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Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries

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ABSTRACT

To what extent do tastes in the field of beauty demarcate symbolic boundaries? This article analyzes social differences in the evaluation of the beauty of female and male faces in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. Combining Q-methodology and open interviews ($N = 150$), it presents a quantifiable comparative measurement of 'beauty tastes', and a qualitative analysis of the underlying 'repertoires of evaluation'. Four types of repertoires were found: aesthetic repertoires; subjectification versus objectification; gender-normative; and racial repertoires. Aesthetic and objectifying evaluations are typically applied to women, whereas evaluative repertoires for men are more subjectified, less aestheticizing, more overtly gendered and racial. Aesthetic repertoires reflect the opposing popular and highbrow logics well-known in cultural sociology. These repertoires resonate with the aesthetics of cultural institutions, notably fashion modeling and pornography. Regression analysis shows that these aesthetic repertoires demarcate boundaries along lines of education, age and urbanity, suggesting that they function as 'emerging cultural capital', applying highbrow logics beyond traditional high art fields. While nationality hardly affects the evaluation of female beauty, significant national differences are found in evaluations of male looks. Long-standing traditions of female depictions have produced more transnational stylistic conventions and repertoires. The evaluation of male facial beauty, on the other hand, appears to be shaped by more nationally specific racial and gender norms and ideologies.

1. Introduction: physical beauty and cultural capital

Physical appearance is related to status. A beautiful physique enhances one's social worth. As many studies in economy and psychology have shown, attractive people are more successful socially and economically than people with average or unattractive looks (Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Moreover, outward signs of status often come to be seen as beautiful or attractive. For instance, bodily signs of privilege like a slim body or a light skin are widely considered beautiful. Around the world people try to achieve such prestigious looks, often with the help of the ever-growing cosmetic and beauty industries (Jones, 2008; Mears, 2011; Stearns, 2013). Sociologists and media scholars have therefore argued that 'aesthetic capital' – the status derived from a beautiful appearance – is a form of symbolic capital (Anderson, Grunert, Katz, & Lovascio, 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015).

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Beauty standards, however, are not universally shared even within a single society. Studies showing that aesthetic capital 'pays off' typically assume that people agree about what is beautiful. However, to benefit from your appearance you need to embody the right kind of beauty. For instance, the beauty standards and bodily styles of the working and lower middle classes diverge considerably from dominant middle class styles (Bettie, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Crane, 2000; Tyler, 2008). Forms of beauty favored by less powerful groups carry social worth in their own surroundings, but may be penalized in society at large. Moreover, some physical styles are a willful denial of mainstream beauty standards. Subcultural styles like punk or gothic, or the arcane and experimental styles of the 'fashion forward' are designed to be liked only by a select group of insiders. The appreciation of physical beauty therefore is – at least partly – a matter of taste. Like other tastes, the appreciation of physical beauty requires cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984): cultural knowledge that varies across social groups and that is distributed unevenly across society.

This article investigates how beauty standards vary across people, and how they are related to social background. Following sociological studies on taste and cultural capital, I assume that the evaluation of the physical appearance of women and men is informed by cultural logics that are related to social background characteristics like age, class and nationality. Moreover, I expect such differences to mark symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Physical appearance – which includes both a person's physique and how this is styled, dressed and adorned – is central to how we judge people not only sexually, but also socially. Looking bad carries strong social and moral connotations. Differences in the valuation of appearance, therefore, may have real social consequences.

This approach builds on the sociology of taste, distinction and symbolic boundaries. In the early twenty-first century, social divides are becoming increasingly complex. Class divisions are shifting, as the vast majority of people in European societies now belong to a large and diverse middle class (Savage et al., 2013). Traditional class distinctions intersect with other divides, like age, gender and ethnicity. Moreover, increasing globalization leads to convergence across national boundaries, but growing divides between locals and cosmopolitans within countries (Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009; Prieur & Savage, 2013). The field of physical appearance is a strategic field to map and analyze how these new social divisions manifest themselves in everyday tastes.

Although the appreciation of physical appearance is a matter of taste, it differs from tastes in, say, music or high arts. First, the evaluation of a persons' appearance depends on their gender and race, and is therefore related to racial and gender ideologies. Second, it is rooted in everyday life and daily aesthetic practice. While fields like fashion modeling (Mears, 2011) and the cosmetic industry (Jones, 2008) are specialized in the production and dissemination of 'beauty', these institutions have not eclipsed everyday practice as much as professionalized artistic fields like music or visual arts. Finally, the appreciation of beauty is marked by a 'double embodiment'. Like all tastes, the judgment of appearance is based in embodied cultural capital: it is a visceral, almost automatic aesthetic experience. However, many people also aim to embody their own beauty standards through beauty practices such as styling, dressing, grooming or cosmetic surgery. In contrast with other cultural tastes, people do wear their beauty standards on their sleeves (and other parts of their bodies).

This study presents comparative data on the appreciation of the beauty of female and male faces from five European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. This comparison enables me to, first, map 'repertoires of evaluation' (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000) of physical appearance both within and across countries, and to unravel the cultural logics underlying these repertoires. Second, a comparative approach sheds light on the mechanisms at play in the shaping of beauty standards. Are symbolic boundaries drawn in similar ways across countries? Or do background factors like class, gender, education, or urbanity have a different impact across national settings?

2. Beauty, capital and subject position: theorizing the evaluation of appearance

The status systems of European societies have transformed considerably over the past decades. Consequently, how people signal their social status and identity has changed as well. Old forms of distinction, like knowledge of high arts, have become less important. Newly emerged means of distinction are both more diverse and less universally shared (Bennett et al., 2009; Lahire, 2006; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005).

Sociologists have identified many new forms of capital: cosmopolitan capital (Weenink, 2008); emerging cultural capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013); multicultural capital (Bryson, 1996); erotic capital (Hakim, 2010); and aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010). Some of these relate to new developments, like increasing globalization (cosmopolitan capital), growing ethnic and cultural diversity (multicultural capital) or the expansion and diversification of the middle classes (emerging cultural capital). Other capital forms refer to resources that are not new at all. Beauty and sexual attractiveness have been sources of power and influence since the beginning of humanity. However, the decreasing universality of status systems in diverse societies may lead to renewed or growing impact of such resources.

This study conceptualizes the evaluation and appreciation of human beauty as a form of distinction. I therefore do not look at the unequal distribution or pay-off of a beautiful appearance ('aesthetic' or 'erotic' capital), but instead at the variations in its appreciation. I see this as cultural capital: a socially conditioned and convertible form of aesthetic appreciation that carries cultural value (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, one's preferences for physical beauty serve as a means to distinguish oneself; and as criteria by which to judge others.

This leads to a twofold question. First: what sort of aesthetic judgments do people make about physical appearance? Second: what symbolic boundaries and social divides are marked by such evaluations of beauty? In order to answer these

questions, I draw on two strands of social theory: the sociology of taste and cultural capital, and theories of the representation of beauty and the body in gender and media studies.

