The Price of Being Pretty:
How High-SES Women Navigate Beauty Premiums and Penalties in Social and Professional Networks

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Abstract

This study examines how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* across professional and social contexts, and how these experiences are shaped by age. Drawing on theories of *aesthetic capital* and capital conversion and accumulation, the research explores how beauty operates as both a resource and a source of vulnerability. Through semi-structured interviews with ten participants (five young professionals and five middle-aged women) and reflexive thematic analysis, four central themes were identified: the accumulation and management of *aesthetic capital*, the negotiation of beauty norms and expectations, the experience of *beauty premiums* and the experience of *beauty penalties*. Findings reveal that beauty is a conditional form of capital. In professional settings, it enhanced credibility and opportunity, particularly for younger women, but also led to stereotyping and sexualization. Middle-aged participants responded with more strategic and controlled presentation styles. In social contexts, beauty fostered visibility and inclusion yet also provoked peer judgment and emotional discomfort, especially among younger participants. Middle-aged women emphasized autonomy and internal motivation in appearance practices, challenging dominant narratives of aesthetic decline. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how *aesthetic capital* operates across age and context. It highlights the double-edged nature of *aesthetic capital* as both empowering and risky, shaped by social norms. Future research should further examine the emotional impact of beauty, pay attention to gendered environments, adopt a longitudinal approach and explore how *beauty premiums and penalties* operate across diverse cultural, racial and socioeconomic groups.

Keywords: Aesthetic capital, beauty premiums and penalties, beauty norms, professional and social contexts, life course perspective

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1. Introduction

Women invest a significant amount of time, energy and resources in their appearance, dedicating nearly 335 hours per year to activities such as skincare, make-up and dressing up (Mafra et al., 2022). Although such levels of investment vary across individuals, reflect a broader social emphasis on the importance of physical attractiveness in society. The global beauty industry, valued at approximately 58 billion dollars in 2024, is projected to grow to 71 billion dollars by 2030, driven by increased consumer spending on cosmetic products and treatments, skincare and personal care (Statista, 2025). From anti-aging skincare to cosmetic procedures, the pursuit of beauty has become a lifelong project, reinforcing the idea that maintaining an attractive appearance is not merely desirable but essential (Elias et al., 2017).

Beauty is not merely a personal asset but operates as a form of "*aesthetic capital*", whereby beauty is regarded as a resource that can yield privileges, opportunities and wealth (Anderson et al., 2010). This conceptualization aligns with broader sociological theories of capital, in which resources such as financial assets – *economic capital* – or social networks – *social capital* – can be leveraged for success (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, appearance functions as a resource that can be accumulated and exchanged for advantages in various settings (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021).

These advantages linked to beauty, referred to as "*beauty premiums*", highlight how attractive individuals experience greater social and economic success (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Empirical research has shown that attractive individuals are not only more likely to be hired but also tend to earn higher salaries, receive favorable treatment in the workplace, and establish broader social networks (Hamermesh, 2011; Kukkonen, 2021; Nault et al., 2020). This phenomenon is largely driven by implicit biases such as the *halo effect*, where individuals perceived as physically attractive are also assumed to have other desirable traits, including competence, intelligence and leadership potential (Dion et al., 1972; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). As a result, beauty can function as a powerful factor in shaping professional and social trajectories.

However, for women, these advantages come with challenges, including normative pressures to adhere to beauty standards (Sarpila et al., 2020; Kukkonen et al., 2018). Unlike men, whose physical appearance tends to play a less decisive role in professional and social evaluation,

women face greater expectations to enhance and sustain their beauty (Gill, 2007). This is further complicated by *"beauty penalties"*, a concept describing the disadvantages or negative consequences that arise from a woman's physical attractiveness (Anderson et al., 2010). *Beauty penalties* can take various forms, from social exclusion and jealousy to professional discrimination, particularly in male-dominated industries where attractiveness is sometimes associated with a lack of competence (Johnson et al., 2010; Marson & Hessmiller, 2016).

Furthermore, beauty is shaped by strict gender norms that prescribe how women are expected to present themselves. *Beauty penalties* are stronger for women than for men, reinforcing broader gender inequalities and placing women in a paradoxical position (Rhode, 2010). While they are expected to invest in their appearance, they are simultaneously criticized when they use their beauty to gain advantages in social and professional contexts (Sarpila et al., 2020). This double standard reflects the complex role of *aesthetic capital*, where beauty can be both an advantage or a disadvantage.

To gain or maintain *aesthetic capital*, women engage in *aesthetic labour*, which involves intentional and strategic actions to enhance their appearance, including personal care, clothing choices and cosmetic enhancements (Holla & Kuipers, 2015). However, *aesthetic labour* goes beyond everyday self-care; it also involves bodily discipline, such as maintaining a slim figure through diet and exercise, undergoing cosmetic procedures and following fashion and beauty trends that signal status and social belonging (Elias et al., 2017). This focus on body maintenance and perfection reinforces the idea that women's attractiveness is not just a natural asset but rather something that must be continually enhanced and refined.

This study focuses on women with a high socioeconomic status, as their social position affords them particular access to the resources and knowledge to engage in *aesthetic labour*. Women with a high socioeconomic status often possess the financial means to purchase beauty products – *economic capital* – and knowledge about the maintenance and performance of beauty practices – *cultural capital* – which illustrates the interplay between different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Women with a high socioeconomic position are particularly relevant to this study because their access to other forms of capital facilitates the accumulation and conversion of *aesthetic capital* (Kukkonen, 2021).

A significant gap in existing research concerns the dual experiences of *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties*, particularly within the professional and social networks of women with a high socioeconomic status. While there has been substantial focus on the benefits of physical

attractiveness, research on *beauty penalties* is comparatively limited (Anderson et al., 2010). Although some studies address *beauty penalties*, the body of literature is significantly smaller and less developed than that on *beauty premiums*, leaving key aspects underexplored. Furthermore, this study examines both the professional and social context, an interplay that received little attention in previous research. Looking at these two contexts is relevant for research because *aesthetic capital* is converted differently in each context, within professionals settings, it often translates to *economic capital*, while in social contexts it can translate to *social capital* (Kukkonen, 2021).

Additionally, this research compares two age groups, namely young professionals and middle-aged women, to examine how age influences the accumulation and utilization of *aesthetic capital* and the experiences of *beauty premiums* and *penalties*. Although this intersection has received limited attention in existing literature, addressing it is relevant because age significantly shapes how beauty is socially valued and how women relate to appearance norms. Young professionals are navigating pressures to optimize their appearance as a marker of success while middle-aged women face unique challenges as aging is often perceived as a loss of femininity (Chambers, 2012; McRobbie, 2015). This age-based comparison provides a more comprehensive understanding of *aesthetic capital* across the life course and the shifting pressures women experience across different life stages.

This research is both societally and scientifically relevant. Societally, this research highlights the gendered dimensions of beauty norms and stricter standards for women. By examining how these norms operate in the professional and social contexts, this study looks at the broader societal structures that reward and penalize women based on their appearance. It also explores how these dynamics are shaped by aging, offering insight into the aesthetic expectations women face across the life course. Scientifically, the study contributes to four key areas. First, it expands the literature on *beauty penalties*, addressing the gap in research on the disadvantages of physical attractiveness. Second, it focuses on women with a high socioeconomic status, an underexamined group in studies on *aesthetic capital*. Third, it integrates social and professional contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how beauty functions as a form of capital across different areas. Finally, this study provides an understanding of how *aesthetic capital* is accumulated and utilized across different ages, which is limited in existing research.

This leads to the central question of this research: *"How do women with high socioeconomic status experience beauty premiums and beauty penalties within their social and professional networks?"*. In addition, this study will examine how these experiences differ between two age

groups, leading to the sub-question: *"How do beauty premiums and beauty penalties differ in the experiences of young professionals and middle-aged women with high socioeconomic status within their social and professional networks?"*. Together, these research questions will provide insight into the complexity of beauty as a form of capital, highlighting how it can serve both as an advantage and a disadvantage, the pressure women face and the role of these dynamics in different contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides this study on the experiences of *beauty premiums and penalties* among women with a high socioeconomic status within their social and professional networks. It begins by exploring Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital. Following this, the concept of *aesthetic capital* is discussed, with a focus on how beauty is socially constructed, accumulated and converted into other forms of capital. The chapter then considers how beauty norms affect women differently across ages, focusing on young professionals and middle-aged women. Finally, it examines how *aesthetic capital* can result in both *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* and how these dynamics are shaped by age and context.

