

The moral underpinnings of beauty: A meaning-based explanation for light and dark complexions in advertising

Shyon Baumann*

*Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Avenue, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M5S 2J4*

Available online 21 February 2008

Abstract

Sociological work on taste relates aesthetic preferences to other social forces. In this paper I examine taste in one particular dimension of personal appearance—complexion, specifically lightness and darkness of complexion. In a content analysis of 2133 individuals appearing in print advertisements in 2003–2004, and in an additional sample of print advertisements from 1970, I find that women are portrayed as having fairer complexions on average than men of the same race. I address possible biological interpretations of this difference and find them wanting. I develop an alternative explanation for the findings and argue that complexion ideals are related to dominant attitudes toward gender roles and to larger cultural meanings given to lightness and darkness. This meaning-based explanation to understanding aesthetics asserts that the dominant meanings of lightness and darkness in our culture are considered more ideally feminine and masculine, respectively. My explanation is supported through a detailed analysis of the ways that white female models with the lightest and darkest complexions are portrayed in a subset of 100 advertisements. Darker complected white female models are more frequently and more overtly sexualized than lighter complected white female models.

© 2007 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Sociological work on taste and aesthetics seeks to explain how seemingly arbitrary aesthetic standards are often linked to other important social phenomena. In this way, we learn, for example, how tastes in areas as diverse as fashion, cooking, and the arts are linked to social class

* Tel.: +1 647 998 6100; fax: +1 416 978 3963.

E-mail address: shyon.baumann@utoronto.ca.

and distinction processes (Bourdieu, 1984). Because tastes have social underpinnings (Lieberson, 2000), the analysis of why certain tastes predominate cannot be answered by expressions of personal preferences alone, where individuals report likes and dislikes that are often formulated intuitively. The sociological challenge in questions of taste is to describe how aesthetic preferences are socially patterned, and to discover links between aesthetics and other areas of life that can help to explain those patterns.

In this paper I address a question of taste in personal appearance. To speak of taste in appearance is to ask why certain physical characteristics are generally considered more attractive than alternative physical characteristics. Personal appearance is comprised of a vast number of discrete and interrelated physical characteristics. The focus of this paper is to explain the dominant tastes in complexion. The empirical question I begin with is, how does the ideal complexion for women compare to the ideal complexion for men, in terms of lightness and darkness of appearance? Through content analysis of advertisements, I find that women are ideally lighter than men. Following this, I address the question of *why* the ideal complexion for women is lighter than the ideal complexion for men. I first address whether there is convincing evidence that the findings reflect a biological gender difference and conclude that the gender difference in complexions in advertisements cannot be accounted for by biological explanations. I then formulate an alternative explanation grounded in a *meaning-based approach*. This approach differs from most other contemporary sociological analyses of taste because it takes into account the dominant meanings of aesthetic characteristics in order to explain the preference for them. In the case of lightness and darkness, Western culture attributes a set of meanings to each of these traits, and these meanings are gendered in the sense that the meanings of lightness correspond to various dimensions of stereotypically feminine gender roles while the meanings of darkness correspond to various dimensions of stereotypically masculine gender roles.

In what follows I first make the case that advertising provides a window for observing physical appearance ideals, and that it is particularly well suited for studying tastes in complexion as they vary by race and gender. I then present findings from a content analysis of 2133 people appearing in advertisements in 2003 and 2004 to document that the ideal complexion for women tends to be lighter than the ideal complexion for men. I also find this gender difference in data from 1970. An assessment of the biological explanation from physical anthropological studies demonstrates that the findings cannot be understood according to that perspective alone. I develop a *meaning-based approach* to argue that these tastes in complexion reflect dominant conceptions of gender roles, and that in this case moral standards and aesthetic standards are mutually reinforcing. To support this argument, I turn to a detailed content analysis of a subset of 100 advertisements of the lightest and darkest complected white women which finds that darker complected white women are more frequently and more overtly sexualized than lighter complected white women. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for research on the social underpinnings of taste.

2. Advertising and attractiveness ideals

Although advertising's ostensible purpose is to sell goods and services, sociologists and communications scholars have identified a latent, secondary role. Schudson (1984: p. 215), for example, views advertising as "capitalist realism," meaning that advertising "does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be - life and lives worth emulating." Likewise, Goffman (1979) argues that advertisements should be seen as ritualized displays;

they depict idealized social relationships. Rather than showing us how men and women actually behave and appear, advertising shows us how we believe men and women should behave and appear. In order to maximize resonance and appeal with a large audience, advertisements need to accord with widely accepted ideals.

Advertising, then, provides a good opportunity to observe indirectly and to measure widely shared or dominant ideals of the society in which the advertising is distributed. Moreover, much advertising is visual in nature, and much advertising features people. Advertising shows us how people should appear, or what is ideally attractive, even if this is not its manifest function (Pollay, 1986).

Physical attractiveness is largely not a matter of choice, but social psychological studies have empirically established that individuals routinely associate a wide range of positive psychological attributes with those whom they judge to be physically attractive (Hosoda et al., 2003). In the case of physical attractiveness, a “halo effect” (Feeley, 2002) means that the evaluation of physical appearance influences the evaluation of other traits. The literature that examines the “what is beautiful is good” (Dion et al., 1972) phenomenon has found correlations between ratings of attractiveness and social competence, intelligence, integrity, and general mental health, among others. It is not surprising, therefore, that advertisements typically feature attractive models. Given the “halo effect” created by perceptions of attractiveness, attractive models are generally more effective for generating positive responses toward that which is being advertised (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Kahle and Homer, 1985).

In this study I am interested not in attractiveness generally, but in a single dimension of attractiveness: lightness or darkness of complexion as defined by both skin and hair tone. This paper capitalizes on the nature of advertising – its reliance on ideals – to gain insight into and to provide an explanation for gender and racial patterns regarding the ideal complexion.

2.1. Articulated and submerged attractiveness ideals

Ideals regarding physical attractiveness vary between societies as well as between groups within a society. In the United States, as elsewhere, there are *dominant* ideals held by the majority ethnic group, and known to virtually all members of society, regarding a great number of physical characteristics. For example, there are ideals for height, weight, the shape of the nose, the shape of the mouth, the color and positioning of the teeth, the distances between facial parts, and more. At the same time, aesthetic ideals of physical attractiveness have gender-specific dimensions. What is attractive for a man is not necessarily attractive for a woman, and vice versa. Furthermore, some ideals are gendered to the extent that opposite qualities are preferred for each gender (Synott, 1987). Oppositional, sub-cultural or minority ideals obviously also exist and can differ from the dominant ideals most commonly observed within the beauty ideals of white, mainstream heterosexuals. For readability, the term “ideal” refers in this paper to the dominant ideal.

Some physical attractiveness ideals are commonly acknowledged within public discourse where they are regularly *articulated*. The dominant aesthetic preference for low body fat in men and even lower body fat in women is one example. Ample breast size for women is another example. Yet another ideal governs tallness, with ideal height for men exceeding the ideal height for women. Not all people share these ideals, but many openly recognize that they describe how we “should” look.

In contrast, other physical attractiveness ideals are not openly discussed or acknowledged. Rather they are *submerged*, and these ideals are important, yet infrequently identified or studied as an element of aesthetic preferences.¹ While these submerged ideals might be as specific and unforbearing as those that are more consciously held, most of us are not conscious that we have these ideals and that they come into play when we evaluate others' or our own attractiveness. Sometimes an appearance ideal can shift from submerged to articulated when it is discussed by appearance experts (e.g., cosmeticians or plastic surgeons) in the mass media. One example of such an ideal in flux is the notion that for maximum attractiveness the space between one's eyes should be exactly as wide as one eye (Dilio, 2005; Habbema, 2004). Despite the occasional shift, there are many physical attractiveness ideals that are still largely submerged. The reason for this is that physical appearance has myriad visual components and this large amount of information is processed by us largely without articulation. We do not consciously acknowledge what we do not articulate. As a consequence, although we can say with certainty whether we find a particular person attractive, we often have difficulty articulating all the reasons behind that finding.