2.1. Shifting social divides, appearance as emerging cultural capital?

Since Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), many studies have analyzed the relation between taste, cultural capital and symbolic boundaries in a range of countries and cultural fields. Surprisingly, the evaluation of physical beauty has not been studied systematically from this perspective. The basic assumption of the 'cultural capital' perspective is that aesthetic judgment is guided by an overarching habitus. This habitus encompasses a range of tastes from paintings and music to food and – presumably – physical appearance. This habitus is specific to social background, in particular social class.

Across (European) countries, people from higher classes tend to make aesthetic judgments on the basis of a distanced aesthetic disposition, whereas lower-class people usually base their evaluations on a popular aesthetics that privileges direct, sensorial forms of enjoyment. This aesthetic disposition increasingly manifests itself outside the domain of high culture, for instance in the knowledgeable consumption of the 'right' popular culture (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Lizardo, 2008; Prieur & Savage, 2013).

Sociologists have explained this expansion of highbrow aesthetics from changing class structures, particularly the growth and diversification of the middle classes. Prieur and Savage (2013) signal a rising importance of 'emerging cultural capital' in various European countries. Rather than privileging highbrow cultural forms, this form of capital entails a knowing mode of appreciation that is applied to a range of domains. Emerging cultural capital is inclusive and international, including sports, popular culture and information technology. In an empirical study of the British class structure, Savage et al. (2013), found that elites have high levels of traditional cultural capital, while emerging cultural capital is prominent among the new class of 'emergent service workers' and the established middle class, which combines old and new forms of cultural capital. Interestingly, one lifestyle practice central to emerging cultural capitalists is fitness, indicating that new middle classes distinguish themselves through bodily aesthetics.

Rather than signaling a whole new social dividing line, the notion of emerging cultural capital points to new intersections between social class and other factors, most importantly age. Recent replications of *Distinction* find a first distinguishing dimension of 'capital volume' or 'cultural capital'. However, the second dimension does not differentiate avant-garde from bourgeois styles (as Bourdieu predicts), but instead shows an age divide (Glevarec & Pinet, 2013; Roose, van Eijck, & Lievens, 2012). Across Europe, younger people combine traditional highbrow and popular culture, have more international tastes, and attach great value to 'authenticity', a criterion typically associated with the evaluation of popular arts like pop music.

Urbanity, sector of the labor market, and involvement in global culture also intersect with social class to produce distinct taste patterns. First, new middle classes are typically urban, preferring a metropolitan and Bohemian lifestyle (Boterman, 2012; Lloyd, 2006). Second, middle-class lifestyles are increasingly attuned to the demands of the post-industrial service economy. Employment in both present-day service jobs requires 'aesthetic labor': a stylized and attractive self-presentation is part of the job qualifications (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). The aesthetization of labor and the self is a general trend in post-industrial societies, manifesting itself especially among the urban young. Third, increasing globalization leads to new forms of stratification that intersect with class. Studies of 'cosmopolitan capital' (Prieur & Savage, 2013; Weenink, 2008) identify a growing dividing line between locals and cosmopolitans. This is specifically relevant to the evaluation of appearance. The rise of a global media culture has led to a profusion of images of (supposedly) beautiful people. The aesthetic standards implied in these images easily spread across countries because they are visual. These omnipresent images send out a continuing message that appearance is exceedingly important, particularly for women (Jones, 2008). Exposure to, and affinity with, this global visual culture is likely related to a cosmopolitan attitude and connectedness with global media culture. Thus, it intersects with class, age and urbanity.

Finally, I expect the evaluation of looks to be related to national background. Different European countries have different 'repertoires of evaluation' (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000), notwithstanding increasing transnational convergence. Surprisingly, there is no previous research on this topic. Therefore, I cannot formulate specific hypotheses about cultural variations in beauty standards (although national stereotypes abound). Repertoires of evaluation may also be affected by proximity to the beauty industries. Because France, Italy and the UK have a strong position in the transnational beauty industry, their beauty standards may resemble professional standards more than those in peripheral Netherlands and Poland. Additionally, social divides may work differently across national settings. For instance, class hierarchies may be more outspoken in class-ridden England than in the self-proclaimed egalitarian Netherlands (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013). Thus, both the content and the importance of beauty standards as a form of capital may vary across countries.

Conceptualizing the evaluation of appearance as cultural capital, thus, highlights the intersections of social divides in the shaping of tastes and repertoires of evaluation. However, the sociology of taste offers few clues on the specific nature of physical beauty, or on the intersections of beauty with gender, sexuality or race. For this we turn to another field.

2.2. Gender, gaze and subject position

While the sociology of taste has rarely considered the appreciation of human appearance, this is well-researched in gender and media studies. Insights from these fields allow us to explore how human beauty differs from other forms of aesthetic appreciation.

The evaluation of human beauty means: the evaluation of human faces and bodies, which are gendered and racialized.[1] This makes judgments of physical beauty different from appreciation of a painting, a piece of music or a plate of food. Human beauty is related to sexual attraction and desirability. Criteria for sexual attractiveness differ from purely aesthetic criteria (Etcoff, 2000; Hakim, 2010). In judging beauty, people have therefore at their disposal two potentially conflicting repertoires of evaluation: attractiveness versus aesthetics. Even among the most sophisticated, the sexual gaze at times trumps the aesthetic disposition. Additionally, the evaluation of beauty is influenced by gender norms. Judging beauty often means: judging whether someone looks like a proper woman or man. Beauty, therefore, is evaluated by the yardstick of normative masculinity and femininity (Jackson, 2006). This means that beauty standards probably reflect wider gender ideologies, which vary across social classes and countries (Davies & Greenstein, 2009).

Moreover, because the evaluation of appearance is embodied, it is informed by racial stereotypes and ideologies. Beauty standards, certainly in Europe but probably around the world, often take whiteness and common physical traits of people of European descent as the norm (Hunter, 2005; Jones, 2008; Mears, 2011, chap. 5; Sengupta, 2006). Physical traits more typical of non-whites are depreciated, or appreciated in stereotypical ways. For instance, black beauty is considered 'exotic' or hypersexual, Asian women are regarded as mysterious, and Asian men as unmasculine. The five countries in this study are transforming – though at various paces – from relative racial homogeneity to greater diversity. This may be reflected in differences in racialization of beauty standards.

A second way in which physical appearance differs from other forms of aesthetic judgments is that judging people's appearance means judging a person. Consequently, people can adopt different subject positions vis-à-vis the person evaluated. A 'subjectifying' stance implies that someone is evaluated as a person. 'Objectification' implies that someone is seen primarily as an object (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Shields, 1990). These subject positions are traditionally gendered: the objectifying stance is associated with a 'male gaze' targeting an 'objectified' female. However, both men and women tend to adopt this objectifying gaze when looking at women (and themselves). Men are more commonly subjectified, although recent studies show how media increasingly objectify men (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). In gender studies, objectification is often equated with sexualization (van der Laan, 2015). However, the aesthetic disposition facilitates a non-sexual aestheticized objectification – think of the purely aesthetic appreciation of nudes in art, like Botticelli's Venus or Michelangelo's David.

Finally, beauty standards differ from other aesthetic standards because they are characterized by a 'double embodiment'. They are embodied, first, in the sense of being an automatic, bodily form of evaluation. However, people also attempt to shape and style their appearance in accordance with these standards (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). This involves clothing, grooming, and durable forms of bodywork like dieting, going to the gym, or dyeing hair. This emulation is mediated by many factors. The basic mechanism, however, appears to be identification: would I, and could I, be like this person?