2.1 The forms of capital

As stated by Bourdieu (1986), capital refers to various forms of valuable, accumulable resources that individuals can possess and utilize to improve their social position. According to Bourdieu (1986) there are three types of capital: *economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital*. The concept of *economic capital* refers to financial resources and material wealth, such as money and property, which can be directly transferred and utilized in economic transactions (Bourdieu, 1986). *Cultural capital* includes knowledge, education and the ability to understand and apply social norms, and can take various forms such as embodied dispositions, cultural goods or formal qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). The third form, *social capital*, consists of the networks, relationships and social connections that individuals have and the benefits they can derive from them (Bourdieu, 1986). Later, Bourdieu added a fourth form: *symbolic capital* which concerns honor, prestige, and reputation and refers to the recognition individuals receive based on the other forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). These different forms of capital are interlinked and can be cultivated into other forms of capital. For example, having *economic capital* enables the accumulation of *cultural-* and *social capital* by, for instance, being able to pay for education or social activities (Bourdieu, 1986). Importantly, Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that capital is unequally distributed in society and perpetuates social inequalities because capital depends on an individual's background, such as class and level of education.

While Bourdieu's (1986) original typology focused on *economic, cultural* and *social capital*, several scholars have extended his theory to examine the role of physical appearance in these processes and recognized physical appearance as a significant form of capital (Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Hakim (2010) introduces *erotic capital*, which encompasses physical beauty, sexual

attractiveness, charm, social skills and presentation which play a role in social and romantic interactions. Building on these ideas, *aesthetic capital* offers a broader perspective than *erotic capital*, focusing on external characteristics that are seen as valuable resources and that provide individuals with social and economic benefits (Anderson et al., 2010).

As Kukkonen (2021) highlights, *aesthetic capital* functions within broader systems of exchange and this exchange is shaped by processes of accumulation and conversion. Accumulation involves the investment of other forms of capital into enhancing one's appearance as *aesthetic capital*, while conversion refers to the exchange of *aesthetic capital* into other forms of capital (Kukkonen, 2021). Like other forms of capital, beauty can be cultivated, converted into other advantages or acquired by those with the means to do so, thereby perpetuating social inequalities (Kuipers, 2022; Anderson et al., 2010). The following section further elaborates on the concept of *aesthetic capital*, highlighting its socially constructed nature and mechanisms.

2.2 Aesthetic capital

Aesthetic capital can be seen as a part of *human capital*: it is part of who you are as an individual, which can lead to advantages in different contexts (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Vrooman et al., 2023). Anderson et al. (2010, p. 566) define *aesthetic capital* as "beauty characteristics that are viewed as assets capable of yielding privileges, opportunities, and wealth". Beauty characteristics that fall into this category include facial and hair features, body shape or physique, and appearance-related choices such as clothing and fashion (Anderson et al., 2010).

However, what counts as *aesthetic capital*, is not fixed or universally defined. These beauty characteristics are indeterminate in nature because they do not refer to objectively measurable traits such as which facial features or body types are valuable (Kukkonen, 2021). The value of physical features and styles arises through social interactions in different contexts, with valuation constantly changing (Kukkonen, 2021). This context-dependent nature of *aesthetic capital* aligns with valuation theory, which sees value not as a fixed attribute, but as something produced through social processes. Helgesson and Muniesa (2013) argue that value is not a stable or inherent quality, but something that is constructed through social practices of valuation. Waibel et al. (2021) build on this with the concept of 'valuation constellations', showing that value arises from the interaction between people, norms and settings. Applied to beauty, this means that *aesthetic capital* does not hold value by itself, but gains worth through shared norms and social interactions that determine what is seen as desirable (Waibel et al., 2021).

This relational understanding of aesthetic value shows the socially constructed nature of beauty standards and beauty norms, which are constantly changing; they differ not only across time and place but are also shaped by power relationships (Holla & Kuipers, 2015). As Holla and Kuipers (2015) point out, different social classes hold varying ideas about what is considered attractive, yet it is often the beauty norms of the upper classes that become dominant across society. In this way, beauty norms function as *cultural capital:* it is knowledge that is distributed unevenly across society and mark social divides (Bourdieu, 1986; Holla & Kuipers, 2015).

Moreover, these norms are gendered, as women face significantly higher societal pressure to meet stricter beauty standards than men, whose appearance tends to be judged according to broader and more flexible norms (Sarpila et al., 2020; Kukkonen et al., 2018). This gendered nature of beauty norms has a direct impact on the accumulation of *aesthetic capital*, as women are expected to invest more heavily in their appearance than men (Sarpila et al., 2020). Unlike other forms of capital, *aesthetic capital* is partly innate, yet it can still be increased through *aesthetic labour*, whereby individuals enhance or modify their appearance in ways that align with dominant beauty standards (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). This labour may include activities ranging from purchasing cosmetic products to undergoing cosmetic- or plastic surgery (Sarpila et al., 2020; Póvoa et al., 2020).

Crucially, the accumulation of *aesthetic capital* through *aesthetic labour* often depends on the conversion of *economic capital* because financial resources are required to access the products, services and treatments that are recognized as desirable (Kukkonen, 2021). This accumulation occurs mainly by buying appearance related consumer items and using them; an accumulation that requires not only money but also a significant amount of time (Kukkonen, 2021). Beyond financial means, *cultural capital* is equally essential. Accumulating *aesthetic capital* requires not only knowing what to buy, but also how to perform appearance practices ‘correctly’ and in line with societal norms (Holla & Kuipers, 2015). These forms of cultural knowledge are often acquired through class-based socialization and are not equally accessible to all. As a result, *aesthetic capital* is accumulated more easily by those who already possess the economic and cultural resources to align with dominant beauty norms, which contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021). In this context, women with a high socioeconomic status are particularly likely to engage in *aesthetic labour*, as they have both the financial means and the cultural knowledge to invest in and manage their appearance over time (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021).

2.2.1 Navigating beauty norms across age

Contemporary beauty practices are shaped by *neoliberal* ideals that promote self-management and continuous self-optimization (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015). These ideals are reinforced through social beauty norms that define how women are expected to look in order to be seen as attractive. These expectations influence how *aesthetic capital* is accumulated and valued, and they vary by age: youth is typically rewarded, while aging is associated with decline and requires greater effort to maintain social value (Jenull et al., 2018). The following sections examine how age-specific beauty norms affect women's experiences with *aesthetic capital*.

For young professional women, appearance is closely tied to ideals of ambition, self-discipline and control (Gill, 2021). In both social and professional contexts, beauty functions as a marker of value, with looking 'put together' seen as a sign of competence and credibility (Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2021). Gill (2021) describes how young women are encouraged to embody the image of the *'neoliberal subject'* through disciplined self-presentation and ongoing self-improvement via *aesthetic labour.* McRobbie (2015) adds that contemporary femininity is governed by the pursuit of 'perfection', where young women are expected to 'have it all'. This pressure is often internalized, with young professionals striving to meet unattainable beauty ideals to gain social validation and professional credibility, as beauty is seen as a marker of success (McRobbie, 2015). These beauty-related expectations reflect broader social beauty norms, shaped by *neoliberal* ideals, where success is seen as the result of individual effort and personal responsibility (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015).

These beauty norms are not only externally imposed but also reinforced through peer relationships. Within close female friendships, appearance becomes a shared concern, shaped by the subtle dynamics of comparison, encouragement and correction. Winch (2013) refers to this as the *'girlfriend culture'*: a cultural context in which female friendships function as spaces of both mutual support and subtle surveillance. Central to this is the *'girlfriend gaze'*, an ongoing and emotionally charged process of comparing, commenting on and subtly shaping one's appearance (Winch, 2013). Ringrose and Renold (2009) highlight how this gaze can involve '*normative cruelties'*: subtle forms of judgment and exclusion that enforce dominant beauty ideals. Through everyday interactions, peer networks contribute to the internalization of beauty norms and regulate how *aesthetic capital* is performed and monitored.

These pressures are further intensified by *consumerism*, which markets beauty products and services as tools for empowerment (Speno & Woolf, 2022). In response, younger women engage in *aesthetic labour* practices such as make-up, tanning, hair dyeing and exercise to align with dominant beauty ideals (McKay et al., 2018). Increasingly, these efforts extend to long-term investments, including cosmetic procedures, to accumulate and sustain their *aesthetic capital* (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2023).

For middle-aged women, maintaining *aesthetic capital* becomes increasingly challenging, as aging is often framed as a visible decline that contradicts dominant ideals of femininity (Chambers, 2012). Rather than being accepted as a natural process, signs of aging are culturally interpreted as a failure to care for or control the body (Macia et al., 2015). Twigg (2003) emphasizes that aging is a socially constructed experience, shaped by norms that equate youth with beauty and value. These norms and expectations are intensified by *neoliberal* ideals and social norms that frame aging as something to be managed through individual effort and investment (Twigg, 2003; Chambers, 2012). This is reflected in cosmetic surgery trends: women aged 40 to 54 represent the largest group undergoing surgical procedures, pointing to ongoing efforts to manage aging *through aesthetic labour* (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2023).

Consumer culture plays a central role in shaping these responses. Anti-aging products, treatments and cosmetic procedures are marketed as empowering choices, though they often reflect compliance with deeply rooted beauty norms (Twigg, 2003; Chambers, 2012). *Aesthetic capital* in midlife is also managed through clothing. Twigg (2007) introduces the concept of '*age-ordering'* to describe how women are expected to dress in age-appropriate ways, avoiding outfits that are too revealing, colorful or youthful. Clothing becomes a visual marker, signaling whether women meet expectations of maturity. Maintaining *aesthetic capital* in this life stage therefore requires not only time and financial investment, but also careful navigation of what is considered acceptable for an aging woman.

