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## THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACT OF APPEARANCE ON VARIOUS SPHERES OF LIFE – THE OPINIONS OF WOMEN AND MEN OF DIFFERENT AGES

**Summary.** The aim of the article is to present the results of a study addressing the issue of the positive and negative influence of appearance in the context of private and professional life. The publication is based on qualitative research on attitudes towards the appearance of women and men of different ages. The way of thinking about appearance depends on the conditions of the gendered age – i.e. the gender and age of the respondents. For women, appearance plays an important role in both the public and private spheres, while men have placed greater importance on it in the public sphere. While women still seem to attribute a greater role to physical appearance, more and more men are beginning to see this as a key aspect in interpersonal relationships. On the basis of the research we can observe the coexistence of two models of “femininity” and “masculinity”: patriarchal and androgynous. Sometimes in the same generation there are contradictory internal attitudes towards appearance. In the youngest generation, the process of unifying attitudes towards appearance is noticeable – attractive appearance is perceived by young men and women as one of the key human capital resources.

**Keywords:** attractiveness, appearance, importance of appearance in life, women, men, professional life, private life, intimate relationships.

### 1. Introduction

We function in a world where a person’s appearance is the basis for many judgements and prejudices. The reason for this being perhaps the fact that we automatically treat appearance as a source of information about ourselves and others. The word “appearance” means “the way that someone or something looks”, “an impression given by someone or something”, “an act of performing or participating in a public event”, “an act of arriving or becoming visible” (*Oxford Living Dictionary*). Although it is possible to talk about appearance in different

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contexts, this text will focus on the physical appearance of the individual – face, body shape, way of dressing etc.

Assigning such great importance to appearance has its evolutionary justification, because appearance was often the only indicator of what is beneficial for us and what is not. It is difficult for us to separate what is “external” from what is “internal”, and for many of us the physicality of a given individual is interpreted as the embodiment of the characteristics of his or her personality, lifestyle, profession, and the values and beliefs they represent (Etcoff 2002). Physical appearance is certainly a basic and direct source of information about the other person, and to a large extent it determines whether or not we are impressed by someone, thereby generating positive feelings. Biogenic factors, such as facial symmetry and beauty, skin and hair quality, height and body shape, play an important role. There are also non-verbal signals, like the way of looking at others, smiling, moving, and body odour (Pawłowski 2018). Demographic and social factors are also important: age, gender, ethnic and cultural identity; the way of dressing, the colours of clothes, accessories, hairstyle and make-up; as well as the importance we attach to the above-mentioned aspects (Adams, Galanes 2008; Klepacka-Gryz 2017).

In this context, reference can be made to the ‘halo’ effect, which explains the automatic attribution of certain personality traits on the basis of a given person’s appearance: attributing attractive people with positive traits, such as wisdom, intelligence and kindness, and unattractive people with negative ones, such as stupidity, malice and sloppiness (Leary 1999; Cialdini 2000). We expect more attractive people to be better at many things, happier, and more mentally balanced. K. Dion’s pioneering research on attractiveness in the 1970<sup>s</sup> shows that attractive people are generally judged more leniently when they make mistakes and an explanation for their behaviour is found more often than for those who are on average attractive or unattractive (Dion, Berscheid, Walster 1972). Since then, a lot of research on the role of appearance in various spheres of life has been conducted, especially by psychologists and social psychologists, in attempts to answer the question of how beauty, physical attractiveness or the lack of it, and physical features signalled by non-verbal communication, have a direct influence on the success or failures of individuals in a personal context (e.g. Andreoni, Ragan 2008; Berscheid, Walster 1978; Buss 2014; Fisher 2012; Swami, Greven 2007; Townsend, Levy 1990) and professional (e.g. Cash, Kilcullen 1985; Mack, Rainey 1990; Raza, Carpenter 1987; Frieze, Olson, Russell 1991; Gladwell 2008; Hamermesh 1994; Hamermesh 2013).

Despite the fact that the subject matter has been widely explored in psychological and social sciences, it seems that in the realm of Polish sociology there have been few studies which focus on the body as the main object of research, or on the way in which people experience the body on a daily basis in a positive and negative way, and how they use it (Jakubowska 2012). Therefore, it is

worth looking into people's experiences and self-reflections on what importance they attach to the way they look, especially in relation to their life experiences in various areas – personal, love, social and career contexts.