These insights supplement the assumptions from cultural capital theory in important ways. They show the specificity of human beauty as form of aesthetic appreciation, and highlight the importance of subject position, identification, attraction and gender and racial ideologies. However, these studies usually have not systematically looked at the appreciation of human beauty. Instead, media, communication and gender scholars have focused primarily on the analysis of images, hypothesizing about their purported effects on viewers.

3. Data and method

This study consisted of three stages. First, a group of trained interviewers conducted 150 interviews in five European countries. During these interviews, people were asked to sort four sets of pictures, of female and male faces and bodies, according to beauty. Interviewers asked respondents' opinions on the pictures, on beauty and its role in everyday life, their beauty practices, and the sources of their beauty standards. Second, a principal component analysis was done to identify underlying evaluative dimensions. The factors discovered depict typical viewpoints on beauty, in other words: the various ways in which respondents judge others' appearance. These factors were interpreted using the interview materials. Finally, I used these dimensions as a dependent variable in a regression analysis to determine how they are associated with social background. This section gives only a brief overview of the method. The online Methodological Appendix discusses in more detail the sample and recruitment procedure, the construction of the Q-sets and the intent of the Q-method, and the variables used in the regression analysis.

3.1. Sample

This study was conducted in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. France, Italy and the United Kingdom occupy central positions in the transnational beauty industry and are key exporters of fashion images. The Netherlands and Poland are peripheral in this field. However, all countries are integrated into transnational visual and media

[1] The fact that the evaluation of human beauty about bodies has another consequence: it is related to body size. Much has been written about the aesthetic appreciation of fatness and thinness (Bordo, 2004; Saguy, 2013; Stearns, 2013). While this topic came up often during the interviews, it was discussed mainly, and passionately, when evaluating bodily beauty. When informants discussed facial beauty, the topic of this article, fatness and thinness were of less concern. This issue will therefore be discussed in forthcoming publications on beauty standards for female and male bodies.

culture. For instance, they all have national editions of fashion magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Men's Health*. Moreover, all five have been part of the European cultural field for several centuries, and – with some variations – share the European highbrow/lowbrow system. Gender relations vary considerably across these countries. In the 2014 Gender Gap Report, the Netherlands ranks 14th, France 16th, the UK 26th, Poland 57th, and Italy 69th (Bekhouche, Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2014). These figures reflect underlying cross-national variations in gender norms and ideologies.

In each country, thirty interviews were conducted on the basis of a standardized protocol. In France, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland, local interviewers did the interviews after receiving training in interview technique and Q-methodology (see below). The British interviews were done by a Dutch researcher who is fluent in English. The sample was construction using as stratified quota procedure, with even representation of genders, respondents of higher and lower educational levels, three age groups (18–30, 31–50, 50+), and metropolitan versus small-town residents in every country.

3.2. Q-methodology and analysis

Q-methodology is designed to examine, standardize and compare subjective viewpoints (Brown, 1993). For this study four Q-sets were developed: of women's faces, men's faces, women's bodies and men's bodies, of 25 pictures each. This article uses only the images of faces, as these are most prominent in everyday social interactions. Images were selected to cover a variety of potentially relevant aspects of beauty, including physical traits, styling and grooming, facial expression and mode and style of photography.

Q-methodology requires a diverse set of items to allow respondents to express their personal viewpoints, and to identify all possible relevant aspects (Kroesen & Bröer, 2009). While this pre-selection is done according to theoretically informed criteria, Q-studies are always inductive. The items are by definition polysemic, and (as the interviews showed) allow for various interpretations. Moreover, the method allows for other criteria to emerge from the analysis. To keep the size of the set within reasonable limits, we restricted the age range of persons in the pictures to approximately 20–35. Previous studies have shown that this most people consider this age the most attractive (Etcoff, 2000).

Respondents were asked to sort these sets into a predefined grid with a bell-curve shape. Five pictures are placed in the middle column (receiving a score of 0), one picture at each extreme with scores of −4 and +4. Interviewees were invited to think out loud during the sorting.

These scores were analyzed with a principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. This analysis aimed to retrieve underlying 'tastes': the factors. For both female and male faces I decided on a four-factor solution. This means there are eight factors: four for women, four for men. This solution has an explained variance of 47% (women) and 44% (men). Interviews were transcribed, if needed translated, and analyzed with Atlas.ti. Factors were interpreted with the help of respondents' comments, particularly the interviews with the 'defining sorters': the persons whose taste most closely resembles a specific factor.

4. The Q-sorts: repertoires of evaluating female and male beauty

All factors distinguish respondents with opposing tastes. The negative pole of each factor is a rejection of the positively ranked images, and vice versa. This highlights an important finding: virtually all pictures are liked by some, but rejected by others. There is therefore not one hegemonic or universal beauty standard for female and male faces.

Instead, I find four main evaluative repertoires, which reflect distinctive perspectives on beauty or 'gazes'. These repertoires crosscut the four factors: they are combined in different ways to make up the most common taste patterns. First, factors vary in the degree to which they reflect an 'aesthetic gaze'. Aestheticizing repertoires judge facial beauty in terms of pleasing or less pleasing visual appearances. As expected on the basis of cultural capital theory, the analysis reveals different, sometimes opposing, aesthetic repertoires leading to different taste patterns.

However, facial appearance is also judged by non-aesthetic standards. The factors show an opposition between objectifying and subjectifying gazes. In the former case, formal or stylistic features of the face or image form the main criteria for distinguishing the beautiful from the less beautiful. In subjectifying views, beauty or attractiveness reflects the (perceived) personality of the person in the picture.

Third, factors vary in the degree to which they are informed by gender norms and gender-specific understandings of beauty. These gender-normative repertoires may focus on formal features and thus relate to objectifying notions of beauty; or on appropriate or desirable behaviors, and thus be part of a subjectifying (often moral) gaze. Similarly, gender-normativity can be more or less aesthetic. Finally, factors vary in the degree to which they are racialized. Some tastes single out specific racial groups or traits as more or less appealing.

Table 1 provides an overview of the eight factors and their relation to the four 'repertoires of evaluation'. It also shows the central value or meaning attached to beauty according to each taste. Thus, the first female factor distinguishes people who believe female beauty is about being 'attractive' from those who feel it is about 'authenticity'. This table shows a gender difference. Aesthetic and objectifying repertoires are most commonly applied to women, whereas male beauty is more racialized and subjectified. Table 2 reveals correlations between the female and male factors. Thus, while evaluations of female and male beauty follow partly different logics, they are related.

Figs. A1 and A2 (online supplement) show the three highest scoring, and lowest scoring images for each factor. Some images load highly on several factors with different underlying repertoires. Often, respondents offered divergent

Table 1
Main characteristics of the factors. One rating: applies to whole factor. Two ratings: low (negative pole) vs. high (positive pole).