2.3 Beauty premiums

The *beauty premium* refers to the phenomenon in which physical attractiveness is rewarded with appreciation and opportunities, providing attractive individuals with certain social and economic advantages (Póvoa et al., 2020). Sociologists associate this with the *"beauty-is-good"* stereotype, or the *"halo effect"*, where physical attractiveness leads to assumptions that attractive individuals possess positive traits like kindness, success, and happiness (Dion et al., 1972; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Anýžová & Matějů, 2018). As discussed earlier, these benefits are not solely based on innate features, but are developed through *aesthetic labour.* Access to *beauty premiums* typically requires both *economic capital* to invest in appearance and *cultural capital* to know how to meet dominant beauty norms (Wong & Penner, 2016). In this way, beauty functions as a socially valued asset that can translate into real-life advantages across different domains.

2.3.1 Beauty premiums in the professional context

Aesthetic capital influences rewards in everyday contexts, particularly in the workplace. Attractive individuals tend to be more economically successful, particularly on the labor market (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen, 2021). Compared to less attractive individuals, attractive people earn more and are more frequently recommended for promotion (Nault et al., 2020). Research by Hamermesh (2011) shows that above-average-looking women earn 4 percent more than average-looking women. This dynamic is particularly visible in industries that emphasize *aesthetic labour*, such as hospitality, retail and other service-oriented organizations, where physical appearance is often implicitly treated as part of the job (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). In these settings, *aesthetic capital* can enhance employability, with companies assuming that attractive employees will positively affect client experiences and thus improve revenue (Hamermesh, 2011).

However, *beauty premiums* are not limited to appearance-focused sectors. Mobius and Rosenblat (2006) demonstrate that *beauty premiums* also occur in other professional contexts through three mechanisms: first, by triggering stereotypes that overestimate an individual's competence; second, by enhancing perceived social and communication skills; and third, by strengthening self-confidence, which can improve negotiation positions (Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). This aligns with research from Judge et al. (2009) who demonstrate that attractive individuals tend to develop stronger core self-evaluations, including higher self-esteem. This

positive self-belief encourages individuals to behave more confidently in professional settings, take on leadership roles and proactively pursue career opportunities (Judge et al., 2009).

Further research demonstrates how physical appearance is actively embedded in organizational decision-making. Witz et al. (2003) show that aesthetic traits are increasingly operationalized in hiring and role allocation, with staff selected to visually match brand identity and placed in high-visibility, client-facing positions. This visibility often brings informal benefits such as access to valuable networks. In male-dominated environments, aligning with traditional feminine norms through appearance can further enhance women's access to clients and career-relevant opportunities (Caven et al., 2013). In this way, *aesthetic capital* enhances visibility, desirability and access to informal workplace rewards, all of which contribute to the *beauty premiums* that attractive individuals receive in professional contexts (Anderson et al., 2010; Elias et al., 2017).

2.3.1.1 Beauty premiums and age in the workplace

Although *beauty premiums* apply broadly, they are not distributed evenly across all age groups. Young professional women particularly benefit from the association between youth and attractiveness, as youthfulness is a key component of contemporary beauty ideals (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In professional contexts, younger women especially benefit from the *beauty premium*, as physical attractiveness and youthfulness are highly valued attributes early in the career (Hamermesh, 2011). Hamermesh (2011) argues that the economic advantages of beauty are most pronounced at the beginning of professional life, when physical appearance is at its peak visibility. Employers and clients tend to respond more favorably to youthful attractiveness, leading to higher starting salaries, more positive evaluations and greater professional opportunities (Hamermesh, 2011). Furthermore, Hamermesh (2011) notes that attractiveness can sometimes compensate for the lack of professional experience among younger workers, making beauty an even more critical asset during the early career phase.

2.3.2 Beauty premiums in the social context

Attractiveness enhances social success, as *aesthetic capital* can be converted into *social capital* (Kukkonen, 2021). Physical attractiveness increases the likelihood of being approached or included in conversations because it is consistently associated with traits such as friendliness, competence and social skills (Feingold, 1992). From early childhood, attractive individuals are perceived more positively and form stronger peer relationships, which lays the foundation for enhanced social confidence and broader networks later in life (Langlois et al., 2000;2002).

These early advantages can accumulate over time through a self-fulfilling dynamic: attractive individuals receive more positive attention, which reinforces their self-belief and social ease, thereby confirming others' expectations (Judge et al., 2009; Langlois et al., 2000). *Aesthetic capital* thus contributes to the development of social confidence and competence, as repeated positive feedback encourages individuals to view themselves as capable and valued (Judge et al., 2009). As a result, they are more likely to take central roles in group settings and expand their *social capital* (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2017). Social benefits can also emerge from stereotype-driven behavior. When people expect attractive individuals to be likeable or socially competent, they behave in ways that reinforce those qualities (Madon et al., 2018).

Beyond perception, attractiveness also elicits emotional responses. People enjoy being around attractive individuals, not just for admiration but because it makes them feel better about themselves (Lemay et al., 2010). These emotions make attractive individuals appear warmer, friendlier and more trustworthy, increasing opportunities for intimacy and inclusion (Lemay et al., 2010). These effects are visible not only in one-on-one encounters but also in access to social gatherings and networks (Palmer & Peterson, 2020).

2.3.2.1 Beauty premiums and age in social life

Moreover, the impact of *aesthetic capital* in social contexts may vary by age, although research on this topic remains limited. Gordon et al. (2013) show that attractive younger individuals are more likely to experience greater social integration during early adulthood. Their attractiveness facilitates the formation of larger friendship networks, enhances peer acceptance and increases opportunities for social engagement (Gordon et al., 2013). While similar research on middle-aged women is scarce, these findings suggest that the social returns on beauty may be particularly pronounced in youth, when social visibility and peer affirmation play a more significant role.

2.4 Beauty penalties

While *aesthetic capital* can offer significant advantages, these are not without complexities. Sarpila et al. (2020) explain that women who openly benefit from their beauty often provoke criticism, as their actions challenge traditional gender expectations, whereas men are less likely to face such judgment. Therefore, being attractive or having a high aesthetic value does not always yield advantages but can also bring disadvantages or negative reactions, known as *beauty penalties* (Anderson et al., 2010). Dermer and Thiel (1975) state that physical attractiveness can lead to negative stereotypes and judgments, related to, for example, egocentrism, materialism and unfaithfulness.

2.4.1 Beauty penalties in the professional context

In professional settings, women can experience disadvantages from being (too) attractive. Rhode (2010) argues that in higher positions traditionally dominated by men, attractive or "sexy" female employees often face the *"bloopsy effect"*, where their attractiveness is associated with reduced competence and intellectual abilities. Even minor deviations from normative dress codes, such as a slightly unbuttoned blouse, can result in lower perceptions of competence and intelligence among working women (Gurung et al., 2017). Similarly, research by Johnson et al. (2010) shows that attractive women can be disadvantaged when applying for jobs traditionally seen as male-oriented, a phenomenon known as the *"beauty is beastly"* effect. Attractive women are perceived as less suitable for traditionally male roles because their attractiveness is associated with femininity rather than traits deemed necessary for these positions, such as leadership (Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2015). According to the lack-of-fit model, this misalignment between attractiveness and job expectations reinforces doubts about women's suitability for certain positions (Hosoda et al., 2003).

Moreover, attractive women are more likely to be objectified in the workplace, leading to self-monitoring and cognitive distraction, which can hinder performance (Johson et al., 2018). Further, Johnson et al (2018) emphasize that attractive women face higher risks of sexual harassment in the workplace, further complicating their professional standing.

2.4.1.1 Beauty penalties and age in the workplace

Age plays a crucial role in how these penalties are experienced. While youth often enhances *aesthetic capital*, it can also make young women more vulnerable to appearance-based scrutiny and doubts about their seriousness or competence (Rhode, 2010; Ramati-Ziber et al., 2019). In contrast, middle-aged women often experience penalties, as aging is linked to a decline in

aesthetic value (Chambers, 2012; Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In professional environments, youth is often valued over experience, leading to a disadvantage for middle-aged women (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Consequently, aging can lead to disadvantages for middle-aged women, with younger, less experienced colleagues being preferred (Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

2.4.2 Beauty penalties in the social context

Although less researched than professional contexts, *beauty penalties* also emerge in social life. Marson and Hessmiller (2016) show that attractive women often face *penalties* such as exclusion, jealousy and negative stereotyping. Their study reveals that in social groups, attractive women are frequently met with suspicion and resentment, leading to difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships. Marson and Hessmiller (2016) emphasize that attractive women often feel socially isolated and report that others assume they are arrogant or superficial, causing them to overcompensate with extra friendliness. Similarly, Shtudiner et al. (2024) demonstrate that attractive women can elicit negative social responses from other women, particularly in the form of dishonesty and rivalry. Their experimental study shows that female participants were more likely to act dishonestly toward attractive women compared to less attractive women, suggesting that attractiveness provokes jealousy and competitive behavior among peers. Shtudiner et al. (2024) argue that beauty can act as a social liability triggering distrust and subtle forms of exclusion within female interactions.