## 2. Research methodology

The aim of the article is to present the results of research on the role of appearance in the context of private and professional life, in the opinions of women and men of different ages. The publication is based on research on expectations and attitudes regarding the appearance and health of women and men in three age categories: young (18–37), middle-aged (38–62) and elderly (over 63). The age ranges were determined on the basis of CBOS survey results, in which Poles were asked “when does youth end, and when do middle age and old age begin?” (CBOS 2012). The research was of a qualitative nature. The material analysed in this paper comes from 90 structured free interviews (IDI) and 12 focused group interviews (FGI) with young people (15 IDI and 2 FGI with women, 15 IDI and 2 FGI with men), middle-aged people (15 IDI and 2 FGI with women, 15 IDI and 2 FGI with men) and elderly people (16 IDI and 2 FGI with women, 14 IDI and 2 FGI with men). All participants of the survey lived in a large city (over 500,000 inhabitants) and had a secondary or higher education and a similar economic status<sup>1</sup>.

The presented research focused on, inter alia, attitudes towards appearance in relation to its three components: cognitive, emotional/evaluative and behavioral. The following definition of an attitude has been adopted: “A person's attitude towards an object is understood as a general set of comparatively long-lasting dispositions for assessing and emotionally responding to this object, and possibly comparatively long-lasting beliefs about the nature and properties of this object accompanying these emotional-appraising dispositions, and comparatively long-lasting dispositions for behaving towards the object” (Nowak 1973: 23).

This article will discuss the cognitive component of the attitude towards the importance that women and men of different ages attach to appearance in relation to these different spheres of life.

The analyzed material is based on the *gendered age* approach, where age is perceived through the prism of gender, and femininity and masculinity are analyzed in the context of desirable appearance characteristics also in relation to age. A distinction was made between biological (metric) age and culturally-defined age – the way one understands youth, middle age and old age in the

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<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out as part of the project “Cultural concepts of gender and age, and attitudes of women and men towards their health and appearance” financed by the National Science Centre, carried out in 2013–2016. A full description of the methodology and *gendered age* concepts can be found in a book of the same title by E. Malinowska, K. Dzwonkowska-Godula, E. Garncarek, J. Czernecka, J. Brzezińska (2016).

context of a given culture. The functioning of cultural definitions of youth, middle age and old age enables an individual to organize their own expectations with regard to themselves and others, as well as social expectations regarding themselves as representatives of a given age category. This in turn enables them to behave in accordance with the definitions, or to comply with expectations for the age category to which they belong. In this context, the importance of the methodological issue mentioned above can be noted, namely the hierarchical structuring of the relationship between culturally defined age and culturally defined gender as two independent variables (generally treated either as separate or as “interdependent”). In this research concept, gendering was adopted as a primary process. Thus, *gendered age* should be understood as transforming the concepts of femininity and masculinity (cultural) in relation to the different age categories within a given gender category. Thus, according to this concept, first the individual becomes a woman or a man, in the process of socialization, and then, in terms of biological age, becomes accordingly “a young man”, “a young woman”, then “a middle-aged woman or man” and “an old woman” or “an old man” (Malinowska et al. 2016: 20).

In accordance with the research concept employed in the study, the patriarchal definitions of femininity and masculinity served as a category of analysis. Apart from social roles and personality traits, the third element in the cultural construct of gender is appearance. Patriarchal definitions of femininity and masculinity indicate that the social position of a man does not depend solely on his appearance, but also on other traits, as a man is dominant in patriarchal concepts. On the other hand, the social position of a woman – who is dominated – depends largely on her appearance. The assessment of a woman’s appearance is based on her reproductive abilities because beauty (which is part of the canon of a given culture) is a kind of capital a woman can use to raise her social status, e.g. through a proper marriage. Appearance is important for women, because although the ideals of beauty have changed over the centuries, women still perceive their appearance to be one of their main resources (Malinowska, Dzwonkowska-Godula, Garncarek 2012). In patriarchal conceptions, a woman is generally described as one who should be physically attractive, pretty, graceful, charming, delicate, well-groomed, neat and clean, with wide hips, a slim waist and relatively large breasts. A man, in turn, should be tall, well-built, strong, muscular, have broad shoulders, and may – or may not – be handsome. He should come across as a person in good physical shape. In his case, negative features such as slovenly appearance are also allowed, because they are not a key element of male identity in a patriarchal society (Mandal 2003; Giza-Poleszczuk 2004; Miluska 2008; Majcher 2012). Questions arise, therefore, as to what importance women and men of different ages attach to appearance in different spheres of life. Can we point to any significant gender and age differences? And do the patriarchal concepts of femininity and masculinity manifest themselves in these reflections?

### 3. The role of appearance in social functioning

The influence of physical attractiveness on the overall assessment of the individual was examined by, among others, S. Raza and B. Carpenter (1987), D. Gilmore et al. (1986), A. Kinicki and C. Lockwood (1985). The results of these studies show a significant positive influence of beauty on the overall assessment of the person. An individual's statements may sound more or less reliable depending on his or her appearance, as beauty plays an important role in creating the first impression. People who are physically attractive may arouse sympathy solely through their appearance (Stojanowska 2003). Moreover, the stereotype of "all that is beautiful is good" functioning in society (Nęcki 1996) makes people credit pretty individuals with such qualities as being nice, sympathetic and honest (Aronson et al. 1997; Aronson 1999).