Factor	Central value	Aesthetic[a]	Subjectified vs. objectified	Gender-normative[b]	Racial[c]	Explained variance (%)
Female faces						*47 (total)*
FF1	Attractive vs. Authentic	++	O vs. S	++ vs. +	++	19
FF2	Sweet vs. Interesting	++	S vs. O	++	− vs. ++	11
FF3	Strong vs. Nice	++ vs. −	O vs. S	+ vs. ++	+ vs. ++	9
FF4	Different vs. Classic	− vs. ++	S vs. O	+ vs. ++	++	8
Male faces						*44 (total)*
MF1	Charming vs. 'Beautiful Boys'	+ vs. ++	S vs. O	++ vs. +	−	17
MF2	'Beauty on the inside' vs. Attractive-masculine	− vs. +	S	− vs. ++	++	10
MF3	Romantic vs. Real	+ vs. −	S	++	+	9
MF4	Exotic vs. Conventional	+ vs. −	S	+	++	8

[a] −: not at all aestheticized, anti-aesthetic; +: somewhat aestheticized; ++: highly aestheticized, taste is centrally defined by aesthetic criteria.
[b] −: not at all gender-normative, e.g., favors androgyny or gender-bending; +: somewhat gender-normative; ++: strongly gendered, taste is centrally defined by gender norms or ideologies.
[c] −: not at all racialized, no indication that stereotypical racial traits either positively or negatively affect a taste; +: somewhat racialized; ++: strongly racial, taste is centrally defined by preference for/aversion to racial traits, e.g., skin color, hair type or color.

Table 2
Correlations between factors and with average appreciation.

	FF1	FF2	FF3	FF4	MF1	MF2	MF3	MF4	Average[a]
FF1	1.00								−.22
FF2	.00	1.00							−.26
FF3	.04	−0.30***	1.00						−.05
FF4	−.14	0.17*	−.15	1.00					.47*
MF1	.30***	.35***	−.32***	.06	1.00				−.27
MF2	−.22**	.08	−.13	.22**	−.06	1.00			.52**
MF3	.45***	−.17*	−.05	−.06	.08	−.09	1.00		.17
MF4	−.15	−.19*	.36***	−.20*	−.14	−.05	−.04	1.00	−.04

* $P < 0.05$.
** $P < 0.01$.
*** $P < 0.001$.
[a] Correlation based on aggregate scores.

interpretations of the same image. Images, in other words, may be liked or disliked for different reasons. The factors therefore cannot be interpreted as reflections of the characteristics of images. Instead, the factors reflect a way of looking, a *gaze*, that promotes a *taste*, the liking of specific elements of images.

4.1. Female faces

The first female factor is discussed extensively, in order to illustrate the underlying repertoires. In the interest of space, I describe the other factors in less detail.

The central opposing values in this factor are 'attractive' versus 'authentic'. It contrasts a preference for stylized, objectified, gender-normative, white beauty (negative pole) with a natural, subjectified, less gender-normative, racially diverse appearance (positive pole). Images scoring low on this factor show posed pictures of highly made-up women with long, well-groomed hair in professional photographs. They gaze into the camera with self-assured provocative ('come hither') looks, and exude a stylized, glamorous, sexualized beauty. This taste corresponds to the aesthetic of an industry that greatly contributes to beauty norms: porn. The four lowest ranking images show adult movie actresses.

The defining sorter is Ruud, a 50-year old mortgage advisor from Amsterdam (*Z*-score 1.97[2]):

> *Number 22 [highest ranking] is the ultimate woman I think (. . .) The symmetry in her face, the look in her eyes. It doesn't have to be a nice woman, because if you see number 20 [2nd highest], she has a much more cheerful air (. . .). There is some arrogance here, in number 22, but I find her an extremely beautiful woman. (I: really attractive). Yes, really. But only physically attractive.*

This statement is aesthetic, objectified and gender-normative. Ruud never mentions race, but in his sorting favors white women. Both men and women share his taste for stylized, attractive women. Federica, for instance, is an 18-year-old

[2] Dutch and French quotations are translated by the author; Polish and Italian interviews were translated by professional translators. The *Z*-score is the standardized score: the respondent's factor score divided by the standard deviation.

school-going woman from Bergamo, Italy (*Z*-score: 1.62). She highlights an important characteristic of an objectifying gaze: discussing elements of the face separately. 'I was very impressed with number 20's mouth: she has a beautiful smile, the beautiful white teeth. And the eyes appear very blue.' Federica is well aware of the role of photography, noting appreciatively 'a play of light that highlights the very face.'

These informants' standards are in line with conventional understandings of female prettiness. They reject women without make-up, with unkempt looks or unusual hairstyles that 'ruin' their faces, as Federica puts it. Theirs is a popular aesthetic: beauty should be like everyday life, but better, more polished, sexier and feminine – to the point of excessiveness. Basia (*Z*-score −1.88), a 58-year old housewife from a Polish town shares Ruud's and Federica's taste. She explicitly rejects black beauty:

> *It's the skin color. Though they are very beautiful. (I: What's beautiful about them?) This girl's look. Beautiful look, beautiful eyes and eyebrows. (I: If the color of their skin were different, would you rate them higher?) Yes. Definitely.*

On the opposite end of this factor, people prefer natural-looking women, in snapshot-style photographs with natural lighting. Their favorites are unposed, with open, smiling faces, or withdrawn and seemingly not noticing the camera. Darek, a 28-year old computer programmer from Warsaw (*Z*-score: 2.64) describes his favorite, the highest-ranking image:

> *She seems to be a nice person – exotic of course. There's something odd about her hair, something interesting, it seems to be asymmetrical, this sort of bun or something. The hair is also not perfect, not to a millimeter, that's some sort of exoticism too, thicker hair maybe, there's something in this slight disorder. This sideways look, cool, I like it.*

Darek's gaze is subjectifying: 'a nice person'. He approves of her dark skin: 'exotic'. Throughout the interview he prefers women who look a little unkempt and therefore more 'authentic': 'She has quite fair-sized eyebrows which is a sign that there hasn't been much interference, and that's cool'. Darek's is a highbrow aesthetic that favors authenticity and irregularity. He dislikes the conventional prettiness of what he calls 'plastic' models and celebrities, calling women whom he (correctly) identifies as porn stars as 'fake'. Regarding Ruud's favorite 22, he concludes: 'I don't see the face, because I mainly see the makeup, fake nails, I don't see what this person looks like.' Darek rarely refers to femininity. He does, however, employ different standards for men and women, making this taste moderately gender-normative.

Another high scorer is Paolo, a 47-year old Milanese banker (*Z*-score: 1.96). Like Darek, he loves authentic and interesting faces. He discusses one of the adult movie actresses in a typically subjectifying move:

> *I like the hair a lot but she has something in the gaze that makes her look a bit insincere. (. . .) Because of the too big lips, maybe they're natural but they're excessive, also the cheekbones, she doesn't look completely true to me.*

Paolo bases his evaluation of beauty on his impression of the person, sometimes imagining her in great detail. He dislikes Ruud's favorite 22 because 'she looks like this socialite who votes for Forza Italia'. Another adult movie star is 'a little doll. A bit fake (. . .) I see her loaded with small bags (. . .) in her wardrobe with 50 pairs of shoes (. . .) Trapped in the role of small woman she has invented for herself'. In summary, the positive pole of this factor reflects a preference for interesting, authentic rather than conventional beauty. It is subjectifying, racialized, and moderately gender-normative. Unlike its 'attractive' counterpart, this taste does not correspond to the aesthetic style of a specific cultural institution or field.