2.4.2.1 Beauty penalties and age in social life

Age also shapes these penalties. For younger women, *beauty penalties* often manifest as internalized social pressure to meet unattainable ideals. As Gill (2012) and McRobbie (2015) argue, young women are held responsible for their appearance and experience implicit social sanctions if they fail to live up to aesthetic norms. These expectations are reinforced through peer networks, leading to anxiety, insecurity and fear of social rejection (Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2021). In contrast, middle-aged women are more likely to experience social invisibility. Twigg (2003; 2007) argues that aging reduces women's alignment with dominant beauty norms, diminishing their visibility in social life. However, this invisibility is conditional: women who appear 'too old' may be ignored, while those who resist aging through dressing risk being judged as inappropriate (Twigg, 2003; 2007). This creates tension in which deviating from norms can trigger social disapproval, illustrating how *aesthetic capital* must be carefully managed to avoid judgment.

Despite the penalties that come with aging, aging does not only entail losses. Research shows that besides aging is associated with a decline in *aesthetic capital* (Chambers, 2012; Clarke & Griffin, 2008), it can also come with important positive psychological developments. Stewart et al. (2001) found that middle-aged women report higher levels of *identity certainty*, generativity and *confident power* compared to earlier adulthood. These developments, including a clearer sense of self and stronger agency, can enhance resilience and self-acceptance (Stewart et al., 2001). As such, they may help women navigate or buffer some of the social and professional disadvantages that come with aging (Stewart et al., 2001).

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums* and *penalties*, and how these experiences differ between younger and middle-aged women. It describes the research design, data collection methods and analytical framework. Together, these elements provide insight into how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived.

3.1 Research design

This research used a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to explore how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums* and *penalties* in both professional and social contexts, with attention to differences between younger and middle-aged women. A qualitative approach was considered most suitable given the aim to understand the nuanced and often implicit ways in which beauty operates. The focus was on uncovering the experiences of participants with beauty and how they navigate them in daily life and across different phases of life. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to reflect in depth on the dimensions of their appearance-related practices. This allowed for a detailed exploration of how *aesthetic capital* is accumulated, managed and experienced across different settings and life stages (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The research design and the interview guide were primarily theory-informed and deductive in nature. Existing literature on *aesthetic capital*, gendered beauty norms and *beauty premiums and penalties* formed the starting point for the study. However, the analysis remained open to insights that did not fit within existing frameworks, allowing room for inductively emerging patterns where relevant (Azungah, 2018; Byrne; 2021). This flexible approach enabled a grounded yet conceptually informed interpretation of the data.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Sample

Given the aim to examine experiences across generational and contextual lines at a single point in time, the study employed a cross-sectional design (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The participants were recruited in the Netherlands in March and April of 2025. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a method suited to identify ‘information-rich’ respondents relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2013). Recruitment was carried out through two primary channels: social media platforms (such as LinkedIn) and via personal networks. A short

recruitment text was distributed, outlining the aim of the study and the target group: women with a high socioeconomic status who invest in their physical appearance. High socioeconomic status was operationalized based on criteria from 'The Netherlands Institute for Social Research' (Arts et al., 2021): participants met at least two of the following conditions: - (1) earning a gross annual income exceeding 46.900 euros, which represents the average gross income in The Netherlands (CBS, 2023); (2) holding higher education qualifications, such as a HBO- or WO bachelor's degree, a WO master's degree, or a doctoral degree (CBS, 2021); (3) maintaining uninterrupted employment for the past four years (Arts et al., 2021). To ensure alignment with the study's focus, only women with a high socioeconomic status working in white-collar professions were included. White-collar jobs were defined as managerial, professional or semi-professional roles involving primarily cognitive and non-manual labor (Hu & Kaplan, 2010; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016).

Respondents were recruited in two groups: younger professionals (21-35 years) and middle-aged women (40-55 years) (Blokker et al., 2019; Petry, 2002). This age-based distinction allows for a comparison of whether and how *beauty premiums* and *penalties* are experienced differently across age groups.

In total, ten women participated with five participants in each age group. As shown in Table 1, the sample was balanced in terms of age group and aligned with the study's criteria. The sample size was determined based on pragmatic considerations and a focus on information-rich cases, with the aim of enabling conceptual depth and age-based comparison rather than numerical representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Low, 2019).

Participant ID	Name*	Age
1	Sophie	24
2	Lotte	27
3	Emma	27
4	Monique	53
5	Isabelle	25
6	Anouk	55
7	Carla	54
8	Nina	54
9	Danielle	49
10	Julia	27

*Names are pseudonyms to protect privacy

Ethical integrity was safeguarded throughout all phases of the research. Prior to participation, respondents received an information letter outlining the study's purpose, design and data handling procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Both the information letter and consent form are included in Appendix D. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any moment without consequences. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis and deleted after the transcription process. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed or anonymized in the transcripts and final reporting. Pseudonyms were used in all quotations. The data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

3.2.2 Method

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, chosen for their ability to combine structure with conversational flexibility (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The open-ended interview questions were directly informed by the theoretical framework. For example, *aesthetic capital* was explored by asking about appearance-related routines and investments. Beauty norms and the pressure to self-optimize were examined through questions on expectations and peer influences. *Beauty premiums and penalties* were operationalized through questions about perceived advantages or disadvantages in social and professional settings. Particular attention was paid to how participants experienced these dynamics in relation to their age. The interview guide (see Appendix A) provided thematic direction while allowing room for follow-up questions and the exploration of emerging topics. To ensure clarity and relevance, a pilot interview was conducted in advance. Although not included in the final dataset, it was instrumental in refining the phrasing of questions, especially those related to *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* in both the professional and social contexts.

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative data approach designed to identify, analyze and interpret patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2020). This method was chosen for its flexibility and its compatibility with both inductive and deductive analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2020). While the theoretical framework offered conceptual direction, the analysis remained open to themes emerging directly from the interviews. This combination made it possible to connect participants' stories to broader theoretical concepts.

In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are not seen as objective findings but as interpretative constructs that take shape through the researcher's active engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The analysis was therefore both iterative and reflexive, involving a constant movement between transcripts, initial codes and developing themes. Throughout this process, attention was paid to the nuances in how women spoke about their appearance, focusing not only on what was said but also on how it was said.

The analysis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to gain familiarity and begin noting initial insights and ideas. Mind maps were used to document initial impressions and emerging points of interest. As the interviews were conducted in Dutch, verbatim transcriptions were made in the original language. After transcription and anonymization, the transcripts were translated into English for further steps. To ensure accuracy, the translations were carefully checked against the original Dutch phrasing to preserve context and nuance. In the second phase, open and axial coding was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. Codes were developed inductively, grounded in participants' language, but interpreted through a theoretical lens. These codes included both more concrete descriptions (e.g., 'dress codes at work') and more abstract interpretations (e.g., 'strategic conformity').

In the third phase, the codes were grouped into broader themes by identifying patterns and conceptual links. This involved a close reading of similarities, contradictions and repetitions across interviews. This was followed by a fourth phase in which themes were reviewed, refined and checked against the dataset to ensure coherence and distinction. Several themes were reworked or removed to better reflect the data and research aims.

In the fifth phase, each theme was clearly defined and given a concise name. Attention was paid to how themes related to one another and to the research questions concerning beauty *premiums and penalties* in both professional and social contexts. In the final phase, the findings were written up as a thematic narrative supported by pseudonymized quotes. As the interviews were conducted in Dutch, a list of original quotes is included in Appendix C.

Because the topic of this research is related to how women experience beauty in daily life, it was important to reflect on the researcher's own position. The researcher shares several characteristics with the participants, for example in terms of age, education or investing in appearance, which means that she is not fully 'outside' the group being studied. On the one hand, this helped create a sense of trust during the interviews, as participants may have felt that

their experiences were understood. On the other hand, it also required awareness of how the researcher's own views about beauty could influence the interpretation of the data. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which emphasizes the researcher's active role in the construction of themes and insights, the researcher actively reflected on potential biases and personal responses during the coding process.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of ten semi-structured interviews with women who occupy a high socioeconomic position. The goal was to examine how they experience *beauty premiums* and *penalties* in their professional and social lives and how these experiences differ between younger and middle-aged women. Two research questions are central to this study: (1) *'How do women with a high socioeconomic status experience beauty premiums and penalties in social and professional contexts?'* (2) '*How do these experiences differ between younger and middle-aged women?'* Based on a thematic analysis, four main themes emerged: (1) *accumulating and managing aesthetic capit*al, (2) *navigating beauty norms and expectations*, (3) *experiencing beauty premiums*, and (4) *experiencing beauty penalties*. The first two themes offer contextual insight into the routines, norms and strategies that shape women's engagement with *aesthetic capital.* These two themes lay the groundwork for interpreting how beauty-related investments become meaningful within both professional and social contexts. The final two themes directly address the research question by exploring how participants experience appearance as a source of advantage (*beauty premium*) or disadvantage (*beauty penalty*). Age-based differences are woven throughout the findings, illustrating how perceptions, motivations and experiences related to appearance evolve across the life course. The chapter is structured thematically, with each section supported by quotes that reflect the women's voices and lived experiences.