CBOS surveys (2017) show that the vast majority of Poles believe that a good presentation is conducive to success in personal and professional life. Nearly three quarters of respondents believe that appearance has a large or very large impact on personal and career success (70% each), and one third even believes that appearance determines success in these areas. Also, the research discussed herein indicates that all participants shared the opinion that appearance plays a significant role in different spheres and areas of life. The interviews concerned both professional, personal and everyday life in a society. There were some opinions holding that with the help of an attractive appearance you can exert a positive influence on other people, and thus, you can make it easier for yourself to find a job, get a promotion or a raise, you can find a life partner more easily and faster, or you can settle a matter in the office, etc. Appearance – in the opinion of respondents – is important because it shows others who we are, what our lifestyle is and what values we have. The respondents believed that simply on the basis of a person's appearance one can say a lot about the person – one of the women who spoke about this subject emphasized that it is a "gateway" to get to know another person, and if the appearance is neat and well-groomed then such a person is viewed as trustworthy (FGI\_1\_KM\_K1)<sup>2</sup>.

Respondents admitted that everyone is subjected to a constant and unavoidable evaluation by others: *Generally speaking, one can say, to quote a proverb: fine feathers make fine birds* (FGI\_4\_MSR\_M1, M1). This assessment focuses on the so-called first impression, which has a decisive influence on how the individual will be treated – whether he or she will inspire confidence and sympathy in others or not. This affects the subsequent development of the relationship with such a person: *You can imagine, for example, that I will stand before the entrance to a bank, because I want to take a loan for my business. Clearly, I will dress up and I have to, as it were, create an image for those who will help me. And now it*

<sup>2</sup> Group interview number (FGI) marking: 1 – interview number; KM – young women; KŚR – middle-aged woman; KST – older woman; MM – young man; MŚR – middle-aged man; MST – older man; K – female; M – male; 2 – respondent number.

*is a question of whether I want to have this image permanently or not* (FGI\_6\_MST\_M1, M1). R. Cialdini (1999) wrote about the effect of the first impression in detail in his publications, emphasizing that the appearance of human beings influences the perception of their other qualities and determines the way in which other people perceive them.

A good appearance is usually associated with adaptation to the situation and the social role played by the individual, supplemented with appropriate clothes, make-up and accessories (Nowakowska 2017). Perhaps that is why the respondents often mentioned that appearance can also be manipulated to achieve certain effects when influencing others. In their opinion, there are situations in which some people intentionally dress in an attractive way in order to gain certain benefits from it: *Someone has a specific goal, gets dressed up, inspires trust and uses it* (FGI\_6\_KST\_K1, K10), *Appearance helps when some people dress better and smile they achieve some results more quickly* (FGI\_6\_MST\_M1, M4). The majority of participants in the survey agreed that an attractive appearance helps in life because it has a positive effect on other people, and therefore you can cope well in many situations and achieve the desired results (cf. Leary 2007).

Psychologists confirm that appearance affects self-esteem, which in turn affects the management of one's own potential in various spheres of life (Nowakowska 2017). This reflection was made by the respondents as well. They believed that a well-groomed appearance contributes to a better mood and well-being, strengthens the individual's self-esteem, thus strengthening the "attractiveness" of the person – this opinion was quite common among the respondents, regardless of their age and gender. Respondents who spoke about this topic said that if they look "good" they feel the same way, if they feel "bad" then their mood is also bad, and this influences the way they behave towards others: *When getting to know people, it is obvious that when I feel good with myself and I know that I look good in general, it is obvious that also some self-confidence is different and it strengthens it. However, if someone is knackered, it is difficult to achieve anything. If you look good, [...] you also know that you look good in her eyes, yes* (FGI\_1\_MM\_M1, M3). Men more often said that they themselves decide what to wear, thus what they look like, and this strengthens or weakens their self-confidence. Women, on the other hand, make the way they look more dependent on their mood, which, in their opinion, also depends on external circumstances, which they do not fully influence themselves: *It is obvious that there are better and worse days, when it is just such a good day, you can see the energy [...]. I think that when we feel good about ourselves, for example today we look good, it's also visible in every woman* (FGI\_1\_KM\_K1, K2). Men emphasized that the most important thing is to look attractive in their own eyes, because it gives rise to confidence, which in turn translates into the perception of attractiveness by others. Women paid more attention to how others think about them and how this affects them. In seeking to explain this phenomenon, one can

refer to the fact that women's self-esteem in patriarchal concepts depends on the assessment they receive from others – on looking at themselves in a social mirror, which may or may not grant its approval. Interestingly, both women and men have confirmed that defects or deficiencies in their appearance negatively affect their self-esteem, and thus cause a lack of focus on interpersonal interactions, because their attention is focused on “what others will think of us”. In the opinion of one of the men who was interviewed, there were situations when he dressed inadequately or carelessly and in his opinion this negatively affected his comfort level and contributed to his unprofessional behaviour (he admitted that he could not focus on what he said to the gathered people because he was thinking about his wrong choice of socks) (FGI\_6\_MST\_M1, M4). In a patriarchal society, men did not attach much importance to their appearance because it was not important to them – they built their social position on other aspects (e.g. power or property). Nowadays, appearance is also becoming an important factor for them, and some researchers believe that a process of androgynisation is underway in this respect, especially when the younger generation is considered (Boksańska 2004).

