for cosmetic surgery rather than plastic surgery. Cosmetic surgery focuses on body enhancement while plastic surgery is used to correct and reshape body parts that are deformed or have sustained damage through disease or trauma (Townley). In another study mentioned by Townley, UK researchers surveyed cosmetic surgery patients to find out what factors motivated them to go under the knife. Not surprisingly, the most common answers had to do with low self-esteem and low opinions of self-attractiveness. As more and more Americans are choosing to have procedures done, cosmetic surgery is becoming more commonplace, and it's making an impact on younger women. Doctors are claiming social media is to blame for encouraging more young people to seek out cosmetic surgery (Paul).

Studies show that “media exposure is consistently linked with women’s body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal, and eating behaviors” (Perloff). The

“internalization of thin-idealized female beauty is a key element in a culturally stereotyped standard of beauty that is ubiquitously communicated in contemporary media throughout Westernized societies” and this is reflected on social media (Perloff). There are so many people on Instagram who were not even celebrities models before, who have made themselves semi-celebrities (called “influencers”) by becoming popular on social media. Even if an influencer hasn’t had any work done, they have edited their pictures. In fact, most women that I know fix up their pictures before posting them as well, and they aren’t even Instagram influencers. There are even Instagram and YouTube accounts dedicated exclusively to sharing picture-editing tips and applications. There are free apps that allow you to completely change your appearance with a few easy clicks, with everything from waist thinning to altering skin complexion to changing hair and eye color. Most young girls are spending a decent amount of time on Instagram and are exposed to fixed photos every day. After a while, when all we see are pictures of beautiful people that we can’t tell are edited, we associate that as the new standard of beauty.

#### How Pressure to be Feminine Affects Mental Health

Women are pressured to conform to beauty standards in the United States and it has taken a toll on mental health. “Body shame” is a term used to describe when people judge someone’s appearance by pointing out less attractive parts of someone’s body. There has been a movement against body shaming with companies using “real women” of all shapes and sizes as models, but these efforts have been met with some backlash, meaning our society still has a long way to go in terms of accepting and celebrating all women.

Body shaming has adverse effects on mental health for women. Perloff found that “as a result of traditional gender role socialization processes, girls and women learn to self-objectify,

internalizing societal emphases on attending to outward appearance rather than inner qualities; they also come to assign more importance to physical appearance than do boys, and are more attuned to appearance management to conform to stereotyped physical attractiveness ideals” (Perloff). Bailey et al. write that, “according to objectification theory, self-objectification and associated body surveillance lead to psychological consequences such as shame, anxiety, decreased flow states (i.e., fewer peak motivational states of deep enjoyment, creativity, and total involvement with life; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and insensitivity to bodily cues, which in turn increase one’s risk of mental health problems. Because appearance is such a central part of a woman’s identity, women who do not feel that their appearance is satisfactory are at risk of mental health problems.

“Research has also provided evidence of the mediating role of body shame in the relationship between self-objectification and mental health risk (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998)”, showing that increased self-objectification is correlated to increased health risk (Bailey). The more a woman feels objectified and bases her self-worth on her appearance, when her appearance is attacked, her self-esteem is under attack as well.

Teens on social media are not the only women struggling with self-esteem and body image issues. McQuaide writes that “by midlife, for at least most of us [women], our resilience has already been put to the test. She acknowledges that women by this age have seen themselves “attempt to cope with the imperfections of the world” and “wrestle with the demons within”. McQuaide quotes other scholars within the literature on women’s resilience, noting that Heilbrun believes that the most critical factor to a woman’s well-being is meaningful work. This may help to explain the advantage that the wealthy have, since being wealthy means that someone has a

higher likelihood of graduating from college and being able to find interesting work with significant autonomy.

Apter found that through studying women at midlife the biggest challenge for them was the balance of living as middle-aged women while integrating the images of being female that they had formulated in their adolescent lives. Women learn as teenagers what the ideal thin-body image is. They also learn that it is ladylike to be submissive, quiet, and polite. As middle aged women, this may become hard for them as working professionals. It is not realistic for a middle-aged woman to look like the 20-year model, and the personality required by a working professional or even a mother requires being authoritative at times. McQuaide found that women who seemed to be the most resilient were not isolated and did not feel insecure. “Self-esteem, low self-denigration, high-feelings of self-effectance”, and “feeling like they had a right to life” were all important aspects of middle-aged women’s resiliency. Confidence or a lack thereof due to how a woman feels about herself affects her access to resiliency.