4.1 Accumulating and managing aesthetic capital

This first theme explores how women with a high socioeconomic status build and maintain *aesthetic capital* through everyday beauty practices. All ten participants described caring for their appearance as a normal part of daily life, involving routines like make-up, hair clothing and occasional treatments. These practices were not merely about self-expression but were often seen as necessary for confidence, credibility and social acceptance. Despite varying motivations, all emphasized the ongoing time, money and effort involved which were shaped by context and age. This theme explores two aspects of that process: the *investments* women make in their appearance; and how they've *built up knowledge* to navigate beauty expectations.

4.1.1 Investing in appearance

A key way participants built *aesthetic capital* was through consistent investment of time and money. For all ten women, looking well-groomed was part of daily life, with routines like make-up, hair and clothing depending on the context. Julia (27) for example, explained: *"During the*

week with make-up and hair, I'd say about twenty to twenty-five minutes. On the weekend I spend more time, especially on Fridays when I wash and blow-dry my hair – then I'm busy for about an hour. And if I'm going out on the weekend, I can easily spend forty-five minutes in front of the mirror". Her reflection illustrates how weekday routines were often more efficient and work-focused, while weekends allowed more space for elaborate grooming. Similarly, Emma (27) noted: *"I always wear neat clothing, have my jewelry on, always wear make-up, and make sure my hair looks good. Basically, just making sure I look presentable". Aesthetic labor* here is framed as a habitual part of being socially and professionally competent. Regardless of the context, grooming remained a stable part of their daily schedule. It was not framed as a luxury or self-care, but as part of a broader commitment to staying well-groomed and in control of how one presents to the outside world.

The financial investments accompanying this *aesthetic labor* were also considerable. Participants described spending money on high-quality, durable products and on services such as hairdressers, nail salons and cosmetic treatments. Emma (27) explained: *"I have some more expensive make-up products, and for my hair, I use all professional salon products. So, they are on the pricier side. But I will say that these products last a long time".* Danielle (49) added: *"Well if I just look at make-up and hairdresser and nails, if I total that up, I'd say around 150 euros per month. And if I include Botox and fillers, then that's around 600 euros every three months".* These financial investments were widely normalized and framed as necessities rather than luxuries.

Age shaped how women approached these efforts. Middle-aged participants emphasized that maintaining a well-groomed appearance required more time, money and planning than when they were younger. Anouk (55) reflected: *"You have to do more to look good. When you're young, you don't have wrinkles, you're not grey—everything is still firm and tight. No, I really think you have to take that into account".* Long-term beauty labor such as Botox was described by middle-aged participants as increasingly necessary to preserve their appearance. Carla (54) noted: *"Every ten weeks I go to the hairdresser. I get my hair colored, and twice a year I go with a friend to get Botox".* These practices were embedded in their social lives and carried out with regularity and routine. For Carla and other middle-aged participants, these treatments were framed as a way to preserve a version of themselves aligned with how they felt internally and to counteract signs of aging.

In contrast, younger participants described fewer structural beauty treatments. Their focus tended to be on maintenance related to social appearance, rather than age-management. For example, Sophie (24) reflected on her long-term investments: *"I go to the hairdresser every three months I think to get my hair dyed and cut. I also get my eyebrows done. Sometimes I also do a facial".* These routines, while important, were not framed as essential or age-related maintenance.

Together, these findings highlight that *aesthetic labor* is an essential strategy for managing *aesthetic capital*, one that involves daily effort, planning and financial investment. While this labor was normalized across participants, it was also shaped by age and context.

4.1.2 Building beauty knowledge

Beyond the physical work of grooming, participants also described how they developed knowledge about appearance over time. This "beauty knowledge", including knowing which products to use, which routines to follow and how to adapt one's look to different contexts, was seen as something learned rather than innate. Younger participants often cited social media as a key source. Emma (27) explained: "*I think mostly through social media. I started watching Beauty Gloss back in the day […] But now, I mostly get product recommendations through social media. However, because I have sensitive skin, I do a lot of research online. So, while I discover brands through social media, I always research what performs best before buying anything".* Her reflection shows how *cultural capital* is built through digital platforms, but filtered through personal needs and critical evaluation.

Middle-aged participants, by contrast, tended to rely more on embodied experience than on external sources. Many described how they gradually developed routines based on what had worked for them over years. Nina (54), for instance, noted: *"I used to put Nivea on my face and that worked just fine. But now I do use a day cream where I think, well, it should have a bit of SPF and some vitamins in it".* Her routine reflects a gradual shift towards more targeted and expensive products, informed by trial and habit rather than trends.

Together, these reflections show that beauty knowledge is actively built and applied but shaped by age. Younger women drew on cultural resources like social media to construct their appearance, while middle-aged women relied on embodied experience. In both cases, beauty knowledge as a form of *cultural capital* is actively converted into *aesthetic capital* to support appearance management across social and professional settings.

This theme highlights how *aesthetic capital* is actively built through *aesthetic labor,* with daily routines and long-term beauty practices that require *economic capital* and *cultural capital.* These investments make beauty socially meaningful and shape how appearance is perceived across contexts. Understanding how *aesthetic capital* is built and maintained is essential for interpreting how women come to experience both *beauty premiums and penalties*.

4.2 Navigating beauty norms and expectations

While participants invested considerable time, money and effort into their appearance, these choices were shaped by social and professional expectations rather than personal preference alone. This theme examines how women with a high socioeconomic status recognize, navigate and negotiate those norms. Younger women described more uncertainty and peer alignment, while middle-aged women relied more on experience. The theme is discussed through three sub-themes: *workplace dress codes*, *social norms* (including *peer conformity)*, and the use of *strategic self-presentation* in both the professional and social context.

4.2.1 Workplace dress codes

Although formal dress codes were rare, most participants described implicit expectations around professional appearance. These norms were unwritten but clearly felt and shaped their choices in clothing, grooming and self-presentation. Younger participants often described navigating these expectations through observation and subtle social cues. Isabelle (26) explained: *"We're given quite a bit of freedom, but you will get side-eyed if you show up very casually. So like a hoodie or a sporty sweatshirt wouldn't be acceptable, or ripped jeans".* Her comment illustrates how workplace norms are enforced through silent judgment rather than explicit rules. For younger participants like Isabelle, navigating workplace expectations required a kind of aesthetic learning: knowing what lies within the 'acceptable' range, even without clear guidelines.

Middle-aged participants spoke with more certainty, describing how their appearance varied by setting and audience. Monique (53) noted: *"I dress differently for work than I do in my personal life—more professionally. Sure, I so*metimes wear jeans, but usually only on casual Fridays. *[…] On other days, I wear business attire. Not necessarily full skirt suits, but I do wear pantsuits or long skirts".* Her adjustment shows an internalized understanding of what is considered 'professional enough', no longer based on trial and error but intuitive. Anouk (55) emphasized situational awareness: *"It's quite free, but for example if I'm in the office and I know there won't be any clients coming, I can definitely wear jeans with a rip, a fashionable rip then. But if you're*

in the showroom or at a trade fair, then you make sure to wear a neat outfit. You definitely wouldn't go in jeans. But those are kind of unwritten rules". This shows that context matters also within the workplace itself. Through years of experience, middle-aged women have developed a nuanced sense of how to adapt their appearance within the workplace.

These reflections show how women across age groups navigate appearance norms in professional environments, but with different degrees of certainty. While younger women were often still learning to decode these unspoken rules, middle-aged participants relied more on experience to navigate professional expectations confidently. Clothing functioned as a form of daily management with an ongoing negotiation between identity, expectations and professionalism.

4.2.2 Social norms

Participants described how societal beauty norms influenced both how they presented themselves and how they were perceived. These norms were rarely explicit but were nonetheless widely felt, particularly among younger women, who associated them with digital culture and peer expectations. Isabelle (25) noted: *"I've often been asked that when I didn't wear makeup. If I didn't wear makeup, people would ask if I was sick […] In that sense, you do feel a certain pressure to do something about your appearance, from the outside world. In terms of wearing makeup. It's kind of seen as normal for a woman to go out wearing makeup".* Her experience reflects how appearance norms are enforced through subtle cues and everyday comments. Julia (27) linked these norms to social media: *"No one literally says to you, "You have to wear makeup" or "You have to be slim," but I think it's more that it becomes a sort of norm. You constantly see videos on social media—no one's going to post themselves on TikTok or Insta without makeup on, you know? So makeup just becomes the norm. And like I said before, with all those influencers, it's just this perfect image that keeps showing up, so you do start thinking about it".* Platforms like Instagram and TikTok generate a constant stream of curated images, creating the sense that certain looks are simply standard.