There were also opinions that attractiveness is a kind of energy, with personality traits manifesting themselves in a form of behaviour – it is not necessarily reflected in appearance itself: *Attractiveness means also whether we are a hit or not, yes. Go-aheadness which is self-confidence, you have to be sure. If you are self-confident, you are positive about this attractiveness, if you are not fully self-assured, if you are reserved, even if you are super-made-up and super-well-groomed and you are not self-confident, then you are not so attractive to other people* (FGI\_2\_MM\_M1, M6). This is confirmed by the considerations of C. Hakim, who, in her concept of erotic capital, emphasizes that interpersonal attractiveness is influenced not only by aspects such as physical appearance (beauty of the face, dressing style, make-up, hairstyle, etc.), but also by vitality defined as possessing positive energy, good humor, “being the life and soul of the party” (Hakim 2010). It is worth noting that in this study, many people, regardless of gender and age, defined “being attractive” in this way. Definitely more multidimensional, not only in the context of the exterior itself, but also their stock-in-trade qualities or behaviour towards others. Attractiveness is associated not only with general care, which manifests itself in attire, hairstyle, being clean-shaven for men or wearing appropriate make-up for women, but also in their positive attitude towards others, emanating optimism and kindness.

#### **4. The role of appearance in the professional sphere**

The first impression of physical attractiveness created by a job candidate or employee may be more important than their experience and education in terms of employment or promotion to a higher position (Kinicki, Lockwood 1985). In D. Mack and D. Rainey's research (1990) on making decisions about

employment, the nice appearance of candidates applying for a job doubled their chance of obtaining it, rather than the quality of professional qualifications. The study by T. Cash and R. Kilcullen (1985), in which the respondents assessed the applications of fictitious candidates for managerial positions, also noted that attractive people with lower qualifications were employed more often than unattractive people with higher qualifications. Polish research confirms this fact as well (Root, Matera 2006).

As this study shows, many people talked about the role of appearance in the context of work. This aspect was the focus of the majority of the survey participants. Younger respondents more often concentrated on topics related to recruitment and getting a job, while older ones focused on promotion, cooperation with clients, and relations with superiors. Creating an appropriate professional image required appropriate measures, such as taking care of the aesthetics of appearance. There were also statements which separated the opinions of women and men in this respect. Men mainly focused on personal hygiene, cleanliness and tidiness, while women talked about adapting their outfits to the situation, fashion trends and so-called “feminine” image assets, such as high-heeled shoes, appropriate make-up and a manicure. In the patriarchal concept of the ideal of femininity, appearance is an element of fundamental importance, of whose significance for social functioning women are fully conscious. Therefore, in these statements it is possible to identify a much deeper awareness of its significance than in the case of men. For the ideal of masculinity concentrates rather on personality traits, treating appearance as its “complement” only. (cf. Melosik 1996). However, as has already been shown above, there a significant change is also taking place here, which is illustrated by the analyzed statements of men.

When asked whether they recall any situations in life in which appearance played an important role, in their opinion, the respondents showed that they had given serious reflection to this subject. Although this is a qualitative survey, it is worth mentioning that more than two thirds of the people giving free interviews had no problems with citing examples related to it. On the basis of these comments, the areas of analysis were divided into those related to professional, personal and social situations, as well as to the handling of so-called everyday matters (e.g. in offices, shopping, etc.). In general, most of the interviewed people admitted that they were aware of the impact that appearance had on their functioning in social reality. It is worth quoting here one of the statements on the subject: *Appearance has always helped me, my whole life it has helped me and I enjoyed it, I perceived myself positively and I was also perceived positively. My appearance helped me to do all the things in my life that I'm satisfied with and it has worked so far [...]. It seems to me that the beauty emphasized by all the things I talked about i.e. the made-up eyes, the make-up itself, the hairstyle, the clothes, it all had a positive effect (KST\_2\_64)*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Indication of the individual interview number (IDI): KM – young women; KŚR – middle-aged woman; KST – older woman; MM – young man; MŚR – middle-aged man; MST – older man; 2 – interview number; 64 – age of respondent given in years.