2.2. *The complexion ideal: evolving, gendered, and submerged (for Whites)*

The ideal regarding attractiveness of complexion in US society is complicated by its connection to the evolving history of racial prejudice. On the one hand, there is an historical preference for light complexions in the majority white society of the United States. For centuries, the dominant view was that the light skin of Caucasians was more attractive than the darker skin of non-Caucasians. Undoubtedly, this preference was linked to racism and was publicly articulated alongside openly racist attitudes. On the other hand, racial attitudes have evolved in recent decades. Some reports in the popular press have suggested that, though a Eurocentric bias still operates, our conceptions of what is attractive have likewise evolved to become more racially inclusive (Avery, 2000; Carr, 2002; Sagario, 2002). Hence, norms concerning attractive complexions are allegedly changing away from a bias towards lightness.² To make matters more complicated, the fashion for tanning has changed over time, creating yet more potential for disagreement over what constitutes an attractive complexion.

To what degree is the complexion ideal articulated in the white majority North American society? I argue that among whites there is no explicitly articulated complexion ideal in contemporary mainstream public discourse. Among African Americans, where complexion is recognized to have important consequences, the preference for a light complexion is to a substantial degree publicly articulated (Breland, 1998). Among whites, however, the complexion ideal, and especially its gendered nature, is submerged. The privilege of being racially white

¹ The idea that tastes operate on various levels of awareness has been acknowledged with different terminology. For example, Lieberson (2000) demonstrates that the selection of first names by parents involves an awareness of a liking for a certain name, but at the same time social influences are responsible for creating trends where particular names surge in popularity, showing that, despite appearances, these parents' tastes are not in fact independent. Lieberson (2000: p. 258) draws a distinction between the "cultural surface" and the social underpinnings of taste.

² Leeds Craig's (2002) work on black women and beauty standards documents the emergence of new aesthetic standards for personal appearance that came along with the "Black is beautiful" movement of the 1960s. Leeds Craig (2002: p. 18) argues, however, that the effects of this movement were "only temporary and within limits," and the Eurocentric ideal is still dominant. In earlier work, Leeds (1994) presents interview data wherein young, black women express a tension between wanting to valorize darker skin and responding to the dominant standard that dark skin is unattractive.

renders the significant variation within the category of “white” less consequential than is the case for blacks.³ What is more, because beauty ideals are allegedly becoming more racially inclusive, some ideals inevitably come into conflict, complexion perhaps being one of the clearest examples. The conflicting ideals and varying images of attractiveness shown in the mass media make it difficult for individuals to be able to settle on a clear articulation of a single ideal. Whites, therefore, are less able to articulate what an ideal complexion should look like, and particularly unable to articulate gender-specific ideals.

Because advertising relies on images that embody ideals, it provides an excellent opportunity to observe the ideal complexion in its gendered and racialized variants. Furthermore, because such images are contextualized in a wider advertisement that contains other visual messages, advertisements provide an opportunity to analyze the kinds of messages with which certain complexions co-vary. This co-variation provides evidence for understanding how different physical appearance characteristics are understood to have distinct meanings, and how these meanings are gendered.

3. Data

The data come from advertisements in nine popular magazines: *People*,⁴ *Time* and *Newsweek* (general interest magazines), *Maxim* and *Esquire* (magazines targeting men), *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan* (magazines targeting women), and *Ebony* and *Essence* (magazines targeting a black audience). Issues between July of 2003 and May of 2004 were randomly selected.⁵ The unit of analysis is the person depicted, not the advertisement, and so the eventual sample size represents the number of individuals appearing in advertisements, with each individual representing a separate record in the data. Advertisements were coded only if they were larger than 2 square inches in size, in color (not black and white),⁶ and featured at least one person in the foreground (in focus). People out of focus or in the background were disregarded. In addition to the magazine in which the advertisements were placed, the other independent variables are sex, race, and age.⁷ Gender proved readily codable, with the very rare cases of indeterminate gender excluded from analysis (two cases). Race, however, proved slightly more difficult to code. There is no practical way to ascertain the “real” gender or race of the models in advertisements. This difficulty notwithstanding, the objective here is to observe the gender and racial identity that *seem to be put forth* in the advertisements. Even this objective, however, was not always possible to attain as visual cues to race in models’ faces were sometimes highly ambiguous (about 3% of models). These

³ For research on the occupational and educational significance of variation in skin color among blacks, see Hill (2000), Hughes and Hertel (1990), and Keith and Herring (1991). However, see Gullickson (2005) for research that finds that the importance of skin tone for blacks’ occupational and educational outcomes has significantly declined in recent decades. The significance of skin tone for assortative mating remains, suggesting that the aesthetic significance of skin tone variation endures.

⁴ *People* skews somewhat female but has a more evenly distributed audience than the other gender-specific magazines in the sample (Ives, 2005).

⁵ A list of the issues included in the sample is available from the author on request.

⁶ This exclusion was necessary because it was not possible to reliably code the dependent variables when advertisements were not in color.

⁷ For this first stage of data analysis, only these four independent variables are employed. However, for the second stage of analysis of a subset of advertisements, the independent variables comprise a much longer list of advertisements’ characteristics. I leave discussion of those variables until that section.

cases were dropped from the analysis. The racial categories used were white, black, Hispanic, East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American. Several prior studies with a focus on race in advertising have noted that categories other than white and black are difficult to analyze because of the stark underrepresentation of models from other racial categories (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Mastro and Stern, 2003; Taylor and Bang, 1997). This problem arose in this study as well, such that analysis only of blacks and whites was possible because the numbers of other groups were too small. Other racial categories are therefore by necessity excluded from the analysis. Age was broken down into the categories of child (0–12), teenager (13–19), adult (20–60), and elderly (61+). Children were excluded from the analysis because it is unclear that aesthetic standards and gender roles as they apply to adults would apply equally to children.

Although previous studies of complexion have dealt exclusively with skin tone, I argue that there is good reason for employing a broader conception of complexion as including both skin and hair tone. This study has three dependent variables: skin tone, hair tone, and a composite measure of complexion comprised of the addition of skin and hair tone. I contend that measuring both skin and hair tone provides a better measure of the overall appearance of lightness or darkness. This paper's focus on taste in lightness or darkness of complexion warrants as complete a measurement of lightness or darkness as possible.

The dependent variables of skin tone and hair tone were coded according to a ten-point scale, with 1 being lightest and 10 being darkest. Coders used a pallet of gradations in skin tones and another pallet of gradations in hair tone, matching the tones in the ads to the closest possible tones in the pallets. Each model was coded independently, according only to the pallet and not with respect to other models in the same or in other advertisements. Skin tone was judged according to the predominant tone present in the face, while hair tone was judged according to the predominant tone present in the hair.⁸ The composite measure of complexion is the addition of the hair and skin tones, with 2 being the lightest possible composite complexion and 20 being the darkest possible composite complexion. Following the exclusions described above, there were 2133 individuals coded from 1508 advertisements.⁹

⁸ Hair tone was sometimes unobservable, for example if a model wore a hat. For this reason, sample sizes vary between analyses for skin and for hair. People who were depicted in advertisements with predominantly or completely grey hair were excluded from the analysis because grey hair has a clear symbolic and actual relationship with age, thereby obscuring and aesthetically overriding its importance as light or dark. The pallets used for coding are available from the author upon request.