Middle-aged women described beauty norms more in terms of emotional tension around aging. Nina (54) explained: *"I think I just find getting older difficult, so to speak. Because I still feel very young. I just think, you know, you look in the mirror and there's nothing really wrong—but if there's something you can do that makes the outside match the inside".* For middle-aged women, the tension often lay not in social comparison but in aligning their appearance with their internal identity. For women like Carla (54) and Anouk (55) dressing appropriately for

their age was part of maintaining authenticity: *"At fifty, you can't wear the same things you did when you were twenty. But you also don't have to walk around like a woolly-socks type. At my age, you can still dress nicely"*, Carla noted. This reflection illustrates how ageing influences fashion choices through self-awareness and a desire for congruence between personal identity and outward appearance.

Together, these reflections show that beauty norms are internalized differently across age groups. Younger women often described pressure from digital culture and social comparisons, while middle-aged women focused more on age-appropriate presentation and emotional alignment. In all cases, norms were subtly enforced but deeply influential.

Peer conformity

Within these broader social norms, peer dynamics played a distinct role. Peer pressure around appearance was especially present among younger participants. Women in their twenties described a subtle but persistent sense of conformity, especially within female friend groups. Sophie (24) reflected: *"I also notice among my friends in [city in the Netherlands] that they talk a lot about what others are wearing. So, you also know that if you are not there, they are probably talking about you as well. Everyone is just very focused on it".* This awareness fostered a sense of aesthetic surveillance, where appearance was both observed and evaluated. She added: *"Look, everyone here is really aware of what looks good and what the trends are. And when you see that in others, you want it too and do not want to be left out. So, you put in the effort to fit in".* Conformity is thus not only driven by verbalized pressure but also by visibility. Others echoed this. Emma (27) described a shared standard in her social circle: *"I think most women in my environment do find it important to look well-groomed. If I look around, most of the women I know have neat nails, nice hair, and always wear some make-up. So, I think I am in an environment where people value that […] If I meet up with friends and they have their make-up done and their hair nice, I don't want to sit there like a stray*". The desire not to stand out as the only one who hasn't 'put herself together' reflects the strength of conformity, even when no one says anything aloud. Isabelle (25) summarized the feeling: *"Pressure might be a big word but I always do my make-up and hair when I meet up with my friends. I know they do that too, so I don't want to be the only one who doesn't. So yeah, actually, now that I say it like this, maybe it is a form of pressure".*

In contrast, middle-aged participants felt less pressure from peers and emphasized internal motivation. Nina (54) noted: *"I just wear what I feel good in. And maybe unconsciously I do know that one group wears a certain thing and another doesn't, but I mostly stick to what I like"*. Her awareness of social expectations didn't translate into pressure, instead she notices it, but feels free to ignore it. Monique (53) expressed a similar view: *"I think that's also because of experience. Of course, it's important to—look, I always tell people: wear what makes you feel confident. If you feel good about yourself and like what you're wearing, that's what matters".* These women acknowledged social expectations but felt freer to dismiss them.

Overall, younger women described stronger peer-driven beauty norms, while middle-aged participants focused more on comfort, self-confidence and internal motivation over external validation.

4.2.3 Strategic self-presentation

While peer conformity reflected a reactive form of appearance management, several participants described more deliberate strategies of using their appearance to shape how they were perceived. In both professional and social contexts, clothing and grooming became tools to project confidence, credibility or social awareness. Among younger women, this strategy was often used to bridge perceived gaps in age or experience. Isabelle (25) shared: *"If I'm meeting new clients, I usually lean towards wearing a suit or a really neat dress. So usually when I have client meetings, yes, and presentations too—I do make a bit more of an effort […] I think it is strategic. In law, it is important to look neat. Especially when meeting new clients. So I do consciously choose to dress formally. I do feel I get taken more seriously and that the client also feels they're being taken seriously".* For her and other younger participants, a polished appearance helped establish authority and professionalism early in their careers. For middle-aged participants, strategic dressing was less about compensating and more about reinforcing their position. Monique (53) explained: *"I usually wear a pantsuit or something similar. But if I know an important client is coming, I make sure to wear one of my nicest suits. I'm really the face of the company, and I want to present that properly*". Her choices reflect a confident use of appearance to match status and responsibility.

Strategic self-presentation also extended to social situations, particularly first impressions. Monique (53) emphasized: *"I do think about that. Because you only get a chance to make a good first impression. First impressions are important to me. When it comes to chemistry, especially among women, the first thing they notice is what someone is wearing".* Her comment

illustrates how appearance can be used intentionally to communicate social cues and manage impressions. She sees clothing as a way to communicate about herself. Especially in high socioeconomic settings, where people are often very aware of fashion and appearance, what you wear can shape how others perceive you. Sophie (25) echoed this from a different angle: *"I think a first impression is important and when I do my make-up or dress nice I have more confidence so I can give a better first impression".* For her, strategic self-presentation is tied to self-assurance with using grooming to feel more at ease when meeting new people.

Across age groups, women used appearance as a communicative strategy. While younger participants emphasized earning credibility, middle-aged women focused on affirming their authority and projecting competence. Appearance was not just about meeting expectations but became a deliberate tool to navigate and shape social and professional interactions.

This theme highlights how women with a high socioeconomic status actively navigate beauty norms across professional and social contexts. Participants described an ongoing negotiation with reading situations, adapting to contexts and managing impressions. These findings show that beauty is not solely produced through individual effort, but also shaped in relation to social norms and perceptions. Recognizing this negotiation is key to understanding how *beauty premiums and penalties* are experienced.

4.3 Experiencing beauty premiums

Participants often described how maintaining a polished appearance brought them concrete advantages. These so-called *beauty premiums* were experienced as social and professional rewards, ranging from increased confidence and attention to career-related opportunities. In this sense, appearance functions not only as a personal asset, but as a form of capital that could be strategically leveraged. The meaning and impact of these premiums differed by age. This theme explores these experiences across three sub-themes: *confidence*, *career* (including *first impressions at work* and *representational roles*), and *social validation and attention.*

4.3.1 Confidence

Participants across both age groups linked grooming to increased self-confidence. When they felt well-groomed, they felt more at ease and capable in professional and social situations. This confidence influenced not only how they felt internally but also how they behaved and were perceived.

Among younger participants, this effect was particularly noticeable in high-stakes professional situations. Sophie (24) explained: *"I also think I simply look better when my hair is done, and I feel a bit more confident. If I have to give a presentation, I like standing there feeling confident".* For Sophie, feeling that she looks good gives her a boost that helps her speak more comfortably in front of an audience. Similarly, Julia (27) reflected: *"Yeah, I definitely feel more confident when I know I look good, and I think you have to radiate that during a presentation […], I make eye contact more easily, and I've had times where I got compliments afterward about how I presented myself or how I stood in front of the group. So I think that says something about how confidently I stood there and how the message came across".* These quotes show how appearance-related confidence can positively impact performance and lead to recognition and positive feedback from others.

Middle-aged women also emphasized confidence, though often in terms of internal comfort and self-expression. Danielle (49) described a job interview: *"I think it also has to do with confidence. That I felt comfortable in that conversation because of how I looked. That I felt confident and maybe dared to say more and show more of myself".* Her quote highlights how feeling good about one's appearance can lead to more openness and authenticity. Where younger participants often described confidence as something they needed to project outward, Danielle's comment suggests that for middle-aged participants, appearance helped create a sense of internal comfort.

In social settings, appearance-based confidence similarly made participants feel more at ease. Lotte (26) shared: *"I think when I put on makeup and do my hair, I feel more confident. And that might help in making contact with people […] It makes it easier to start a conversation with someone".* Lotte's experience shows how aesthetic confidence can ease social interaction. Danielle (49) echoed this from a middle-aged perspective: *"Maybe also in making connections. I think that also goes back to self-confidence. I think if you feel good and comfortable in your own skin, that you radiate that self-confidence. And that makes it easier to talk to strangers. And maybe people are more likely to approach you too".*

Together, these reflections show that confidence is a key *beauty premium*: it enhances how women present themselves, interact with others and are perceived. While younger women often focused on performance and external perception, middle-aged women emphasized inner comfort.

4.3.2 Career

Several participants described how a polished appearance could offer concrete professional advantages. Looking attractive or well-groomed was linked to better treatment in job interviews, greater visibility and access to career opportunities. This highlights how beauty can function as capital in the workplace. While younger women often spoke about gaining visibility in their early careers or being assigned certain tasks, middle-aged women focused more on professional impression management and leadership credibility. This section explores how *beauty premiums* were experienced in professional contexts and is divided into two sub-themes: *first impressions at work* and *representational roles*.