In the context of professional life and the direct impact of appearance on this sphere, many respondents were well aware that it is a kind of “capital” that plays a key role in this area and thus it is worth investing in: *At work, this appearance always helps [...] when a person dresses up somehow appropriately. When you went to the CEO, a jacket always had to be worn, or something had to be done somewhere, I think one always looks differently at people, now also [...]. However, when a man is neatly dressed, they immediately judge him well, it's better if he is more elegant (MST\_8\_70). Helps in some circumstances [...]. When I somehow dress up as if I was going to a gala, I am received differently in the office, such a simple example. By strangers. This may change during the conversation, but the first impression remains (MST\_10\_71).*

Respondents often referred to the recruitment process as the moment when they discovered that the assessment of appearance could play a role in deciding whether or not they would get a job: *At work, it happened during interviews, as I was trying to get a job in trade, that appearance gave me advantages. But it's not that I went in for a conversation and someone thought “a pretty girl”, I was just quite attractive plus neatly dressed. And if someone would like to employ me in trade, it is still important (KM\_9\_30).* It has been noted that adapting the appearance to these formal requirements is an imposed external necessity and does not always reflect a person's dressing style or character traits. However, this dressing up – as one of the respondents put it – “to fit a particular situation” is necessary to achieve the desired goal. Women seemed to stress that their physical attractiveness is or was only an additional asset during interviews, rather than a key one, and that knowledge, experience and other aspects of human capital were, in their opinion, the most important factors. This proves the “rejection” of the patriarchal concept of femininity, in which appearance is held to be a key element of women's capital. It is also confirmed by the research of E. Paprzycka and D. Orlik, which shows that 76% of the respondents share the opinion that attractive candidates have a better chance of being interviewed than less attractive people, “as many as” 43% of men and “only” 23% of women share this opinion. Moreover, nearly 35% of men and 18% of women agreed with the statement that during a job interview attractive persons, despite their lack of expertise, are better evaluated (Paprzycka, Orlik 2014).

Often, status at work – its character, or a specific position – determines the way in which people have to create their appearance. Their authority and position in the organization depends on it: *When I was still working in the industry, I had to be dressed particularly well because I was a designer and everyone was looking at me. I couldn't look bad, could I? And there were situations when I looked good, but sometimes I looked very good and this translated into the course of the situation, because I felt that I was well received, and this gives you a sense of self-confidence, you feel different, that you are well perceived at the moment (KST\_4\_66).* In the opinion of survey participants, an attractive appearance helps to gain trust, means

that a person is better evaluated as a professional, and is treated more seriously by colleagues. One young man noticed that a neat look helps in his professional life, especially when you are involved in physical work. In his opinion, thanks to the fact that someone smells nice and is clean, interpersonal relations with clients, co-workers, subcontractors are more “friendly”: *they treat you like a professional, because appearance is also a sign of professionalism for some people, in every business* (MM\_8\_29). This “professional competence”, in other words a person’s knowledge, professionalism and professional experience, is deduced from their appearance, which results in respectful treatment in professional and interpersonal contacts. It is also the ability to behave appropriately, and be polite, friendly and open to others (cf. Hakim 2010).

Survey participants also talked about situations in which their appearance played an unfavourable role. One of the men mentioned that he wanted to go to a photography college, because his passion was photography and he knew a lot about it. He also taught his “not very wise” colleague to take an oral exam. In the end, the recruitment committee accepted the colleague, who was tall and handsome, and not him. The respondent admitted that, in his opinion, this was due to the exceptionally attractive appearance of his colleague (MST\_2\_63). In two cases, women remembered that their appearance prevented them from recruiting. This is a statement from one of them: *I was inadequately dressed for the situation. I went for a job interview in a regular turtleneck blouse and I know that this was one of reasons why I was not employed* (KSR\_1\_38). Another woman who spoke on this subject admitted that when she was involved in trade and selling various groceries, she sometimes paid much higher prices for goods in wholesalers when she was elegantly dressed. When she was dressed “more modestly” – she was given a much lower price, and only then did she realize the importance of appearance in life and the extent to which the evaluation of others depends on it (KSR\_8\_53).

In the case of women, this formal appearance at work has not always played a significant role. For example, one of the respondents stated that putting on a nice dress, although not always “*strictly fitting the dress code*” in force in her company, made her colleagues more friendly, helpful, and more willing to help her than when she wore trousers (KSR\_1\_38). Another woman recalled the statement of her boss, who said that when he first saw her, he was captivated by her girly appearance, small stature, smile and the joy beaming from her. He thought that she had come for an internship (because she looked very young) and not for work, and she was immediately employed by him (KST\_7\_70). Another situation referred directly to the change in one woman’s assessment by her colleagues after she had lost weight: *A few years ago I slimmed down and lost a lot of weight [...], people told me what a cool girl I was now! [...] It’s nice that I looked better, but did I have a different character and everything? The only thing that mattered to them was superficiality. [...] Some people said – “a little less of you and you’re cool”, which means a little too much of you and you’re uncool? And wisdom*

and knowledge, work, behaviour – as if it did not matter, unfortunately only this superficiality (KM\_13\_34). This inclusion in the current canon of beauty, especially in the case of women, results in their greater “visibility” – obesity, like old age or disability, contributes to this specific social “invisibility”, this applies mainly to women, because they are more readily identified and evaluated in terms of their appearance. In the case of men, there were also a few statements claiming that their attractiveness brings measurable benefits in the professional sphere.