⁹ Interrater agreement was measured through the use of the kappa statistic with the prerecorded weighting available in Stata 9. The weighting discounts rater disagreements according to the maximum number of possible ratings so that near agreements contribute toward agreement, with the magnitude of the contribution diminishing in a linear fashion as the discrepancy between raters grows. The agreement was measured through a comparison of the ratings given to individuals appearing in all advertisements in one magazine issue ($N = 107$) by the author and by a research assistant who was trained in the method of coding without knowledge of the primary research questions. Agreement regarding age was not assessed because, as will be discussed below, age was not included in the eventual analysis. The results are as follows:

	Agreement (%)	Expected agreement (%)	Kappa	S.E.	Z	Prob > Z
Skin	85.22	75.57	0.3950	0.0542	7.29	0.0000
Hair	89.20	69.01	0.6516	0.0599	10.88	0.0000
Race	98.82	73.87	0.9549	0.0954	10.01	0.0000
Gender	100.00	70.58	1.0000	0.0971	10.30	0.0000

Table 1
Complexion ratings by gender and race in all magazines in data set

White men	White women	Black men	Black women
Skin			
3.3 (1.2) N = 645	2.8 (1.1) N = 1128	8.1 (1.3) N = 123	7.2 (1.3) N = 237
Hair			
6.3 (2.2) N = 594	5.0 (2.3) N = 1118	9.7 (0.7) N = 89	8.8 (1.7) N = 230
Composite			
9.7 (2.5) N = 594	7.8 (2.7) N = 1118	17.8 (1.9) N = 89	16.0 (2.5) N = 230

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Photographs, of course, are malleable insofar as they do not simply reflect a person's true appearance. In fact, images in advertising are highly stylized and digitally manipulated and rarely show how models might appear face-to-face. The data, then, measures appearance norms that are unconstrained by the real-life physical attributes of models. Instead, because physical appearance is so easily manipulated in photography, the final images are tailored to suit various physical appearance ideals, including complexion ideals. Because photographic manipulation occurs to make advertisements adhere more closely to ideals, it enhances rather than detracts from the appropriateness of the data source.

4. Complexion findings

The process of content analyzing such a large number of individuals in advertisements provides many observations about how people are presented. Conventional wisdom about a strong focus on youth and beauty in the media is supported. There is a virtual absence of unfit or elderly people, or people with obvious physical imperfections. Indeed, the range of physical appearance represented in advertisements is, by all standards, extremely narrow.

Among the many dimensions of physical appearance, it is the lightness or darkness of skin and hair that is of interest here. Table 1 provides complexion measurements broken down by race and gender. Results are not presented according to age or magazine because these variables had no recognizable influence on complexion.¹⁰ Regarding skin, the lightest color on the palette, 1, is almost purely white, while the darkest color of 10 is a very dark brown. Regarding hair, the palette ranges from a platinum blond color to black.¹¹ In addition to the results for skin and hair, a composite measure of overall complexion is reported. The composite measure is the simple addition of skin and hair tone results for each person and ranges from 2 to 20.

¹⁰ The lack of difference according to magazine was surprising, particularly in the case of magazines aimed at an African American audience. Although these magazines contained a much higher proportion of black models in their advertisements, the complexion trends for all models in these magazines were nearly identical to the trends observed more broadly for all models.

¹¹ The palette was designed to reflect the spectrum of actual skin colors. Because even the lightest skin contains some pigment, and because the darkest skin is not a true black color, the palette ranged from almost-white to very dark brown. The palette for hair color, however, had a slightly wider range, as hair can appear from white to true black.

Regarding white women, the average skin tone is a very light 2.8, and hair tone averages out to a middling 5.0. The averages conceal a wide range of tones for skin and hair. Although the wide range of white women's hair tones might be expected, the wide range of skin tones of white women is more surprising. Although racially white, these women's skin can appear as dark as 8 (often achieved through the use of shadows or other circumstances where lighting is minimized). The average skin tone for white men is a fairly light 3.3 while the average hair tone is a somewhat dark 6.3. Just as with women, the averages conceal a wide range of tones, and white men's skin was also rated as dark as 8. Most importantly, the gender comparison reveals that white men tend to be presented with darker complexions than white women. The gender differences in both hair and skin tones are statistically significant at the 0.000 level. The composite measure, in particular, reveals the strength of this trend and the gender difference is likewise significant at the 0.000 level.

Turning to the results for blacks, as could be expected, black men and women have darker skin, hair, and overall complexions than white men and women. Of greater interest, however, is the gender difference that reappears. For skin, hair, and the composite measure black men appear in darker tones than black women, and the differences are each significant at the 0.000 level. Thus, there is a gender gap in skin and hair tone for both blacks and whites.¹²

Because whites and blacks are analyzed separately, these gender differences cannot be the result of the differential representation of racial groups by gender. Rather, what we see is that women and men differ in their average lightness or darkness according to a consistent pattern for both blacks and whites. The numbers point to trends that are subtle but certainly noticeable to anyone who pays attention to how men and women are portrayed in advertisements.

Are these trends representative of a single point in time, or do they represent more durable gender differences? Because all elements of beauty are subject to fashion – which is to say, change for the sake of change – it is possible that the gender difference in complexion norms is a contemporary phenomenon. The fashion for sun tanning, for example, could in some way influence the findings, especially if such a fashion were gender specific. To address this possibility, I collected and analyzed a second sample of magazine advertisements from 1970 (see Table 2).¹³

The first point to make is that advertisements in 1970 popular magazines overwhelmingly feature white models. Only 8 of the 268 people coded were non-white (7 black, 1 Hispanic). Therefore, I compare only white men and women. In comparison with the data from 2003 and

¹² The independent samples *t*-test in Stata was used for all difference of means tests. I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for noting that since many models appear together in advertisements, the samples of men and women are not entirely independent. In fact, about half of all models appear alone in ads, while the rest appear with others of the same or the opposite sex. To be conservative, I recalculated the *t*-tests in the following way. While the total number of models is 2133, the total number of advertisements is 1508. A conservative calculation of the *t*-tests would use the number of advertisements in which the models appeared for the sample size. Because $2133/1508 = 1.4$, I divided each group's sample size by 1.4 and recalculated the *t*-tests. (For example, when calculating the significance of the difference between white men's skin and white women's skin, the *N*s used were 461 and 806, respectively, rather than 645 and 1128.) In all cases, the differences of means remained significant at the 0.000 level.

¹³ The sample is composed of advertisements appearing in *Esquire*, *Life*, *Time*, and *Vogue* magazines. These magazines respectively target men, a general audience, and women. Several months were covered within each magazine so that every month in 1970 is represented. The year 1970 is an appropriate comparison because it balances a need to sample from a distant time period with a need for access to advertisements in color. The use of color in magazine advertisements grew gradually in the middle of the 20th century so that by 1970 a substantial portion of advertisements were printed in color (although fewer than half of the advertisements were in color in the magazines I examined).

Table 2
Complexion differences between white men and women in 1970s advertisements

White men	White women
Skin	
3.7 (1.2)	2.9 (1.1)
<i>N</i> = 107	<i>N</i> = 151
Hair	
7.7 (2.4)	5.3 (2.8)
<i>N</i> = 99	<i>N</i> = 141
Composite	
11.4 (2.7)	8.3 (3.3)
<i>N</i> = 97	<i>N</i> = 141

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

2004, both men and women have darker complexions in advertisements in 1970. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain these rather small differences between 1970 and 2003–2004.¹⁴ What is relevant, however, is that the same pattern of gender differences is found in both time periods. White men have darker average skin tone, hair color, and overall complexion than white women in 1970.¹⁵ This evidence suggests that the tendency, for whites at least, for women to have fairer complexions than men is not particular to recent years alone. Instead, it appears that the gender difference in complexion norms is a relatively enduring aesthetic preference in our culture.