The second factor revolves around the contrast between 'sweet' and 'interesting' women. At the negative pole we find images of smiling, casual-looking women of different ages and ethnicities, making eye contact, photographed in natural lighting or recognizable surroundings. The opposite end shows pale blonde women with unusual features, photographed in studio settings. They have stern, blank stares: the 'empty gaze' typical of contemporary high fashion models.

People who prefer sweet faces stress the importance of a smile, and reject the 'cold', 'unfriendly', 'distant' models. Two defining sorters:

> *A woman has to look sweet. Like, see what I am doing here [sorting]. All sweet and open faces. (. . .) A woman has to be innocent, apparently. (Jan-Willem, Netherlands, 45, banker, village. Z-score: −1.80)*
> *She has this somewhat romantic character, with her face in the grass (. . .) She also has a very sweet air, voilà. It is funny because what I like here is this slightly romantic aspect. (Eric, France, 58, consultant, town. Z-score −1.80)*

Their counterparts who prefer 'interesting' beauty are well-versed in media culture: some recognize the models in the images. They tend to discuss images not as persons but as aesthetic types. Defining sorter Noémie, a Parisian artist (32, *Z*-score 2.65), classifies all images like this: 'Number 2. Fake Vanessa Paradis (. . .) Number 9, it's very 1980s, I love it, it's almost rock and roll by now.' This taste combines the highbrow aesthetic of the lovers of authentic women, preferring 'interesting' and 'unusual' faces, with an objectifying gaze:

> *The shape of her eyes, big lips, very nice. Her face is wide, which usually isn't very advantageous, but in her case, it gives her, well, something special. Her eyebrows are very nice. Beautiful hair color. She's not a standard beauty, so I didn't notice her, but when I had a closer look, it seems to me there is something interesting in her. (Zosia, 26, graphic designer, Warsaw, Z-score 2.37)*

Like the previous factor, this factor opposes popular and highbrow tastes. But whereas the attractive-authentic factor contrasts an objectifying popular with a subjectifying highbrow gaze; the sweet-interesting opposition distinguishes highbrow objectification from popular subjectification. This second factor is more gender-normative and less explicitly

racial. The sweet-interesting opposition is strikingly similar to the central institutional high-low divide in the fashion field. The 'sweet' women match the 'commercial' aesthetic of mainstream fashion and advertising, whereas the 'interesting' women are high fashion models conforming to the edgy 'editorial' style of high-end fashion magazines (Mears, 2011). Indeed, smiles versus empty gazes are important symbolic markers of this divide (van der Laan, 2015).

The third factor distinguishes 'strong' from 'nice' women. At the low end, we find professional images of confident-looking women with strong faces or unusual styling (e.g., partly shaved hair). Two defining sorters:

> *I really like the eyes, I like it very much. It's a look that captures me. (. . .) She has a serene expression; she doesn't pose in this way. She doesn't seem particularly pretending or posing. (Alessandro, 28, barkeeper, Milan. Z-score −2.04)*
> *Let's look at the face as at a system. Her eye color perfectly harmonizes with her beauty and in 22 it completely doesn't. The dark eyes of Asian women have always seemed to me nice. (. . .) It would be extremely nice if 21 had extremely green eyes, but in these photos you can't fully see it. The shape of eyes is important. (Mirosław, 32, lecturer, Warsaw. Z-score −2.02)*

These informants resemble lovers of 'interesting' beauty like Noémie: an objectifying gaze, many references to celebrities, models and media culture, and a preference for unusual faces. However, Alessandro and Mirosław attach great importance to expression and a strong look, rejecting high-end models' empty gazes Additionally, they are less gender-normative and like androgynous looks. Several defining sorters express a dislike for blondes, preferring – in an explicitly aesthetic argument – more 'contrast' (Ania, 26, salesperson, Warsaw. *Z*-score −1.94).

Their counterparts like 'nice' girls: images of smiling, friendly, natural-looking women with pale faces and blond or light ginger hair, photographed in non-studio settings. They reject purely aesthetic evaluations of people's appearance:

> *They are not beautiful, but they've got this beauty inside. It's in their character, if I may say so. It seems to me that they are such nice, frank, non-sarcastic girls. (Marysia, 63, retired technical worker, Warsaw. Z-score 2.45)*
> *No. 10, I've put at the top. She just seems very natural. (. . .) She looks like she'd be someone who I'd want to get to know and get on with. (. . .) 21: She looks relaxed, her eyes look friendly. It looks like it's a posed photograph. (. . .) So maybe she is working for a modeling or acting agency or something like that but. . . She has sort of flushed cheeks and she looks warm and healthy and somebody you'd like to get to know. (Janet, 34, housewife, English town. Z-score: 1.75)*

These informants abhor 'negative' people who are 'aggressive' or 'sarcastic'. Janet's least favorite is the girl with partly shaved hair:

> *I don't think she's necessarily ugly (. . .) but she comes across as quite aggressive. (. . .) You know that something bad has happened to her that would make her not want to embrace you.*

Marysia and Janet brush aside outside appearance as a criterion for evaluating others. Their gaze is subjectifying and gender-normative: they judge women, but not men, primarily on niceness. Although their judgments are not explicitly racial, they single out 'light' women.

The final female factor also contrasts an aesthetic with an anti-aesthetic gaze. For lack of a better term, I call this 'different' versus 'classic' beauty. High-loading images on this factor are the overall favorites: professional images of models with symmetrical, even faces. This factor correlates .47 with the average appreciation of all images (see Table 2). The two highest-ranking images show dark women, but – interestingly – this is not thematized in interviews with distinctive sorters. High scorers praise their favorites for their 'natural', 'classic', beauty that is not excessive in any way:

> *She looks immaculate (. . .) She looks like someone who could be a model but she looks natural. She doesn't seem skinny. I think she's beautiful. She hardly looks like she's got any makeup on. (. . .) They both look just natural and plain. (Shedan, coffeeshop owner, 26, London. Z-score 1.84)*

At the low end, we find casual photographs of less conventionally attractive women. The lowest-ranking image shows a pretty girl with a blue wig. Two low-ranking faces are Asian – again, not thematized in the interviews. Informants with this taste are diverse and difficult to categorize. The defining sorter is Francis, a 67-year old farmer from southern France (*Z*-score: −2.35):

> *It's not my world. All that is too chic for me. Okay, maybe the African woman but she's pretty much the only one. And her [blue wig], I could meet her. Because you live in worlds that form groups, like the world of Ariege [region], the farmers, all that. That's not the same world as the world of the cafés of Toulouse, Saint Sernin. . . No, I would like to see another stack. They get on my nerves, these broads of yours.*

What low scorers have in common is not so much a preference, as a rejection: of global fashion and beauty culture and its aesthetization of female beauty.

4.2. Male faces

The factor analysis of male beauty also yielded four factors reflecting opposing tastes. Male beauty standards are less aesthetic and objectified than female beauty standards, making racial and gender-normative repertoires more prominent. Informants often had difficulty putting evaluations of male beauty into words, and sometimes resisted the idea of judging

male beauty. This reflects a widely shared conviction, in all five countries, that beauty is a feminine affair. Especially men balked at having to judge other men's appearance, apparently considering it a threat or insult to their masculine identity. The male factor labels in Table 1 are therefore less succinct, as central values were more difficult to extract from the interviews.