Women are more depressed than ever before. Unipolar major depression is the most common psychiatric condition seen by primary care physicians (Gregory). Depressed women may have more atypical symptoms, more anxiety, and more dysthymia (low-mood for two or more years) than depressed men (Gregory). On average, depression is diagnosed in two women in this country for every diagnosed man. For major depression, Epidemiologic Catchment Area researchers reported a female-to-male ratio of 2.4 to 1, whereas figures from the National Comorbidity Survey are 1.7 to 1 (Gregory). Harvard Health Publishing writes that “it’s not clear what causes the gender gap in this mood disorder”. There are different theories that try to explain the difference between men and women and being diagnosed with depression,

including that men may be less likely to seek out a diagnosis for depression. Also, women's genetic makeup may be a factor in making women more susceptible to mood disorders.

Interestingly, the preponderance of depression in women is consistent across cultures (Gregory). These findings are consistent with the literature on depression rates in women. Research shows that women don't over-report their symptoms (Gregory). Depression could be more likely to affect those with relatives who also have depression. Anyone whose family history includes unipolar or bipolar depression in a parent or other close biological relative is at increased risk for depression (Gregory). Therefore, it is not clear if simply being a woman is directly correlated with being more susceptible to depression or if environmental factors like the pressure to conform to standards of beauty play a stronger role.

### Professional Women

The general gender stereotype is that males are strong and women are weak, and this translates into corporate America. There are cases of women deliberately modifying their appearance with the goal of changing how others view them. Hillary Clinton famously dresses in pant-suits for almost every occasion. She wrote in her book, *What Happened*, that she felt the pant suit made her feel professional and "ready to go" (Clinton). Another reason she mentioned was the pant suit helped her fit in with the male politicians. She writes "I also thought it would be good to do what male politicians do and wear more or less the same thing every day" (Clinton). After the intense media coverage of Sarah Palin's fashion in the 2008 election, it was smart of Hillary to adopt a uniform that would lessen media distractions.

Flicker writes that "women in political leadership are imprisoned in a double-bind communication: when they perform and dress along feminine patterns, they might be looked as

deficient actors in the hard field of politics. When they refuse typical female looks and submit to male dress code, their performance is commented as conspicuous” (Flicker). Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes dresses in black turtlenecks like Steve Jobs, and reportedly has even changed her voice to a deeper tone to be taken seriously by investors and the biotechnology community. Women have deliberately changed the way that they dress and hold themselves to appear stronger to the media.

### How Appearance Affects Women of Color

Historically, race has played a substantial role in the power structure of America, and gender exacerbates that racial discrimination. Generally, “skin complexion has a history of impacting race relations in America. In fact, positive characteristics are attributed to those with lighter skin while those who with darker complexions are frequently placed into stereotypical categories and judged severely by their physical appearance” (Mathews). In media, the leads are typically Caucasian, which sets a standard for what society typically thinks of as a movie star.

Unequal representation of women of color in media reflects society’s social climate for women of color. UCLA’s 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report shows how women of color are not equally represented in modern movies. Women in general were reported as underrepresented in film- 31.2% of starring role, 6.9% of directors, and 44% of cable scripted roles were women (UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report). Minorities only held 13.9% of film leads, 12.6% of film directors, and only 20% of cable scripted leads (UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report). The report doesn’t explicitly show the statistics for women minorities, but women would only share a fraction of the small minority percentages of leads and directors in film.

When there is not equal representation of women of color in the media, society appears to uphold a white standard of beauty. “The low self-esteem that is experienced by women of darker

complexions is only what her society mirrors; that she is not worthy of feeling appeal in herself. These negative judgments are twofold—brought about by the upholding of white beauty standards and the continuation of racism” (Mathews).