These findings both replicate and extend prior research. Rich and Cash (1993) noted the tendency for white women on magazine covers to be depicted as more frequently blonde than the general population, and Keenan (1996) found that black women tend to be represented in advertisements with lighter complexions than are black men. However, no prior research has focused on the variability in the complexions of whites in advertisements. The main contribution of these findings on complexion is to document that the trend known to exist for blacks also exists among whites, whereby women are ideally lighter than men. Through content analysis of a large sample of advertisements, this submerged appearance ideal is brought to the surface.

5. Complexion and biological gender differences

Before continuing with an analysis of the findings as a submerged appearance ideal, we must first consider an alternative understanding of the gender difference in complexions. Has the research measured not simply an appearance ideal, but also an objective, biological difference between men and women? Do men across races have darker complexions than women? If this is the case, then these data would be inadequate for establishing that there is a gender difference in complexion ideals.

¹⁴ It is tempting to speculate that fashions for fairness in white people have changed over time. Of the 268 people in the sample, 22 were excluded from the analysis due to unobservable hair color. However, it is also possible that the complexion scores are darker in 1970 because the pages of the magazines have darkened with age. Such a phenomenon cannot, however, explain the observed gender differences in 1970.

¹⁵ Differences between men and women are statistically significant ($p < 0.000$) for each measure.

A body of research in physical anthropology is concerned with understanding the evolutionary mechanisms that have created the wide range of skin tones found between human populations. Within this literature, empirical evidence on skin pigmentation, as measured through machines that detect light reflectance, has been collected for populations from around the globe. One interesting finding is that most of the studies that included a record of the sex of subjects find that females do tend to have lighter skin than males from the same populations (Jablonski and Chaplin, 2000; Madrigal and Kelly, 2006). These studies were generally carried out over the course of the last four decades.

An implication of this body of research, then, is that the observed skin tone gender differences in advertisements reflect simple biological gender differences. There are reasons to be wary of this interpretation, however. One reason for caution is that other, more recent research has found no significant sex differences in the lightness of skin (Shriver et al., 2003; Wagner et al., 2002). These authors note that while most prior studies have found significant sex differences, it is difficult to assess whether prior studies controlled for differing activity patterns and clothing customs between the sexes, and they suggest that this could explain the pattern found in prior studies as men in many societies have typically spent more time outdoors.

A second reason to doubt that the different complexions of women and men in advertising reflect only a biological difference is that the size of the difference found in advertising is much larger than the difference reported in the physical anthropological studies. Tegner (1992) notes that the studies of skin pigmentation generally report that females' skin is 2–3% lighter than males'. In contrast, in the sample of advertisements in this study, the skin of white females is 15.2% lighter than the skin of white males, and the skin of black females is 11.1% lighter than the skin of black males (from Table 1). The magnitude of these differences cannot be explained by biological differences.

One reason why advertising images are a good source of data on ideals is precisely because they are selected and edited rather than a simple reflection of reality. This disjuncture between advertising and actual physical appearance is highlighted by Keenan (1996) who finds that *advertisements* in mainstream magazines feature black models with lighter complexions than those black models found in *editorial* photographs. Moreover, black women in advertisements are lighter than black men in advertisements, but the same gender difference is not found for editorial photographs. Keenan reasons that editorial photographs more closely represent actual people while advertisements represent attractiveness ideals. If the gender difference in complexions in advertisements reflected biological differences, we would expect to see this difference appear in editorial photographs as well. As this is not the case, Keenan's findings undermine a biological explanation for the gender difference in complexion in advertisements.

In sum, although some would argue that an evolutionary psychological perspective can fully explain the representation of women in advertisements (Saad, 2004), biological gender differences offer at best a partial explanation for the gender differences found in the data.

6. Meanings, morals, and aesthetics

As an alternative to a biologically based explanation, I argue that the observed gender differences in complexions point to an attractiveness ideal that is, for whites, at least partially submerged. Although the ideal of bloneness for women is articulated, the idea of lighter skin for white women relative to white men, I would argue, is a submerged ideal. Key to my explanation is an understanding that the average lightness of women's complexions masks a great deal of variation. Although on average women are depicted as fairer, there are many instances where

women – both black and white – are darkly complected. My meaning-based explanation for the complexion appearance ideal can account for the lighter average complexions of women while also illuminating the tastes underlying the portrayals of women as darkly complected.

I contend that the complexion findings should be understood as a product of deeply rooted and enduring cultural values. My argument to explain the findings has two key features. First, it is based on the *meanings* that lightness and darkness have in our culture. Second, it highlights the links between moral and aesthetic judgments. My meaning-based approach to understanding an aesthetic phenomenon explains the observed difference in complexion ideals between men and women as part of the larger understanding in our culture of the appropriate roles and expectations for men and women. In effect, appearance ideals are symbolically aligned with gendered moral codes.

The notion that attractiveness ideals concerning lightness and darkness are asymmetrical across genders has been discussed by previous studies. For example, Rich and Cash (1993: pp. 113–114) report in a study of media representations of hair color:

In Western Caucasian society, there seems to be a popular image of beautiful women as having a fair complexion, light eye color, and light hair color, in contrast to an ideal image of men as having darker features We have the “fair maiden,” and the “tall, dark, and handsome” gentleman.

Hill’s (2002: p. 79) study of a gender difference in complexion ideals for African Americans likewise identifies the difference as rooted in long-standing ideas about fairness as particularly feminine in European culture.

Although these studies have noted a connection between lightness and particularly *feminine* beauty, they do not explore the symbolism and the moral connotations connected to lightness and darkness themselves as explanatory factors for the gender differential they observe. In short, there is no attempt in these studies on skin tone to explain why fairness is particularly feminine and darkness is particularly masculine, other than to imply that the link is an historical accident. Such a view, however, begs the question of why the linkages could not be reversed. Why do we see the particular pattern that we do regarding complexion ideals and gender?

The meaning-based approach to understanding complexion ideals can advance our knowledge of the cultural forces causing this differential and provide a fuller explanation of this phenomenon. According to this approach, the average gender difference in complexion arises from the close connection between what “lightness” means and what behavior is valued in women, and the close connection between what “darkness” means and what is valued in men.

Physical lightness and darkness are aesthetic characteristics that, perhaps better than any other aesthetic characteristic, exemplify the link between aesthetic and moral judgments. The concepts of lightness and darkness have strong associations with a variety of qualities that have moral connotations. Associations with whiteness or lightness include youth, innocence, purity, virginity, vulnerability, and delicacy. Associations with blackness or darkness include threat, aggression, virility, mystery, villainy, and danger. Lightness and darkness together compose a stable, clear, and well-known cultural dichotomy. Evidence for the nature of this dichotomy can be found throughout our culture.¹⁶ Dyer (1997: p. 58) notes that, indeed, “the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the seventh meaning of white both ‘morally and spiritually pure’ and ‘free from malignity . . . esp. as opposed to something that is characterized as black.’”

¹⁶ The cliché of the good guys in white hats and the bad guys in black hats is a good example.

Considering the dominant meanings of lightness and darkness, it seems reasonable to argue that women are sometimes held to higher standards of lightness than are men because the meaning of lightness coincides with our definition of the appropriate role of women in society. As women are held to an aesthetic double standard, *they are simultaneously held to a moral double standard regarding precisely those attitudes and behaviors most closely connected to the aesthetic characteristics in question*. Those attitudes and behaviors frequently concern sexual activity. For example, women are held to different standards regarding their virginity, innocence, purity, and their willingness to engage in sexual activity (Aubrey, 2004; Foschi, 2000: p. 35)—and these are precisely the qualities invoked by an aesthetic of lightness. Women are rewarded for exemplifying these attitudinal and behavioral qualities, such as chastity and innocence, just as they are rewarded for exemplifying the aesthetic characteristic that symbolizes them.