Several young men shared their reflections on the fact that their attractive appearance helps them to gain the sympathy of older women – bosses, clients, colleagues: *Somehow it happens that ladies 40 to 50 years of age have been reacting well to me. I also see it at work [...], they look at me rather favourably, they smile. This cooperation is a bit easier, thanks to the way I look, I think I benefit from it* (MM\_6\_27). What is interesting, young men also mentioned that receiving compliments from others has a good impact on their well-being, which additionally motivates them to work, gives them satisfaction and “wings”. This is one of the statements on the subject: *It's not really a professional benefit, but it was very nice [...]. I felt great. [...] Something like this has a very positive influence on people, on how we see ourselves* (MM\_10\_31). Among young men, there is a similar process of internalizing the importance of appearance and the possibility of attracting attention to oneself by means of external features and thus obtaining benefits.

In the literature on the subject, we can find research showing that attractive women, like handsome men, find jobs more easily and receive higher salaries, but in the case of women, an attractive appearance can also be to their disadvantage. Beautiful women are seen as seductive rather than intelligent, competent or decisive, which is not consistent with the desired characteristics for managerial positions. Attractive women are sometimes “punished” for their appearance, because they may be considered too feminine to effectively perform their duties at a high position. Handsome men, on the other hand, are generally perceived as more professional (Etcoff 2009).

## 5. The role of appearance in private life and everyday functioning

Appearance plays a positive role in the personal, social and everyday life of the respondents. Many of them declared that if one likes someone, this usually evokes positive reactions in people, who become nicer, kinder and more sympathetic: *If you look nice people talk with you differently, don't they? If I wear a nice blouse, clips, shoes, I'll do my hair at the hairdresser's, I'll oxidize, dye, arrange it nicely, they treat you differently. The conversation goes a different way, they are polite, kind to you and take you seriously* (KST\_13\_85). *Appearance helps you to enter new environments, it is also easier for you to enter them, I have*

*entered such new environments several times and appearance matters. Again, we return to the same topic – the first impression that is made on the other person is through the prism of appearance (MM\_15\_37).* According to some respondents, an original, unusual look makes others remember the person: for example, extraordinary height, extraordinary hair colour (e.g. light blonde, fiery red) or an original hairstyle (e.g. wild curly hair). Several respondents admitted that thanks to these features they are “conspicuous”, and people willingly establish contact with them. A statement on the subject: *Appearance helps me, because I am a rather characteristic person, because of my very light blonde hair it is a little hard to confuse me with someone else [...] it is much easier to catch someone’s eye or remember him/her” (MM\_11\_31).* Etcoff, a researcher of beauty, confirms that we automatically evaluate a person’s appearance and their attractiveness, and this impression remains in our memory for a long time (Etcoff 2009).

According to the participants of the research discussed here, appearance is also important in establishing intimate relations. It makes us interested in a given person – it becomes an impulse to get to know them better, and in time to fall in love. In the case of middle-aged and older people, these were statements referring to their youth, when physical attractiveness is more important than at later stages of life. It is worth quoting a few memories of the participants on this subject: *When I met my fiancé, he always said [...] that he liked my eyes, that I was so straight, that I was so thin, that I was so physically fit (KST\_7\_70).* *Certainly in the context of meeting my partner, my appearance also had some significance, because at that time I had long hair and my girlfriend liked long-haired guys very much (MM\_7\_28).* There were also some statements from men admitting that in their case the fact they were short had a negative impact on their ability to establish contacts with women, because if they liked a woman who was taller than them, she either did not want to dance with them or they “felt it was not appropriate to ask them to dance”. Numerous studies show that at the very beginning of a relationship it is appearance that counts, because it makes it easier to evaluate a potential partner (although sex and reproduction have become separate today, the adaptation processes have not been modified in this respect) (Hatfield, Sprecher 1986). Also, D. Buss’s research conducted on ten thousand respondents from 14 to 70 years of age from 37 communities indicates that when it comes to preferences regarding the appearance of partners, physical attractiveness and good appearance are at the top of the list of important and desirable characteristics. Strategies for selecting partners differ according to gender – men focus on appearance, because it provides guidance on whether a woman is healthy and fertile, and women judge men for longer, and their judgements are not always final (because it is not only about fertility, but also about the ability to provide support in raising a child) (Buss 2014).