International relations also impact the beauty standards in the United States. Since 9/11, the hijab has become even more taboo than it already was in the United States. Muslim women wear a hijab for religious and social reasons in middle eastern countries. Traditionally, “as a visible marker of group membership, the hijab may be used to promote the social prestige of its wearers, thereby increasing their self-esteem, especially within stigmatized populations who often embrace their "otherness" to promote cohesion within the group. Thus, women who wear the hijab are likely to have higher status in Muslim communities” (Pasha-Zaidi). However, this is not the case in the United States. “The ‘re-Islamization’ of Muslim women after 9/11, for example, seems to have elevated perceptions of hijab among Muslims” (Haddad, 2007). Since 9/11, the hijab has held a negative connotation for racist Americans. As a result, many Muslims “underwent a religious renaissance after the 9/11 attacks, asserting their religion as a declared identity to strengthen their self-image, promote a positive image of Islam, and counter the stereotypes and public misconceptions that were being propagated ad hominem” (Pasha-Zaidi). As the United States has moved on from 9/11, education and support for Muslim hijab-wearing women has increased but also the hijab remains a contentious issue in some circles in the US.

### Why We Must Overcome the Objectification of Women

I believe that the increasingly severe problem of women being mentally affected by trying to reach unrealistic beauty standards has systemic roots. When women gain political power, they will stop being as objectified. Women being reduced to their appearance diminishes

any respect that they have gained from their achievements. Women will not have reached true equality until beauty standards are not the primary thing that women are judged by.

Lagon writes that “although the world has made significant strides in reducing gender inequality, women continue to lag far behind in terms of political empowerment. This is a problem not only for women but for humankind as well”. In 2019, women make up only 19.4% of Congress. Still, we have never had a woman president or even vice president, and we are supposedly in the most progressive times ever. Sharing political leadership means sharing power, the most highly prioritized political power (Leyenaar). Leyenaar suggests that progress of women’s political leadership may be hindered by the success of new populist and right-winged parties”. In the United States, we have certainly seen this with Donald Trump’s popularity despite his blatant disrespect for women. Trump has repeatedly made comments about women’s appearances to attack them in the media. Various women’s appearances have been an easy target for Trump to attack because women’s looks are already vulnerable in our society. Someone like Trump is the embodiment of the backlash to movements like the anti-body shaming movement or the #MeToo movement. He represents those who want to maintain the status quo of marginalizing women who previously did not have a voice in society.

This is not just a problem in the United States. Around the world, “women are outnumbered in legislatures 4 to 1, and as of January 2015, there were only 18 women world leaders, including 12 female heads of government and 11 elected female heads of state” (Lagon). Women make up half of the population, yet there remains this extreme power retention by men.

There are leaders that see the benefits to incorporating women into higher positions of power. Rwandan president “Paul Kagame believes that women’s political empowerment is linked to their economic growth” (Lagon). McKinsey Global Institute found that advancing

women's equality could add "\$12 trillion to global growth" (Woetzel et al). The literature claims that "women's political empowerment appears to also contribute to the promotion of equality and broadening and deepening of democracy's global reach. In development and foreign policy, prioritizing women's empowerment is undoubtedly a just goal in and of itself" (Lagon).

Lagon discusses the implications of the Rwandan genocide on women in positions of power. After the Rwandan genocide, "women made up over 70% of the population" (Lagon). This pushed women into government leadership positions. "Rwanda is now one of only four countries with a higher representation of women in the labor force than men and it has the best wage equality for similar work of anywhere in the world" (Lagon). Paul Kagame, "has explicitly linked women's political representation to Rwanda's capacity for growth" (Lagon). He says that, "Increased participation of women in politics... 'is necessary for improved social, economic, and political conditions of their families and the entire country.'" (Lagon). Research also suggests that "women's political representation is positively correlated with a nation's ability to incorporate women into its formal economy and boost its gross domestic product" (Lagon). Ultimately, every society has standards of appearance, and those that conform have and probably will continue to be rewarded. We can continue to educate and become self-aware, but I am not sure if it is possible to completely get rid of these norms. Also, I'm not sure if having them to a smaller extent is a terrible thing. If we can just stop young girls from hating themselves while scrolling through social media and level the political playing field between men and women, that would be enough for me. I think by reaching political and social equality, women will be more respected for their achievements and less so for their looks. Men are also still judged by their appearance, but overall, they are not having mental health problems to the extent that women are. Therefore, the future for women looks promising once we become more socially and political

equal to men. However, the time frame for achieving could be much longer than we are hoping for.

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