The meaning-based approach to understanding complexion differences explains why women have fairer complexions than men in advertisements on average. In general, advertisements conform to rather than subvert dominant gender roles. But the approach is also flexible enough to explain the wide variation in women's complexions in advertisements. A meaning-based approach leaves room to interpret women's darker complexions in advertisements as instances when the message of the advertisement involves not women's purity, innocence, or delicacy, but rather women's sexuality or 'impurity'. One empirical implication of the meaning-based approach, then, is that fairer complexions among women in advertisements are associated with conservative gender role messages, while darker complexions among women in advertisements are associated with greater sexualization. The following section tests for this implication.

7. Sexualization and complexion: a comparison of fair and dark white women

A meaning-based approach to understanding complexion differences predicts the conditions under which advertisements will tend to portray women with fairer complexions—namely, when the advertisement emphasizes the woman's purity and delicacy rather than her active sexuality. Through an analysis of a subsample of advertisements, I find evidence in support of the meaning-based approach to understanding gendered complexion differences. This evidence comes from a content analysis of two groups of advertisements: 50 unique advertisements featuring white women with the lightest complexions in the sample and 50 unique advertisements featuring white women with the darkest complexions in the sample.¹⁷ In this case, the number of advertisements is equal to the number of people in each group.¹⁸ The meaning-based explanation for complexion differences posits that women are ideally lighter in complexion than men because this lightness is representative of ideally feminine moral traits and behavior. If this perspective is accurate, then such moral attributes and behavior should be more prominent on average in advertisements with

¹⁷ I focus on white women because the differences in overall complexion between lightest and darkest are larger than for black women. The 50 lightest white women had overall complexions between 2 and 5 (on the scale from 2 to 20), while the 50 darkest white women had overall complexions between 12 and 16. Future research should examine whether the findings for white women extend to black women and for white and black men as such results would clarify the amount of empirical support that exists for the meaning-based approach.

¹⁸ There were two fairly complected women who were omitted from the analysis because they appeared in the same advertisement as another of the most fairly complected women. This achieved the goal of coding women in unique advertisements to maintain the independence of each data point. To reach the sample size of 50, the next two most fairly complected women in the sample were chosen. No substitutions were necessary for the darkest complected women.

the fairest women compared to advertisements with women with the darkest complexions. A comparison between these two groups of advertisements provides a test of the explanation.

What evidence exists within the advertisements to link light complexions with innocence, purity, and delicacy? Table 3 presents the results of a manifest content analysis that compares the two groups of advertisements in terms of objectively codable characteristics. The first column shows the total number of the lightest women possessing a characteristic, and the second column shows the total number of the darkest women possessing a characteristic. The third column contains the results of difference of proportions tests.¹⁹

Compared to women with the fairest complexions, women with the darkest complexions are in an advanced state of undress. Although not every difference in proportions achieves statistical significance, each point of comparison is in the expected direction. Given the relatively small sample size, the consistency with which the differences appear in the expected direction should be given weight as supporting evidence. The women with the darkest complexions are also more likely to have a bared midriff, and only they are shown with bared feet and are implied to be totally nude, strategically covered to avoid being entirely nude. The darkest complected women are also likely to be provocatively dressed, wearing a bra or bra-like article of clothing such as a bikini top, and underwear or similar article of clothing such as a bikini bottom. In contrast, the lightest complected women are more likely to be conservatively dressed. Although most of the measures narrowly miss statistical significance, they all point in the expected direction.

The darkest complected women are more likely to have hair that reaches their shoulders or beyond. As Synott (1987: p. 384) notes, long hair symbolizes both femininity and sexiness within Anglo-American culture. Wetness has an erotic symbolism in our culture (Ingham, 2002), and there again the darkest complected women are more likely to be wet in advertisements.²⁰ In addition to having closed eyes, the darkest complected women were more likely to be caressing or cradling an object, using their fingertips with their fingers extended to lightly touch, hold, or outline an object, a sexualized and non-utilitarian form of touching (Goffman, 1979: p. 29).

The darkest complected women were much more likely to be reclined, a position with an association with sexual activity. In contrast, the lightest complected women were more likely to make eye contact with the audience and to have only their face or face and shoulders depicted. Previous research has documented that such depictions generate an impression of competency in comparison to whole-body depictions (Schwarz and Kurz, 1989).

Although only a minority of each group was shown alongside a man, it is the nature of the relationship between the woman and the man that exhibits the greatest difference. The darkest complected women were more likely to have intimate (kissing, hugging, touching of head or face) contact with a man. In contrast the fairest complected women were more likely to appear alongside another woman, with casual physical contact or none at all. This difference speaks to a tendency for some of the fairest complected women to be presented in a way that evokes chastity and the protective presence of another woman. Some of the darkest complected women, however, were presented in a manner that either strongly connoted sexual contact or was overtly depicting sexual contact.

The final coding categories relate to the context of the women's portrayals. The darkest complected women were more likely to be in advertisements for alcoholic beverages. One

¹⁹ A one-tailed test is used to measure significance because I have directional hypotheses regarding the differences between the two groups.

²⁰ Ingham (2002: p. 43) notes that Freud argued that wetness symbolized "dirty sexuality."

Table 3
 Characteristics of advertisements with White women with 50 lightest and darkest complexions

Characteristics	Lightest	Darkest	Significantly different (one-tailed test)
State of undress			
Bared midriff	3	20	***
Bared thighs	14	16	
Bared shoulders	20	31	*
Bared feet	0	4	*
Visible cleavage	9	16	
Implied to be naked	0	4	*
Provocatively dressed			
Wearing a bra or similar top without a shirt	2	13	***
Wearing underwear or bikini bottom	2	7	*
Conservatively dressed			
Wearing long sleeves	18	13	
Wearing a jacket	11	7	
Wearing a turtleneck	3	0	*
Wearing long pants	11	6	
Sexual signals			
Hair to shoulders or beyond	20	29	**
Wet	0	5	*
Closed eyes	2	8	*
Caressing an object	4	11	*
In bed	2	2	
Mouth in contact with an object	0	3	*
Suggestive positioning			
Reclined	3	13	***
Legs spread widely	3	5	
Feet visibly off the ground	2	6	
Suggestions of propriety			
Child present	1	1	
Eye contact with audience	36	24	**
Standing upright	16	11	
Smiling	10	11	
Head/Shoulders only	10	3	*
Relationship to men			
Alongside a man	8	10	
No physical contact with man present	4	3	
Casual physical contact with man	2	0	
Intimate physical contact with man	2	7	*
Relationship to women			
Alongside a woman	9	3	*
No physical contact with woman present	2	2	
Casual physical contact with woman	7	1	*
Intimate physical contact with a woman	0	0	
Consumer context			
Advertisement for alcohol	2	7	*
Advertisement in a men's magazine	4	9	
Advertisement for tanning products	0	1	

Table 3 (Continued)

Characteristics	Lightest	Darkest	Significantly different (one-tailed test)
General context			
Outdoor setting	5	20	***
All white background	20	3	***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

interpretation of this difference is that advertisers frequently link alcoholic consumption with sexual activity or sexually charged situations, and the submerged complexion ideal of a dark complexion “looks right” for such ads. The darkest complected women were also more likely to be shown outdoors, the majority of which were rural or natural settings. Such settings can contribute to an atmosphere of reduced constraint, supervision, and formality. Although not overtly sexual in themselves, these qualities are more compatible with the suggestion of sexual potential that is present in these advertisements.

The all white background in which more of the lightest complected women were portrayed, however, contributed to an atmosphere of purity and radiance. The tendency to portray fair women against white backgrounds in advertisements is noted by Redmond (2003: p. 176) who argues that these “symbolically loaded white settings . . . connote ideas of purity and innocence and radiance.”