First impressions at work

Participants described how appearance shaped first impressions in professional settings, such as job interviews or early interactions with clients and colleagues. A polished look was often associated with credibility, being taken seriously and stand out in a positive way. These elements influenced how others responded to them, sometimes leading to better treatment or more opportunities. Carla (54) noted: *"I believe that's true, yes. That people really do look at that. A nice face, nice clothing, a nice personality – you can get further with that. I really think so. And maybe a director is even charmed by someone and thinks, 'Oh, she's a nice type. She'd be a good secretary', or whatever role"*. Carla's comment suggests that appearance can influence decision-making at work and *beauty premiums* are understood as part of broader social dynamics that shape workplace opportunities. Danielle (49) shared how her appearance may have helped her secure a job over another candidate: *"There were several candidates and we were down to three. And look, I'm not necessarily saying "attractive," I mean more in terms of presence and grooming […] The other was a woman and she came from a bit of a duller industry and, well, she kind of looked the part too. Maybe it's silly to say. She was intelligent and probably would've done her job well. But yeah, when I saw and spoke to her I didn't get a very positive or energetic impression and yeah, I do think that helped me get the role"*. Danielle's account emphasized presence over beauty alone, yet implies that grooming and energy made her more compelling, which highlights how *beauty premiums* operate subtly but are influential during moments where visibility and impressions matter.

Younger participants, in contrast, described ongoing experiences where their appearance influenced how they were treated, especially early in their careers. Sophie (24) observed that male colleagues were more likely to engage with her than with a similarly positioned peer:

"Everyone talks about it [her own clothing style] a lot and is very friendly about it. And I started at the same time as someone else who experiences that much less. You clearly notice a difference in how my colleagues, especially male colleagues, treat me versus her […] They also email me more often to assign work, even though they could send it to her as well. They just seek more contact with me than with her". Her experience shows how appearance can shape interactions at work which can have an impact early in a career. She explained further: *"I gain knowledge much faster than she does, which helps me progress because people give me more opportunities than they give her"*. Her reflection underscores how appearance can shape informal interactions, that, over time, lead to cumulative career advantages. Being included more often allowed her to learn faster and build experience, suggesting that *aesthetic capital* can quietly increase professional growth. Isabelle (25) echoed this, stating: *"In the beginning, you're really dependent on other colleagues for how much work you get, what kind of work, and so on. And male colleagues tend to give more and nicer work to the women who dress like that".* These quotes point to a pattern in which femininity and polished appearance subtly guide task distribution and access which is especially salient in early career phases when inclusion matters.

Together, appearance influenced professional impressions, but age shaped how these dynamics were experienced. Among middle-aged participants, reflections were often retrospective and linked to moments of hiring or leadership. Among younger women, the effects were more ongoing and situated in the early stages of their careers, where visibility, likeability and impression management played a significant role in how opportunities were distributed. This distinction suggests that *beauty premiums* operate differently depending on age, experience and professional positioning.

Representational roles

Beyond shaping first impressions, participants described how appearance influenced access to visible and client-facing roles. Being selected to 'represent the company' was not only a matter of competence, but also of visual presentation. Anouk (55) offered a clear example: *"The sales team always goes to the fairs and then a few people from the inside sales team go along for support, and a choice is made there. Who looks representative on the stand? And the one who always wears her hair in a ponytail with the same blouse and the same old pants is not chosen to go […] So yes, there is definitely a distinction made in who looks representative and who can sell something for us. But that also has to do with the fact that on a stand, you're the face of the company. And what image do you want to portray as a company?".* Her account reveals how

aesthetic presentation becomes an informal selection criterion. Even when unstated, appearance signals professionalism and alignment with the company's projected image.

This connection between grooming and visibility was echoed by younger participants. Sophie (24) observed: *"You definitely see that the team responsible for bringing in new clients consists of people who all look well-dressed. If you don't look well-groomed, you are not included in that group".* For her, these exclusions were subtle but evident whereby grooming shaped who got access to high-value networks and tasks. This reflects how *beauty premiums* can act as a gatekeeper in early-career visibility.

Carla (54) also noted that certain women were more likely to be sent to client meetings, not necessarily because of their skills, but because of how they presented themselves: *"I do notice that when someone comes in and is immediately a fun "type," they are often the ones who go out more quickly […] So when you go to clients, you often see that they send certain types of people more quickly to those meetings"*. Her use of the phrase 'fun type' suggests that decisions are shaped by a mix of visual, social and personality, with appearance playing a key role in who is perceived as the right type to represent the brand.

These examples show that *beauty premiums* are not only about initial impressions, but also about sustained access to visible, high-impact roles. For younger women like Sophie, appearance played a more immediate and consequential role in gaining inclusion and visibility. Middle-aged participants tended to describe these dynamics from a more established position, where they observed how appearance shaped others' access. This suggests that while beauty remains relevant across age groups, its impact depends on one's position in the organizational hierarchy. In both cases, *aesthetic capital* translated into real professional advantages.

4.3.3 Social validation and attention

Outside the workplace, participants described how appearance could generate social benefits in everyday life. Looking polished or stylish often led to compliments, attention and casual interactions, reinforcing a sense of visibility and connection. These moments, though often brief, highlight how *aesthetic capital* can generate advantages in the social context.

Younger participants emphasized how their appearance affected public and social encounters. Isabelle (25) noted: *"You definitely notice that you get more attention. Yeah, so that really stands out. If I end up in the city unprepared, it's different than when I go out in a cute outfit, maybe something a little more revealing, and nice makeup, more put-together—you can tell. Then you*

just make contact more easily or something". Her reflection shows how visual effort increases social openness: when she looked polished, others were more inclined to approach her. Emma (27) added that compliments often sparked interaction: *"For example, when I go to a party or when I go out, I do notice that if I look good, people are quicker to give a compliment like, "Oh, you look great," or "That's a nice outfit." And then you do end up talking to someone more easily".* Appearance here acts as a social facilitator that helps initiate interactions. Julia (27) emphasized that such responses weren't limited to male attention: *"When I go to a festival and I buy a new outfit and do my hair nicely and put on makeup, I do notice people talk to me more often. And it's not just men—women also come up to me like, "Where did you get that dress?" or "Where's that bag from?" And then you end up having a little chat with someone"*. In this way, fashion becomes a shared language that generates spontaneous connection and validation.

Among middle-aged participants, attention was subtler but still meaningful. Monique (53) remarked: *"If I think someone looks nice, I'm more likely to strike up a conversation with them. It also gives you an easy opening—like, 'That's a lovely skirt you're wearing'".* This illustrates that grooming fosters approachability and social ease. While women like Carla (54) and Nina (54) didn't speak directly about compliments, they did note that looking polished helped them feel more presentable or at ease in social gatherings.

Across both groups, appearance functioned as a form of capital that can be converted into *social capital*. For younger women, the rewards were more immediate and visible. For middle-aged participants, they were more contextual such as fitting in. In both cases, *aesthetic capital* leads to *beauty premiums* such as social visibility, recognition and connection.

The findings show that for women with a high socioeconomic status, *aesthetic capital* can generate advantages in both professional and social life. These *beauty premiums* ranged from increased confidence to greater opportunities at work and social ease. While younger participants often described more immediate and visible benefits, middle-aged women benefited from being perceived as competent or representative. In both cases, appearance functioned as a form of capital that can lead to *beauty premiums*.

4.4 Experiencing beauty penalties

While appearance could offer benefits, participants also reflected on moments when it became a liability. These experiences exposed the ambivalent nature of *aesthetic capital*: beauty could attract attention and reward but also invite judgment, exclusion or discomfort. Some women described being sexualized, taken less seriously or facing uncertainty about how much

grooming was appropriate. Even when not experienced directly, many recognized these dynamics in others. This theme explores the ways in which beauty can be a penalty, structured around three sub-themes*: gendered assumptions* (including stereotypes, sexualization, and misrecognition), *peer judgment and jealousy*, and *emotional discomfort,* across both professional and social contexts and age groups.

4.4.1 Gendered assumptions

In professional contexts, participants described how looking attractive could trigger doubts about their competence or seriousness, rooted in persistent stereotypes about femininity. These assumptions suggested that women could not be both capable and good-looking. Although not all participants had personally encountered these reactions, some had witnessed them in others or adjusted their own behavior to avoid such perceptions. This sub-theme explores how *beauty penalties* in the workplace are experienced through three dynamics: *stereotyping, sexualization and misrecognition*.

Stereotypes

Two participants described how looking attractive or feminine led others to question their intelligence or abilities. These stereotypes were often expressed through jokes or comments that reduced them to their looks. Julia (27), for example, recalled her onboarding at a male-dominated firm: *"It's a male-dominated field, and we're a young company with a lot of young employees, and sometimes jokes get made. I know that when I first started there, I struggled a bit with that. You're still onboarding, and if you don't understand something right away, sometimes someone would make a remark like, "That's because you're blonde," and then I'd think, that has nothing to do with it—I'm just new here and still learning how things work.* Her experience shows how humor can be used to mask stereotypical thinking. Such remarks link her appearance to a lack of ability rather than to her newcomer status. Nina (54) shared a more explicit example: *"Someone once said to me, 'You got that job because you've got a pretty face.' And I could've hit them for that. I thought, do you even know how long I studied?".* The comment dismisses her hard work, suggesting her success was based on looks rather than competence. Her reaction illustrates the emotional toll of being dismissed and not taken seriously.

These reflections show how stereotypes can undermine competence across age groups. While younger women often faced it in the form of seemingly harmless jokes, middle-aged women encountered more direct dismissal of their expertise. In both cases, beauty became a filter through which their abilities were questioned.