The first male factor contrasts 'charming' men with 'beautiful boys'. On the negative pole, we find well-groomed, smiling, dark-haired men with open expressions appealing directly to the viewer. Their counterparts are unsmiling, young-looking men with pale, regular features and neutral or dreamy expressions. They have the androgynous, empty look popular in contemporary high fashion. Pictures on both ends are professional and flattering.

The defining scorers of both ends:

> *Meeeh. I don't like them [high-ranking images]. Sort of like, how to say, fashion models. Let's look. Oh, this one [low-ranking] isn't bad to look at. Let's put him here. Because he is smiling. The others all have this serious look. (. . .). I like his eyes. And his laugh. This one [high-ranking] is looking much more serious. Boring. Yes that looks like a very boring little man to me. (Marijke, 63, housewife, Amsterdam. Z-score −1.75)*
>
> *Just quite a beautiful boy. (. . .) He also looks like he could be a bit arrogant. (. . .) He has got the fine features that I like. I always find men with fine features quite attractive. The way he is looking into the distance. It's all very set up, isn't it? It looks like he's modeling. Unfortunately, he looks like he's modelling for something like Jack Wills (. . .). an English brand that has associations with sort of – It's all a bit public school. (Anne, London, 28, physician, Z-score 1.78)*

Marijke's is a subjectified popular gaze: she values smiling, charming men. Anna's gaze is highbrow and objectifying: she recognizes her favorite as a model, likes his looks even though she doesn't like the person, and prefers sophisticated 'fine' features. This factor is the male pendant of the 'nice' versus 'interesting' female factor. As Table 2 shows, these factors correlate .35. Like its corresponding female factor, this factor reflects the opposing professional aesthetics of the fashion field: a smiling, masculine, 'commercial' versus a boyish, androgynous 'editorial' look.

The second male factor opposes images of confident-looking men with masculine features (stubble, strong jawline) with less conventionally masculine men. The lowest scoring images show two Asians, and a man with 1980s-style make-up and colored hair. I summarize this factor as 'beauty on the inside' versus 'attractive and masculine'. Correlating .52 with the average ranking, this seems a male variation on the 'different' versus 'classic' factor: it separates people with a mainstream taste from a diverse group characterized by resistance to mainstream masculinity.

The 'attractive masculine' taste is represented by Amsterdam bartender Sayla (19, *Z*-score 1.61):

> *Him I find just a beautiful man. Really a beautiful man. I like the picture too. (. . .). Nice beautiful lashes, friendly smile, masculine look. Yes, just a very nice man. I wouldn't mind going on a date with him. (. . .) But I have to say, those I find really beautiful, and the others. (. . .) Could be really good friends. With three I would go on a date. But honestly the others. . . Not ugly, more neutral.*

This taste is gender-normative and subjectifying: Sayla's main criterion is whether she would date a man. High scorers stress the importance of masculinity, and, like Sayla, often present explicitly sexual evaluations. The combination of sexual and gender-normative criteria is clearest in negative judgments. Men who are 'too coif' (Liz, journalist, 32, London. *Z*-score 1.61), made up, boyish or blonde (according to Sayla 'blond boys are just not hot') are brushed aside. Asian men are dismissed as insufficiently masculine and (Liz again) 'just not attractive'.

Low scorers on this factor are united by their rejection of male aesthetization and objectification and a dislike of outspoken masculinity. The distinctive sorter was 53-year-old entrepreneur Mario from Como (score: −2.21). Mario, like many male informants, protested at having to evaluate male beauty. His main criterion was whether a male face showed a 'good person': '6 [Asian] is nice. I expect that everything about him is beautiful, beyond the face.' Another male face he appreciates because he 'inspires sympathy, not aesthetic beauty (. . .) he sends me something nice and positive.' Mario's rejection of male aesthetization leads to a preference for faces other informants describe as 'effeminate': of Asian men, and carefully style white men.

The third factor, summarized as 'romantic' versus 'real', contrasts a styled, clean, boyish look with a more unkempt, unconventional and mature appearance. Suzanne, a 78-year old Parisian nurse (*Z*-score −2.16) is the defining sorter for the 'romantic' taste:

> *He looks a little mysterious, he is also beautiful. He has a beautiful nose, this look, it a bit severe. But he is beautiful, he is young, he is beautiful (. . .) He also seems very romantic. (. . .) Because his hair is a little ruffled. I don't know what he is looking at, I am not sure what he is saying. There is purity in his face. He has this romantic air.*

The high scorers on this factor reject aesthetic evaluation of men as 'unmasculine'. Andrew, a 49-year old security guard from an English town (*Z*-score: 2.03) chides the Dutch interviewer: 'No. I'm just saying to ask a man to rate other men's beauty is not really an Anglo-Saxon concept.' Rather than looking for the most beautiful, Andrew looks for 'real' men whom he can identify with:

> *Looks like a normal bloke, just giving normal people a break in life. Just looks like an ordinary guy. Same with 12 and 25 because they look individual, and they look like people who go their own way in life. I think that's good. (. . .) They've both got their hair quite long and unconventional, so they seem free-thinking. I have a positive reaction to people who are free-thinking and have got their own ideas. (. . .) Number 21 looks like a completely ordinary guy. He's got a beard, and he just*

looks like an ordinary bloke, so I just like that picture because I'm just giving the ordinary guy a look in rather than having lots of pictures of models and stuff.

This factor strongly correlates (.45) with the attractive versus authentic female factor. Like its female pendant, this factor revolves around the distinction between stylized and unkempt looks. In both the male and female versions, the stylized pole favors whiteness while the 'unkempt' pole is racially diverse: the highest-ranking male image, and Andrew's favorite, is black. Also, in both factors the stylized-unkempt opposition highlights a gender divide: real women are stylized; real men don't pay too much attention to looks. Consequently: unkempt women are 'alternative', stylized men receive the somewhat unmasculine moniker 'romantic'.

The fourth male factor is the most racialized of all factors. On the basis of the interviews, I dub the central values underlying this factor as 'exotic' versus 'conventional'. At the low end, we find three very diverse black men: a sportsman, a commercial male model, and a transvestite. What unites them is their color. High-loading images show tidy, young, rather average-looking, blond or reddish-haired men. Race, however, was hardly mentioned in interviews with defining sorters.

Nellie, a 49-year old cleaner from a village in the north of the Netherlands is the distinctive sorter for the high end (*Z*-score 2.15). She describes her favorites as 'handsome' and 'normal':

This I think is a handsome boy for people of the same age, isn't he? (. . .) Well, I think for 25-year old girls this is a nice boy (. . .) He is my son's age, so you look at it differently. I'm not a person of extremes. I am more a of a 'just act normal' person.