The overall picture generated by the manifest content analysis of the subsample of advertisements is that the fairest complected women tend to be portrayed in less overtly sexualized ways than are the darkest complected women. Both groups are conventionally attractive, with every woman being a thin, young adult. But we see here a strong correspondence between an aesthetic characteristic and an implied set of moral traits: fairness in complexion is associated with a presentation of more reserved, chaste, and proper women. The results support the meaning-based explanation of the gendered pattern of complexion differences.

A final comparison based on a qualitative analysis of themes and moods in the advertisements also supports the meaning-based explanation. A subjective assessment of the depiction of women in the advertisements reveals that the darkest complected women were more frequently presented as overtly sexual. For example, some of the women in this group modeled lingerie (in a women’s magazine) or wore revealing clothes in advertisements for electronics or furniture (in men’s magazines) while wearing an expression of arousal, with mouth slightly ajar and looking away from the camera. An advertisement for electronics features a nearly nude woman with the caption “All your favorite turn-ons.” Another advertisement from this group was for an alcoholic beverage and included the caption “Forbidden pleasures are frequently the most enjoyable.” Yet another advertisement features a woman lifted by a man on a dance floor. She is smiling broadly with her legs wrapped around his waist. She is wearing a cowboy hat, blue jeans, and cowboy boots, giving the impression of riding him. She is also wearing a bikini top, and he has an alcoholic beverage in his hand.

While the fairest complected women were sometimes portrayed as sultry, sexy, and aggressively sexy, such scenes were less frequent and more tempered. More common among the fairest women were portrayals of friendliness, happiness, and honesty. Such qualities were conveyed in an advertisement for an animal adoption league, in which a smiling, fully clothed woman cuddles a lap dog. Also common was an expression of primness that was nearly totally

absent from the group of darkest complected women. Primness was conveyed largely through facial expression, with mouth closed and unsmiling, chin up, and looking into the camera with an expression of judgment or a hint of defiance. Finally, the fairest complected women were more frequently depicted in ways that subtly suggested wealth and privilege. This suggestion was delivered predominantly through the clothing that the women wore. The fairest complected women were more likely to model expensive designer clothing and boutique labels such as Chanel and Versace. Moreover, when the advertisement was not for clothing, the fairest complected women were more likely to be wearing expensive-looking clothing. The association with wealth and privilege contributes to an atmosphere of propriety and autonomy among the fairest complected women, an atmosphere less compatible with objectification.

These results support a link between aesthetic traits and moral codes. The women whose *complexions* are most strongly ideally feminine are the same women whose *implied behaviors and identities* are most strongly ideally feminine. The meaning-based explanation to the aesthetic preference for fair women receives strong support from a comparison which serves as a test case for the explanation.

7.1. Lightness and gender in popular culture

Additional support for the meaning-based explanation for gendered complexion differences can be found in numerous examples throughout our culture. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) note in their study of the prevalence of beauty ideals in fairy tales that there is often a link between goodness, beauty, and lightness on the one hand, and evilness, ugliness, and darkness on the other.²¹ Lightness and darkness might be denoted by complexion or by other means, such as the good daughter being showered with gold and the bad daughter showered with pitch that can never be removed.²² Consider also the symbolism of one of Western culture's most important rituals—the heterosexual wedding. Typically, the man is in a black tuxedo and the woman is in a white dress.²³ Attractiveness ideals regarding complexion, then, are in line with a wider gestalt of gender and lightness or darkness.

Looking beyond Western cultures, Tegner's (1992) study of art finds that artists in many cultures have traditionally tended to portray women with lighter skin than men. She suggests that artists have exaggerated complexion differences between men and women as a technique for visually emphasizing gender differences, much as is done with respect to gender differences in body size and musculature.

8. Conclusion

Prior work has argued persuasively that beauty standards function as a gendered form of social control (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2004; Freedman, 1986; Jeffreys, 2005), encouraging conformity to typically feminine attitudes and behaviors. This analysis adds nuance to that

²¹ Although Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) interpret this linkage as a comment on race in fairy tales, my analysis would suggest that these fairy tales are playing on the dominant meanings of lightness and darkness rather than on race per se.

²² The very name "Snow White" is indicative of this more general pattern.

²³ Dyer (1997: p. 122–142) argues that visual representations of women in Western culture – as in films and painting – tend to depict white women as radiantly and glowingly white. Dyer interprets this tendency as a symbolic statement about the role of women as morally pure and virtuous.

argument: particular standards are related to particular kinds of social control. In this case, the ideal for fairness in complexion is related to restrictive norms concerning feminine sexual behaviors and attitudes—purity, modesty, and goodness. This link, then, mutually reinforces and naturalizes both the beauty ideal and the social control. The ideally fair woman has ideally feminine virtues; the ideally, sexually virtuous woman is ideally beautiful. Inversely, long-standing stereotypes about black women link their blackness with potent and active sexuality (Banet-Weiser, 1999: p. 138), and suggest the particular strength and power of these associations for dark-complected black women given their documented existence across races. My research both supports and extends recent work by Thompson and Keith (2001) that finds that darker skin tone among African American women is associated with lower self-esteem. Thompson and Keith reason that this negative outcome is a result of the dominant ideal valuing lighter complexions in society. Because dominant gender roles place a higher value on appearance for women, their self-esteem is more vulnerable to this appearance ideal than is men's. I extend their argument beyond African Americans to argue that a complexion ideal exists for white women as well, although it is submerged rather than articulated for this group.

There is important variation in women's complexions in advertisements. White women can range from angelic paleness to sultry darkness, and black women are depicted in an array of tones that overlap with white women's complexions to a surprising extent, although on average they are, of course, darker. This variation shows that a feminine complexion ideal is not as rigid as is the ideal for thinness, for example. However, the presentation of the fair woman is quite common, and it is the frequency of this mode of feminine presentation that can account for the lighter average complexion of women in the data. Complexion is one of many dimensions of personal appearance that can be altered or manipulated to suit certain purposes. Women are especially fair when included in an advertising message that emphasizes purity and innocence. The extreme version of this mode of presentation, when women were presented as light as the coding would allow, was never observed for men.

A second contribution of this work is an empirically supported claim that aesthetic preferences operate to reflect moral preferences. The sociological study of culture has devoted a great deal of attention to both aesthetic boundaries and moral boundaries, but little work in the sociology of culture focuses on the links between aesthetics and morality. This study is an effort to build our knowledge concerning these links, and finds that systematic gender differences in appearance ideals can be more than simple, or random expressions of aesthetic preferences. Rather, at least in the case of complexion ideals, they can be moral statements, and they can suggest and reinforce a gendered and racialized moral code.

A caveat is required regarding the interpretation of the moral codes embodied in these advertisements. On the one hand, prior research has established that Western culture has traditionally judged women negatively for overt expressions of sexual desire or sexual availability, ranging from gendered epithets such as "whore" or "slut" to biases about a lack of competence or intelligence. On the other hand, contemporary Western culture has moved toward greater acceptance of women's sexuality, and so the sexualization of darker complected women in the advertisements may be reflecting and reinforcing a morally neutral depiction of women's sexuality. However, while there is no denying that multiple interpretations of the signals in the advertisements are possible, I argue that there is a hegemonic interpretation, which I have explored in this paper. The connection between an aesthetic of lightness and moral evaluation is not the only interpretation, but it draws on the continued inequality of sexual standards for men and women (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Marks and Fraley, 2006; Milhausen and Herold, 1999;

Milhausen and Herold, 2001) as well as on the dominant understandings of the meanings of lightness and darkness.