When it comes to the importance of appearance in other everyday situations, it is worth noting the different perspectives of women and men. Middle-aged and

older women talked about situations in which men were the ‘other side’ of the interaction and, in their opinion, they looked younger than their birth certificate indicates. One of them admitted that when she was stopped by the police for a traffic offence, the policeman who checked her documents could not believe her real birth certificate and let her go without a ticket because, in her opinion, she looked so young (KSR\_2\_41). On the other hand, another participant of the survey, representing the oldest category of respondents, told us how a bus driver stopped at a crossroads especially for her and allowed her to get on the bus, saying “Well, wouldn’t I help such a woman?” The respondent thought that the make-up made her look “younger, very nice” (KSR\_8\_53). Women often gave similar examples. In addition, it is worth mentioning that only in the opinions of middle-aged and older women does an attractive appearance help them to remain “attractive to the world” for longer, and be visible to others. Attracting attention to oneself by means of appearance seems to be strongly internalised by women, because for them “to be visible” means simply “to exist socially”, “to exist for others”.

Young participants of the research emphasized the stereotypical treatment of young, attractive women: *A well-groomed woman, and especially a young woman, is pigeonholed in a certain way and in order to impress with something more than just her appearance, she has to try harder, because she immediately is an airhead* (FGI\_1\_KM\_KK1, K1). In the literature on the subject, we can find studies stating that beauty and physical attractiveness are badly associated with some features, for example intelligence – this applies especially to women (although not only) (Aronson et al. 1997). The reason for this may arise from the opinions common in society about so-called “sweet idiots” or “stupid blondes” (Mandal 2000). At the same time, the statement of one of the youngest participants of the study showed that not only the appearance itself is important in interpersonal contacts, but also the way of behaving. The respondent admitted that if she needs help from a man, she smiles at him, blinks intensively and directly asks for help, not allowing the thought that she might not be able to get it. She is convinced that it is thanks to the way she presents herself, what outfit she is wearing (KM\_5\_28). This is in line with the way in which women use their erotic capital (as mentioned above) in their daily lives (Hakim 2010). One can see here a “clash” of two concepts of femininity – the traditional one, directly using beauty as capital, and the “modern” one, in which beauty is only an additional “ace” up one’s sleeve, not a key value.

Although men are also aware of the fact that an attractive appearance facilitates their social functioning in such an everyday dimension, none of them spoke directly about the benefits of a young appearance, as was the case with women. However, there were some issues related to the relationship between men and women in this context: *I definitely prefer to deal with women, if I have to get something done and I see that in the office or wherever there is a girl, it will be much easier for me to do it. [...] Maybe it’s my appearance, maybe my personal charm, sometimes a timbre of voice, a question of who is on the other side, what*

*you can afford in such an official conversation, or some kind of joke or anecdote* (MSR\_9\_54). Another one also referred to a similar situation, yet emphasizing that the best way to “get things done for him” is to deal with women who are much older than him. Only in one case did the participant describe a situation in which his appearance of a “cool dude” saved him from receiving a ticket from a policeman, also a man (MM\_15\_37). It is worth adding that only men spoke about the negative reactions to their appearance that they had experienced. These cases were rare. One of the men admitted that he happened to be dressed in scruffy clothes, in a crumpled and stained shirt, and was unshaven, when he went to an office. On the one hand, he noticed that this appearance translated into his lack of self-confidence, and on the other hand, he was immediately classified as a person not worth talking to (MST\_11\_71). Another example was when the respondent browsed through shirts in a branded shop and the saleswoman looked at him and said: *‘You’re not gonna buy it anyway’. The shirt cost 200 zlotys. So, because of my appearance I was judged not to be able to buy this shirt, right* (MSR\_15\_61). In general, men participating in the survey treated their appearance more rationally, as an addition to “male” human capital, which may give extra help, but is certainly not crucial. However, it can be seen that especially younger and middle-aged men are increasingly using it for instrumental purposes in order to achieve what they go after, including in the spheres of relationships and social relations.

## 6. Final reflections

These research results are in line with previous findings made on the basis of analyses within the field of psychology, social psychology and sociology. This applies – in particular – to the fact that the participants, regardless of age, show considerable reflectiveness and awareness of the growing importance of appearance in the context of interpersonal relations in different areas of life. This refers primarily to the first impression and halo effect based on a well-groomed, attractive appearance, which contributes to the fact that other, non-physical features of the individual are perceived more positively and thus the person has measurable benefits in their private and/or professional life. In professional life, these benefits are: getting a job or a promotion, getting a raise or a bonus, playing a specific role in an organization, and building their authority as a professional. In the private sphere, it is success in finding a partner, and in everyday life it is being able to deal faster with formalities in various institutions and organizations, obtaining help and meeting with more friendly treatment on various occasions from strangers. Certainly, in the analysed material, appearance as an element of human capital becomes a source of contentment, self-acceptance, satisfaction with oneself and greater motivation, which in turn translates into greater self-confidence in relations with others.