She makes no explicit comments about skin color, but twice calls dark men 'threatening'. When Murzyn (59, Poland, farmer, village. *Z*-score: 2.05) is asked why he puts black men at the low end, he explains 'It's hard for me to say anything about them because they are not Poles. (. . .) Because they are black-skinned, the look can be good, but this only a person who deals with them can really tell. Me, I rather didn't have anything to do with them.' Like Nellie, Murzyn appreciates a conventional look: his favorite has 'a serene face, the hairstyle is quite nice. He looks like a calm, well-mannered guy, and perhaps a Catholic, I think.'

Low scorers one this factor are only slightly more explicit in their appreciation of dark faces. Only one defining scores, Emma (30, schoolteacher, London. *Z*-score: −2.21) explicitly aestheticizes blackness: 'I definitely find men with dark hair and dark skin more attractive'. Others are more veiled, like Samantha (26, UK, social worker, town. *Z*-score: −2.06), who explained 'I don't like blond men'. Two other high scorers greatly value expressiveness (a judgment potentially informed by racial stereotypes). For instance, Eulalie (24, counselor, French town. *Z*-score −2.31) appreciates the expression of the black model:

As the most beautiful I take the 24. Not because he is necessarily the most beautiful but he has – The photo speaks, it has this happy mood. (. . .) Voilà, the photo is expressive (. . .) If he hadn't smiled like that I might have put him in the middle of the ranking.

This factor correlates with the female strong versus nice factor. In its preference for unthreatening 'light' beauty it is similarly subjectifying, gendered and anti-aesthetic. However, for men the preference for 'lightness' goes hand in hand with an aversion to 'darkness', and vice versa. The preference for 'dark men' seems more aesthetic, and based in a taste for the exotic. This racialization of beauty, however, is quite implicit, and couched in non-racial terms like normal, threatening, expressiveness or an aversion to blond men. If we hadn't combined the interviews with the Q-sorts, the racial aspect of beauty would have gone quite unnoticed.

5. Regression analysis: repertoires of evaluating beauty as symbolic boundaries?

Are these repertoires of evaluating female and male faces related to social background and therefore, potentially, to social divides and symbolic boundaries? To answer this question, I used the respondents' factor scores as dependent variables in a regression analysis. Note that, since this study is not based on a statistically representative sample, results cannot automatically be generalized to the entire population. The results, shown in Table 3, should be interpreted with care. The online Methodological Appendix provides details on the variables and analysis.

Table 3
Regression models: beauty repertoires and social background.

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
FF1	High education	.72**	.72**	.71**
	Metropolitan	.97***	.98***	.98***
	Age	−.02+	−.02+	−.02
	Women		.19	.19
	UK[a]			.09
	Poland[a]			.01
	France[a]			.37
	Netherlands[a]			.01
	R^2	.14	.14	.15
FF2	High education	.45*	.45*	.43*
	Metropolitan	.40	.40	.40

Table 3 (*Continued*)

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Age	−.02**	−.02**	−.02**
	Women		.01	.05
	UK[a]			.45
	Poland[a]			.54
	France[a]			−.17
	Netherlands[a]			−.29
	R^2	.09	.09	.13
FF3	High education	−.02	−.02	.04
	Metropolitan	−.22	−.21	−.21
	Age	.04***	.04***	.04***
	Women		.28	.31
	UK[a]			.04
	Poland[a]			.42
	France[a]			−.10
	Netherlands[a]			.53
	R^2	.15	.16	.19
FF4	High education	.07	.07	.07
	Metropolitan	.07	.09	.07
	Age (p/yr)	−.02*	−.02**	−.02**
	Women		.43*	.43*
	UK[a]			−.32
	Poland[a]			−.14
	France[a]			−.33
	Netherlands[a]			−.44
	R^2	.03	.06	.07
MF1	High education	.40+	.39+	.35
	Metropolitan	.37	.36	.38*
	Age	−.05***	−.05***	−.04***
	Women		−.33	−.29
	UK[a]			1.20***
	Poland[a]			.73*
	France[a]			.34
	Netherlands[a]			.14
	R^2	.23	.24	.31
MF2	High education	−.31	−.30	−.23
	Metropolitan	−.14	.25	−.09
	Age	−.02**	−.03**	−.03**
	Women		.66**	.72**
	UK[a]			.84*
	Poland[a]			1.01**
	France[a]			.23
	Netherlands[a]			1.29***
	R^2	.06	.11	.20
MF3	High education	−.09	−.09	−.11
	Metropolitan	.54**	.53**	.51**
	Age	−.01	−.01	−.01
	Women		−.36	−.42+
	UK[a]			−.89*
	Poland[a]			−1.04**
	France[a]			−.24
	Netherlands[a]			−.53
	R^2	.05	.06	.13
MF4	High education	−.30	−.31	−.23
	Metropolitan	−.02	−.03	−.03
	Age	.03***	.03***	.03***
	Women		−.26	−.22
	UK[a]			.10
	Poland[a]			.37
	France[a]			−.51
	Netherlands[a]			.64+
	R^2	.12	.13	.20

For information on variables, see the online Methodological Appendix.

[a] Reference category: Italy.

+ $P < .1$.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

The first regression model (Model 1) tests whether repertoires for evaluating faces qualify as (emerging) cultural capital. It looks at relations between the eight factors and age, metropolitan location and educational level, which is used as cross-nationally standardized proxy of social class.

Model 2 adds gender. Gender affects subject position, potentially leading to differential patterns of identification and sexual attraction. Moreover, women may be more sensitive to, and targeted by, cultural standards of physical beauty. Sadly, the data do not allow us to look for the relation with ethnicity/race. Ethnic landscapes, and the local meanings attached to race or ethnicity are so diverse across our sample countries as to be almost incomparable.

Model 3 adds nationality. This allows us to test, first, whether national background affects respondents' repertoires, and second, how national setting impacts on other variables. Italy, with its strong position in the transnational fashion field, is the reference category.

5.1. Results

The results for female and male faces are strikingly different, and will be discussed separately. Appreciation of female beauty is quite well explained from a combined impact of age, class and metropolitanism. This supports the expectation that the aesthetization of physical appearance (which is more common for women) is related to cultural capital. Particularly the first factor, contrasting attractive and authentic beauty, shows the pattern expected of 'emerging' forms of cultural capital, distinguishing educated, younger urbanites from less educated, older, non-metropolitans. This factor also shows that authenticity is an important criterion in the logic of 'new cultural capital'. Moreover, a liking for authenticity goes together with openness to racial diversity and a less gender-normative stance, which seems to fit with the international, 'Bohemian' profile of this group. The sweet versus interesting factor also distinguishes young from old, educated from less educated, but shows no effect of urbanity. This factor, therefore, seems more in line with a traditional high-low divide: conventional versus avant-garde tastes, manifesting themselves outside traditional highbrow cultural fields.

The other two female factors only show age effects. Older informants prefer 'nice' and 'diverse' beauty, which means they are more adverse to objectifying and aestheticizing repertoires. This age effect may be a consequence of older people's less extensive immersion into media culture. Alternatively, it could be related to the age difference with the women in the pictures, who were all relatively young.

Surprisingly, neither gender (Model 2) nor nationality (Model 3) show much effect. Gender contributes somewhat the explanation of the fourth factor: Women like classic beauties better; men are more likely to reject mainstream aesthetics. Nationality shows no effect at all. This cross-national similarity suggests that informants' repertoires for evaluating female appearance are effectively forged within a transnational European field.