The subject of tanning presents an interesting complication for the analysis of complexion ideals. On the one hand, I argue that the ideal complexion for women is fairer than is the ideal complexion for men. On the other hand, many white women tan in order to darken their complexion. Does the phenomenon of tanning negate the connection between moral and aesthetic preferences? Furthermore, are women who tan resisting the social control of beauty standards? The meaning-based approach to explaining the aesthetic preference for fairness in women's complexions suggests an alternative understanding of the meaning of tanning. Prior work has demonstrated that women tan primarily in the pursuit of beauty (Garvin and Wilson, 1999; Murray and Turner, 2004). However, it is the *kind* of beauty they pursue that is key to understanding why a preference for tanning among some women can exist alongside a preference for fairness for women. Rather than a denial of feminine identity or of beauty standards, tanning suggests that beauty ideals are complex and multi-faceted; they contain multiple points of idealization linked with different meanings, even meanings that are held in tension like lightness/darkness. This meaning-based interpretation allows us to analytically move beyond a simplistic, monochromatic notion of beauty ideals, and recognize that tanning is part of the idealization of feminine beauty associated with darkness; it conveys vitality, exposure, sexuality and experience rather than overtones of purity, delicacy, and innocence. In other words, the link between aesthetic and moral preferences is not broken with tanning, but instead a different link is highlighted, along with the complexity of beauty ideals. It should be noted, however, that tanning is by no means the dominant ideal for women as depicted in magazine advertisements; paler skin than men is dominant, and only a minority of women appears as tanned.

A third contribution of this work is to provide empirical evidence that a sociological study of media content can successfully elucidate questions of meaning, capitalizing on the strengths of both empirical and interpretive inquiry (Griswold, 1992). Some scholars who are concerned with meaning argue that because meaning is actively constructed through interpretations by individuals, not inherent to cultural objects, investigations of meaning must query individuals (see Kepplinger, 1989 for a discussion of this point). I would respond that not all dimensions of meaning can be accessed through studies of individual interpretations, since the motivations underlying aesthetic preferences cannot always be consciously articulated. Content analysis is especially well suited to exploring the submerged complexion ideal among whites by tapping into “cultural meaning” in lieu of “individual readings of texts” (Thomas, 1994: p. 688). In the present study, the question of meaning concerns widely held, but largely latent, cultural norms about associations with “lightness” and “darkness.” There is little doubt about the existence of these dominant meanings within our culture, and by focusing on dominant meanings that are widely distributed and strongly patterned, this study is able to attend to the question of meaning through a quantitative study of cultural content.²⁴

²⁴ There are pitfalls, as well, to the use of advertising images as a window on appearance ideals. Most importantly, we need some assurance that the data do not merely represent photographic conventions rather than more widely shared cultural ideals. In the case of a gender difference in complexion, ample corroborating evidence suggests that the findings are not merely photographic conventions. First, “in the United States up to forty percent of women add blond to their hair” (Etcoff, 1999: p. 126). Second, skin lighteners are disproportionately marketed to and bought by (minority) women. Third, interracial marriage rates in the United States are heavily skewed. Black men marry white women several times more often than white men marry black women (Alba, 1995: p. 16).

The issue of idealized depictions of women and men is of pressing social concern on account of the influence that the mass media have in society, especially over the young. In particular, there is a large and growing literature that links mass media images with the self-esteem of girls (Dittmar and Howard, 2004; Frisby, 2004; Goodman, 2002). Much of this literature deals with the effects of nearly relentless exposure to images of implausibly thin women in the mass media. There has been in recent years a consciousness-raising effort about the thin ideal and its destructive potential. By articulating the ideal and explaining how unrealistic and unhealthy it is, it is hoped that the negative effects on girls will be reduced. But media images are idealized in many ways aside from body shape. Complexion is one of these ways, and it is another potential source of anxiety that should be identified and articulated.²⁵

Future research should examine the extent to which these findings hold for media images in non-Western cultures. There is a growing literature that documents the problem of skin bleaching or whitening in many countries. Charles's (2003) study on the self-esteem of Jamaicans who bleach their skin notes that the practice is much more prevalent among women. Japanese culture also finds white skin more attractive than dark skin, with a far greater expectation for whiteness among women than among men (Ashikari, 2005). The same gendered preference for whiter skin has been documented in Kenya (England, 2004), Brazil (Telles, 2004: p. 193) and in India (Pearson, 2004). In each instance, there is a preference for fairness among both sexes, though the preference is stronger for women. There is some evidence that this preference for fairness predates colonialism—for example, the preference for fairness in India is related to the caste system. It stands to reason, however, that such preferences at the least would have been exacerbated by colonialism, and the resulting global prevalence of an Anglo-European beauty ideal based on an idealized fair complexion. Moreover, multinational corporations are contributing to the problem through aggressive marketing of skin lightening products. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the phenomenon of a preference for fair skin in these disparate countries for either sex or the special emphasis on fairness reserved for women, although further research is clearly needed. An international perspective on culture, aesthetics, gender, and media content would allow a better understanding of the validity of the argument that complexion ideals represent a gendered moral code.

Acknowledgements

This paper benefited greatly from the helpful advice of the anonymous reviewers at *Poetics*. In addition, I thank Josée Johnston for her careful reading of the article and her many insightful questions and suggestions. I acknowledge also the helpful comments I received during a presentation at a seminar in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto, and especially Marion Blute, Bonnie Erickson, Ron Gillis, and Judith Taylor. Thanks also to Scott Schieman for a helpful recommendation. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Advances in Content Analysis and the Sociology of Culture' panel at the 2004 meetings of the American Sociological Association. I received much helpful feedback there, and I especially thank Ron Breiger for his constructive criticisms. This work was carried out with the support of funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

²⁵ Casanova (2004: p. 291) argues that pervasive norms that equate fair complexions with feminine beauty in Ecuador are at least in part due to media depictions in which fair women are idealized and darker skinned women are generally absent.

References

- Alba, Richard, 1995. Assimilation's quiet tide. *The Public Interest* 119, 3–18.
- Ashikari, Mikiko, 2005. Cultivating Japanese whiteness: the “whitening” cosmetics boom and the Japanese identity. *Journal of Material Culture* 10, 73–91.
- Aubrey, Jennifer Stevens, 2004. Sex and punishment: an examination of sexual consequences and the sexual double standard in teen programming. *Sex Roles* 50, 505–514.
- Avery, Nicole Volta, 2000 May 5. The Changing Face of Fashion: A Broader Cultural Complexion Drives Diversity in Today's Advertising, *The Detroit Free Press*.
- Baker, M.J., Churchill Jr., G.A., 1977. The impact of physically attractive models on advertising evaluations. *Journal of Marketing Research* 14, 538–555.
- Baker-Sperry, Lori, Grauerholz, Liz, 2003. The pervasiveness and persistence of the feminine beauty ideal in children's fairy tales. *Gender & Society* 15 (5), 711–726.
- Baker-Sperry, Lori, Grauerholz, Liz, 2004. The pervasiveness and persistence of the feminine beauty ideal in children's fairy tales. *Gender & Society* 15, 711–726.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, 1999. *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pagents and National Identity*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by R. Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Breland, Alfred, 1998. A model for differential perceptions of competence based on skin tone among African Americans. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26 (4), 294–311.
- Carr, David, 2002 November 18. On covers of many magazines, a full racial palette is still rare. *The New York Times*.
- Casanova, Erynn Masi de., 2004. No ugly women: concepts of race and beauty among adolescent women in Ecuador. *Gender & Society* 18, 287–308.
- Charles, Christopher A.D., 2003. Skin bleaching, self-hate, and black identity in Jamaica. *Journal of Black Studies* 33, 711–728.
- Coltrane, Scott, Messineo, Melinda, 2000. The perpetuation of subtle prejudice: race and gender imagery in 1990s television advertising. *Sex Roles* 42, 363–389.
- Crawford, Mary, Popp, Danielle, 2003. Sexual double standards: a review and methodological critique of two decades of research. *Journal of Sex Research* 40 (1), 13–26.
- Dilio, Dino, 2005. All about eyes. *Cosmetics* 33 (2), 18–19.
- Dion, Karen, Ellen, Berscheid, Elaine, Walster, 1972. What is beautiful is good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 24, 285–290.
- Dittmar, Helga, Howard, Sarah, 2004. Thin-ideal internalization and social comparison tendency as moderators of media models' impact on women's body-focused anxiety. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 23, 768–791.
- Dyer, Richard, 1997. *White*. Routledge, New York.
- England, Andrew, 2004 August 17. Cosmetics industry cashes in where fairer equals better: in Kenya, women queue to buy lightening creams that damage skin, writes Andrew England. *Financial Times* 9.
- Etcoff, Nancy, 1999. *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*. Anchor Books, New York.
- Feeley, Thomas Hugh, 2002. Comment on halo effects in rating and evaluation research. *Human Communication Research* 28, 578–586.
- Foschi, Martha, 2000. Double standards for competence: theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, 21–42.
- Freedman, Rita, 1986. *Beauty Bound*. D.C. Heath, Lexington, MA.
- Frisby, Cynthia M., 2004. Does race matter? Effects of idealized images on African American women's perceptions of body esteem. *Journal of Black Studies* 34, 323–347.
- Garvin, T., Wilson, K., 1999. The use of storytelling for understanding women's desires to tan: lessons from the field. *Professional Geographer* 51 (2), 296–306.
- Goffman, Erving, 1979. *Gender Advertisements*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Goodman, J. Robyn, 2002. Flabless is fabulous: How Latina and Anglo women read and incorporate the excessively thin body ideal into everyday experience. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79, 712–727.
- Griswold, Wendy, 1992. The sociology of culture: four good arguments (and one bad one). *Acta Sociologica* 35, 323–328.
- Gullickson, Aaron, 2005. The significance of color declines: a re-analysis of skin differentials in post civil rights America. *Social Forces* 84 (1), 157–180.
- Habbema, Loek, 2004. Facial esthetics and patient selection. *Clinics in Dermatology* 22, 14–17.