The way of thinking about appearance depends on the conditions of the *gendered age* – i.e. the gender and age of the respondents. For women, appearance plays an important role in both the public and private spheres, while men attribute it with greater importance in the public sphere. In patriarchal gender concepts, appearance is a fundamental element for women and a secondary or even tertiary element for men. And in the case of both women and men, there are changes in attitudes. Although women still seem to attribute a greater role to physical appearance, regardless of their age, men's statements also show that this is an aspect that is increasingly important to them and is becoming a 'top league' factor (especially for young and middle-aged people).

Physical attractiveness increases the social visibility of women, thus bringing or retaining specific benefits from the situation. This is based on the still strongly rooted conviction that their social position largely depends on beauty (such a strongly socialised conviction is characteristic of patriarchal society). Young women seemed to be most aware of the importance of appearance and its impact, especially in the professional sphere, and at the same time one could notice in their statements that appearance was perceived to be an instrumental capital. Middle-aged and older women were aware of the role that appearance plays in the context of fulfilling certain professional roles, but they did not address the issue of career advancement in their statements, as the youngest respondents sometimes did. On the other hand, young women pointed to the problem of their stereotypical perception in the context of their beauty ("pretty equals unintelligent"), which hinders their professional career, and they stressed that physical attractiveness is only an additional asset. One could see here the rejection of the patriarchal concept of femininity. On the other hand, in the statements of women, it can be seen that not fitting the model of traditional femininity through, for example, the ageing process or obesity, i.e. the lack of physical attractiveness, contributes to the social "invisibility" of these women. This can be seen mainly in the statements of older participants, who over the years try to maintain this capital through various treatments (e.g. appropriate outfit, hairstyle, make-up).

For men of all ages, an attractive appearance is most important in the professional sphere. For respondents in the oldest age category – in fact, only this sphere played a role. This is an important observation in relation to the fact that in a patriarchal society a man did not build his capital directly on his looks. A very clear, different tendency can be noticed among young men, and also among those in middle age, who start to treat their appearance instrumentally, as bringing measurable benefits in various spheres of life (not only in professional life). Interestingly, in their interviews men also refer to the issue of higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence through a more attractive appearance – which in patriarchal gender concepts is reserved for women.

On the basis of this research we can observe the coexistence of two models of "femininity" and "masculinity": patriarchal and androgynous. Sometimes in

the same generation there are contradictory internal attitudes towards appearance. Among the youngest generation, the process of unifying attitudes towards appearance is noticeable – an attractive appearance is perceived by young men and young women as one of the key human capital resources. As Kimmel writes in modern society, “the traditional image of women as sexual objects has simply expanded: we have all become objects to be watched” (Kimmel 2015: 457). On the basis of these studies it can be assumed that for the youngest generation (and perhaps for the next generations) the importance of this type of aesthetic and image capital will grow.

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## **POZYTYWNY I NEGATYWNY WPLYW WYGLĄDU ZEWNĘTRZNEGO NA RÓŻNE OBSZARY ŻYCIA – OPINIE KOBIEC I MĘŻCZYŹN W RÓŻNYM WIEKU**

**Abstrakt.** Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników badania podejmującego zagadnienie pozytywnego i negatywnego wpływu wyglądu w kontekście życia prywatnego i zawodowego. Publikacja powstała w oparciu o badania jakościowe dotyczące postaw wobec wyglądu kobiet oraz mężczyzn młodych, w średnim wieku oraz starych. Sposób myślenia o wyglądzie zależy od uwarunkowań *gendered age* – czyli płci i wieku badanych. Dla kobiet wygląd odgrywa istotną rolę zarówno w kontekście funkcjonowania w sferze publicznej, jak i prywatnej, z kolei mężczyźni przypisywali mu większe znaczenie w sferze publicznej. Choć nadal kobiety zdają się przypisywać większą rolę wyglądowi fizycznemu, to również coraz więcej mężczyzn zaczyna postrzegać ten aspekt jako kluczowy w relacjach interpersonalnych. Na podstawie niniejszych badań daje się zauważyć współlistnienie dwóch modeli „kobiecości” i „męskości”, patriarchalnego i androgynicznego. Niekiedy w tym samym pokoleniu funkcjonują sprzeczne wewnętrzne postawy wobec wyglądu. W najmłodszym pokoleniu zauważalny jest proces ujednociania się postaw wobec wyglądu – atrakcyjny wygląd zarówno przez młodych mężczyzn, jak i młode kobiety jest postrzegany jako jeden z kluczowych zasobów kapitału ludzkiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** atrakcyjność, wygląd, znaczenie wyglądu w życiu, kobiety, mężczyźni, życie zawodowe, życie prywatne, związki intymne.