The appreciation of male facial beauty, however, follows a different logic. Model 1 explains relatively little variance. Only the 'charming versus beautiful' factor shows a slight effect of education, which disappears after controlling for country. Age is related to three factors. Younger people prefer the beautiful boys over the charming men (Factor 1), 'Beauty on the inside' over the attractive-masculine beauty (Factor 2), and conventional over exotic beauty (Factor 4). In other words: younger people like the more boyish, less outspokenly masculine images. Somewhat puzzlingly, the third factor (romantic versus real men) is related to urbanity.

Model 2 improves the explanatory power of the second factor considerably. Women, in other words, prefer attractive-masculine men, whereas men favor the less masculine faces of the 'beauty on the inside' pole. This reflects a heternormative logic: men refuse to aestheticize other men. Women, when prompted, more willingly aestheticize, even sexualize, male beauty. Moreover, women may generally be more likely to appreciate mainstream beauty of men and women. That this factor correlates with the average supports this interpretation.

Model 3, adding the countries, leads to dramatic improvement in explained variation. In contrast with the female factors, repertoires for evaluating male beauty are nationally bound. Nationality does not intersect with the other variables, as it cancels out little of the effects of other variables. We find no effect of proximity to fashion core or periphery, as Italian respondents differ most from the Brits. Instead, the first, second and third factors suggest a cultural divide between the north and the south: Poland, the UK and the Netherlands versus France and Italy.

The evaluation of male beauty appears to be influenced most by cross-national differences in gender-ideologies. Italy, the most gender-unequal, emerges as the most macho. Italians reject the more aestheticized male images: the beautiful boys (factor 1), the attractive-masculine men (factor 2), and the romantic men (factor 3). France shows a similar pattern, though less outspoken. The northern countries all prefer a different version of stylized masculinity: modelesque in the UK (factor 1), mainstream sexy in the Netherlands (factor 2), and boyishly groomed in Poland (factor 3). However, nationally specific racial ideologies also seem to play a role. The northern countries also show a marked preference for 'white' beauty, rejecting Asian faces (factor 2) and the black man scoring highest on the 'real men' factor. Dutch informants also seemed most aversive to 'exotic' black men of factor 4. The latter factor also is the only one that shows a relation with EGP: manual workers and farmers were significantly more likely than others to prefer the white men.

6. Conclusion: towards a cultural sociology of beauty?

This article mapped and analyzed social differences in the evaluation of female and male beauty. Thus, it gauged to what extent tastes in the field of beauty demarcate symbolic boundaries. Combining Q-sorts and open interviews, I presented both

a quantifiable comparative measurement of repertoires of evaluation, and an in-depth exploration of the underlying logics of these 'beauty tastes'. I found that the evaluation of looks is based on four distinct types of repertoires of evaluation: aesthetic repertoires; subjectification versus objectification; gender-normativity; and racial repertoires. The outcomes of the factor analysis were interpreted in the light of these dimensions.

The appreciation of female and male beauty is guided by different logics. Across countries, the judgments of female faces to a large extent followed a logic akin to the evaluation of other aesthetic products. Less educated, older and non-metropolitan informants look for pleasing, appealing faces, whereas more educated, younger, metropolitan informants prefer a beauty that is 'interesting' or 'authentic'. However, alongside these aesthetic repertoires I found subjectified and objectified 'gazes', racial and gendered tastes, suggesting that there is something specific about beauty that escapes the popular-highbrow logic.

Male beauty is less commonly judged according to an aesthetic logic. In line with insights from gender and media studies, men are less objectified and aestheticized. Consequently, men are less easily measured by a strictly aesthetic yardstick. Only one factor out of four involves a distanced highbrow gaze. Instead, the evaluation of male faces reflects culturally specific gender and racial norms and ideologies. This leads to considerable cross-national variation. Thus, the appreciation of male looks is less transnational than the judgment of female beauty.

The presence of distinct tastes based in social divides suggests that beauty standards serve as a means of distinction. What people find beautiful provides information – consciously or unconsciously – about their social position. In the case of appearance, this information is quite literally embodied, for instance in styles of dress and grooming. This article has not explored the real-life consequences of these repertoires: do people explicitly reject others on the basis of their appearance? I intend to do this in follow-up studies. However, the harsh moral and personal judgments of the Q-images indicate that appearance is central to people's evaluation of others.

Can we say, however, that beauty standards serve as *cultural* capital? In other words: does the evaluation of appearance function as a form of aesthetic knowledge marking symbolic boundaries? For the female faces, it does. Preferences for specific looks are more prominent among social groups possessing both more conventional and newer forms of cultural capital. Moreover, I found that popular and aestheticized tastes correspond with the styles of established – popular, yet stratified – cultural fields: pornography and fashion photography. These styles in turn build on an age-long history of the stylized representation of women across cultural fields.

The aesthetization and objectification of male beauty, in contrast, is a newer and rarer phenomenon, that met with resistance especially among male informants. Across countries, a minority of informants applies an aesthetic and objectifying look to men. This may be a cultural vanguard, more versed in transnational media culture and the expansive aestheticizing gaze of the emerging cultural capitalists of the Post-Fordist economy. Dominant repertoires for evaluating male looks are less concerned with aesthetics than with normative masculinity and racial boundaries. While this certainly demarcates symbolic boundaries, these boundaries are primarily gendered and moral, rather than aesthetic and cultural.

This study raises several new questions that need to be addressed in further research. An important theme for further research is the relation between race and beauty. While the Q-results clearly show that race matters, this theme is quite submerged and implicit in most interviews. Both the relation between beauty standards and our informants' ethnic and racial background, and between beauty standards and national racial ideologies will be explored in further research. A second important question regards the institutional basis of beauty standards: where do they come from? The aestheticized factors could easily be traced back to the cultural industries. But for the other factors, the institutional 'roots' are less clear.

The method and findings presented here also have some limitations. While the sample was carefully constructed, it is not an a-select sample. Thus, the findings cannot be immediately generalized to the population of these five countries. Moreover, while the Q-set aimed to capture a wide variety of beauty types, it was limited to a specific age group and to faces that could potentially be found beautiful. While within these limitations, people found enough to abhor and reject, it is conceivable that an even more diverse set of images would have shown more consensus, and less variation. However, the primary aim of this was to uncover what people find beautiful – not what they find ugly.

This study has a number of implications for further research. Most importantly, it has opened up the field of human beauty to sociological comparison, by combining the comparative sociology of taste with insights from gender studies and Q-methodology. Second, it contributes to our understanding of the workings of cultural capital in today's increasingly diverse societies. In particular, it supports to recent analyses that show the increasing importance of 'emerging cultural capital' that applies highbrow aesthetics to a growing range of fields, sometimes rather far removed from traditional high arts and culture. Third, these results highlight the uneven nature of the transnational media field: whereas female beauty standards converge cross-nationally, male beauty standards are shaped primarily by national cultural ideologies. Finally, our analysis qualified academic and journalistic critiques of dominant beauty standards (Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). Our findings show that there is no single, mass-media imposed beauty standard for men or women. Instead, beauty standards vary because they are intricately connected with societal processes of exclusion and belonging, imitation and distinction.

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Supplementary data

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