- Hill, Mark E., 2002. Skin color and the perception of attractiveness among African Americans: does gender make a difference? *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65, 77–91.
- Hill, Mark E., 2000. Color differences in the socioeconomic status of African American men: results of a longitudinal study. *Social Forces* 78, 1437–1460.
- Hosoda, Megumi, Stone-Romero, Eugene F., Coats, Gwen, 2003. The effects of physical attractiveness on job-related outcomes: a meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Personnel Psychology* 56, 431–462.
- Hughes, Michael, Hertel, Bradley R., 1990. The significance of color remains: a study of life chances, mate selection, and ethnic consciousness among Black Americans. *Social Forces* 68, 1105–1120.
- Ingham, John M., 2002. Primal scene and misreading in Nabokov's *Lolita*. *American Imago* 59, 27–52.
- Ives, Nat, 2005. Magazine of the year: people. *Advertising Age* 76, 42.
- Jablonski, Nina G., Chaplin, George, 2000. The evolution of human skin coloration. *Journal of Human Evolution* 39, 57–106.
- Jeffreys, Sheila, 2005. *Beauty and Misogyny. Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. Routledge, New York.
- Kahle, Lynn R., Homer, Pamela M., 1985. Physical attractiveness of the celebrity endorser: a social adaptation perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research* 11, 954–961.
- Keenan, Kevin L., 1996. Skin tone and physical features of blacks in magazine advertisements. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, 905–912.
- Kepplinger, Hans Mathias, 1989. Content analysis and reception analysis. *American Behavioral Scientist* 33 (2), 175–182.
- Keith, Verna M., Herring, Cedric, 1991. Skin tone and stratification in the black community. *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (3), 760–778.
- Leeds, Maxine, 1994. Young African-American women and the language of beauty. In: Callaghan, Karen A. (Ed.), *Ideal of Feminine Beauty: Philosophical, Social, and Cultural Dimensions*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, pp. 147–159.
- Leeds Craig, Maxine, 2002. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Lieberson, Stanley, 2000. *A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Madrigal, Lorena, Kelly, William, 2006. Human skin-color sexual dimorphism: a test of the sexual selection hypothesis. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (published online in advance of print: www.interscience.wiley.com).
- Marks, Michael J., Fraley, R. Chris, 2006. Confirmation bias and the sexual double standard. *Sex Roles* 54 (1/2), 19–26.
- Mastro, Dana E., Stern, Susannah R., 2003. Representations of race in television commercials: a content analysis of prime-time advertising. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47, 638–647.
- Milhausen, Robin R., Herold, Edward S., 2001. Reconceptualizing the sexual double standard. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 13, 63–83.
- Milhausen, Robin R., Herold, Edward S., 1999. Does the sexual double standard still exist? Perceptions of university women. *Journal of Sex Research* 36, 361–368.
- Murray, Craig D., Turner, Elizabeth, 2004. Health, risk, and sunbed use: a qualitative study. *Health, Risk & Society* 6 (1), 67–80.
- Pearson, Beth, 2004 May 10. Where the formula for a good job is simply skin deep; Sales of skin-lightening products are booming in the east. But will it lead to a better life for women? *The Herald (Glasgow)* 10.
- Pollay, Richard W., 1986. The distorted mirror: reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. *Journal of Marketing* 50, 18–36.
- Redmond, Sean, 2003. Thin white women in advertising: deathly corporeality. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, 170–190.
- Rich, Melissa K., Cash, Thomas F., 1993. The American image of beauty: media representations of hair color for four decades. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 29, 113–124.
- Saad, Gad, 2004. Applying evolutionary psychology in understanding the representation of women in advertisements. *Psychology and Marketing* 21 (8), 593–612.
- Sagario, Dawn, 2002 December 29. Interracial couples becoming more common; the 'Halle Berry' syndrome, education boost acceptance. *The Seattle Times*.
- Schudson, Michael, 1984. *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*. Basic Books, New York.
- Schwarz, Norbert, Kurz, Eva, 1989. What's in a picture? The impact of face-ism on trait attribution. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 19, 311–316.
- Shriver, Mark D., Parra, Esteban J., Dios, Sonia, Bonilla, Carolina, Norton, Heather, Jovel, Celina, Pfaff, Carrie, Jones, Cecily, Massac, Aisha, Cameron, Neil, Baron, Archie, Jackson, Tabitha, Argyropoulos, George, Jin, Li, Hoggart,

- Clive J., McKeigue, Paul M., Kittles, Rick A., 2003. Skin pigmentation, biogeographical ancestry, and admixture mapping. *Human Genetics* 112, 387–399.
- Synott, A., 1987. Shame and glory: a sociology of hair. *British Journal of Sociology* 38, 381–413.
- Taylor, Charles R., Bang, Hae-Kyong, 1997. Portrayals of Latinos in magazine advertising. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 74, 285–303.
- Tegner, Eva, 1992. Sex differences in skin pigmentation illustrated in art. *American Journal of Dermatopathology* 14 (3), 283–287.
- Telles, Edward E., 2004. *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Thomas, Sari, 1994. Artfactual study in the analysis of culture: a defense of content analysis in the postmodern age. *Communication Research* 21, 683–697.
- Thompson, Maxine S., Keith, Verna M., 2001. The blacker the berry: gender, skin tone, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. *Gender & Society* 15, 336–357.
- Wagner, Jennifer K., Parra, Esteban J., Norton, Heather L., Jovel, Celina, Shriver, Mark D., 2002. Skin responses to ultraviolet radiation: effects of constitutive pigmentation, sex, and ancestry. *Pigment Cell Research* 15, 385–390.

Shyon Baumann is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. He works within the areas of the arts, media, and culture. This paper is part of a larger project on advertising funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He is also writing, with Josée Johnston, a book manuscript on the American gourmet food scene, to be published by Routledge in 2009.