Sexualization

Several participants described how their appearance attracted sexualizing comments, especially in male-dominated work environments. These remarks, though not always overt harassment, made them feel uncomfortable or scrutinized. Younger women often encountered this during informal settings like after-work drinks. Julia (27) shared: *"During Friday afternoon drinks, they do talk openly about colleagues—female ones—about who looks good and who doesn't. And yeah, I can handle comments now, but there have been women who worked here that weren't okay with that [...] They're just a bit cocky. And once they've had a few drinks, they loosen up a bit and say things. They're all pretty young guys".* Although she felt able to handle it, she recognized that others felt uneasy. Such remarks normalize the constant evaluation of women's looks, reinforcing a culture where appearance is always under review. Isabelle (25) highlighted how femininity shaped these judgments: *"If I look at colleagues, then some men will comment on a certain woman's style of clothing. They'll say she's not very feminine, she doesn't often wear dresses or heels. And then they view her differently. Women who do wear heels and dresses—they'll say "Wow, you're hot," and blah blah. But about that other colleague, they'll say "Yeah no, I wouldn't go for her." They openly talk like that. It's really Friday afternoon drinks kind of talk"*. Her account shows how traditional markers of femininity are both expected but also causes comments and deviation from these markers invites dismissal. Appearance becomes a basis for social ranking, especially among women.

Middle-aged participants described fewer direct comments but emphasized preventive adjusting their appearance. Danielle (49) noted how even minor changes triggered reactions: *"There was a time I had a dinner after work on a Friday, so I wore something a bit different than usual, and then you get comments like, 'Oh, you've got a party tonight?' Yeah, you're not really waiting for that kind of thing at work".* Although the comment was relatively mild, it still shows a reminder that what women wear is constantly noticed and interpreted. Nina (54) described how she adapted her clothing style in a male-dominated environment: *" I also work with a lot of men – it's a male-dominated environment. So dresses and skirt suits aren't always the best choice, let's say. So I just try to adapt and dress casually".* Rather than expressing her personal style freely, Nina opted for safer, more casual clothing to avoid being seen as

provocative. Unlike younger women, who often had to react to unsolicited comments, middle-aged women preemptively adapted their style to avoid scrutiny.

These accounts reveal how beauty can become a liability when it attracts unwanted attention. Younger women tended to face open judgments, while middle-aged women developed strategies to avoid being sexualized. Across both age groups, beauty required management not only for success, but also for self-protection.

Misrecognition

Although only one participant reported being directly misrecognized due to her appearance, the incident illustrates how femininity can clash with expectations of authority. Danielle (49) recalled entering a meeting where she was neatly dressed and mistaken for support staff: *"At my previous job when I worked at [company], I walked into a meeting room a bit late and there were some external people there. And I came in all neatly dressed and then this guy ordered coffee from me. Because he thought I was someone serving coffee [...] But then I just sat down and I was actually the one leading the meeting. So it was kind of a strange moment"*. Her polished and feminine appearance did not align with the implicit image of leadership held by others in the room. This moment reveals how being well-dressed and feminine can activate gendered assumptions that diminish professional status. Although Danielle did not describe this as a common occurrence but the incident left a strong impression. In this way, beauty or grooming can paradoxically mask competence, especially when it conflicts with traditional images of authority.

These findings show that beauty can work against women when it triggers gendered assumptions. Instead of being seen as competent, women risk being stereotyped, sexualized or misrecognized. Especially in male-dominated professional settings, *aesthetic capital* must be carefully managed to protect professional credibility.

4.4.2 Peer judgment and jealousy

Beauty did not only generate tension in professional settings; several participants also experienced judgment or rivalry in social contexts, particularly among other women. Julia (27) reflected: *"Especially with women among themselves. Women can be really mean and jealous. So if you're really pretty or wear nice makeup or have fancy stuff—like a designer bag or something—there will always be women who give you a look or make a comment"*. Her comment highlights how looking attractive could prompt silent disapproval rather than admiration, pointing to subtle forms of regulation in female peer groups.

Middle-aged participants expressed similar experiences. Carla (54) noted: *"Yes, maybe jealousy or something, between women. Yes, women can be quite fierce. So I think—yes, I think jealousy among women happens quite a lot. That they think, 'Oh, there she goes again, with this or with something new.' […] Women can really go at each other. They might even get in each other's way"*. Her reflection points to the pressure women may feel to manage not just male attention, but also the reactions of other women. Even small style choices could trigger negative reactions. Danielle (49) added: *There are women who might think, "oh here she comes with her pretty face, stealing the men from right under my nose." So there can be a bit of jealousy among women"*. In her view, beauty could be perceived as social or romantic competition.

Across age groups, participants described how beauty could strain relationships with other women. Rather than generating admiration, it sometimes prompted jealousy or rivalry. These reflections show that *aesthetic capital* must be carefully managed not only in male-dominated spaces, but also in female social circles.

4.4.3 Emotional discomfort

While grooming often boosted confidence, several participants described how is also caused stress. Younger participants shared the stress of having to strike the perfect balance: looking like they made an effort, but not too much. Julia (27) explained: *"You can never really get it right. Because it can't be too much, but also not too little, so you kind of have to land somewhere in between. Because if it's too much, you get comments like, "Wow, that's over the top," and if it's too little, you get, "Ugh, she's so boring." So you kind of have to find a balance or something"*. Her quote highlights the mental burden of anticipating judgment and adjusting accordingly. Lotte (27) shared how this uncertainty shaped her preparation before social events: *"Like, "How will they think I look?" […] But if I'm going to a birthday party or somewhere where I don't know everyone, I'll probably try on five different outfits at home before deciding. I'll change multiple times, and then my boyfriend will say, "Why are you changing ten times?" And I just don't know what to wear"*. Her example shows how stress about getting it 'wrong' can lead to overthinking and hesitation and reflects a deeper concern with social perception. Isabelle (25) described feeling uncomfortable when overdressed: *"If you go to a birthday party and everyone is dressed casually and you show up in a glitter dress, it's just awkward. You literally stand out, and that's not always what you want […] I've definitely been overdressed*

before, and then I don't feel comfortable". Rather than feeling confident, being too dressed up made her feel exposed and out of place.

In contrast, middle-aged women described a clear shift in how they related to their appearance. Where they once felt pressure to meet expectations, they now emphasized self-assurance. Monique (53) reflected: *"For example, speaking for myself—I'm single, and if I walk into a place, I just walk in. I don't really care what people think of me anymore. In the past, I cared a lot about what others thought of me. But not anymore. Now it's just 'what you see is what you get.' I'm not going to pretend to be someone I'm not. That time is over for me".* Her words show that growing older brings more confidence and less concern about fitting into others' expectations. Carla (54) echoed this: *"I think you definitely worried more about that when you were younger. I think I used to worry more about that. I still did my own thing, but I was more concerned like, 'Is this overdressed?' or 'Am I underdressed?' Yeah, you're just more insecure"* . With age came confidence and the freedom to dress on their own terms.

Together, these reflections show how emotional discomfort around appearance was most present among younger women. For middle-aged women, *aesthetic labor* remained part of daily life, but with less anxiety. This shift suggests that the emotional costs of *aesthetic capital* decrease with age, as women gain more confidence.

Although beauty could generate rewards, participants also described moments when it became a burden. These penalties ranged from being sexualized or underestimated at work to feeling judged in social settings. While often subtle, such experiences exposed the hidden costs of *aesthetic capital*. Age shaped how these penalties were experienced: younger women spoke more frequently about doubt, pressure and discomfort, whereas middle-aged women expressed a growing ease and detachment from external expectations. This contrast suggests that the emotional weight of *beauty penalties* may decline over time.

5. Discussion

This study explored how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums and penalties* across professional and social contexts, with a comparative lens on age. The central research question guiding this study was: *"How do women with a high socioeconomic status experience beauty premiums and beauty penalties within their social and professional networks?"*. In addition, the study addressed the sub-question: *"How do beauty premiums and beauty penalties differ in the experiences of young professionals and middle-aged women with high socioeconomic status within their social and professional networks?'*. The findings offer a nuanced understanding of *aesthetic capital* as an advantage and a liability, shaped by context and life stage. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, explores how they confirm or complicate existing literature and reflects on both expected and absent outcomes.

The findings support the conceptualization of beauty as a form of *aesthetic capital*, one that can be accumulated and strategically managed through *aesthetic labor* (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Participants described consistent investments in grooming, clothing and beauty routines, which were not framed as a luxury but as necessary to appear credible, confident and socially accepted. These practices illustrate Bourdieu (1986) principle of capital conversion: *economic capital* and *cultural capital* were converted into *aesthetic capital*. Some participants described these efforts as part of a broader pattern of strategic self-presentation, adjusting their appearance depending on the social or professional setting. At the same time, they often talked about these routines in everyday terms, as 'normal' or 'feeling good', showing how strategic appearance management is frequently woven into daily life without being framed as calculated.

However, several middle-aged participants noted that maintaining this kind of polished appearance required more effort than in earlier adulthood. They described investing more time, money and planning into grooming in order to maintain a socially and professional acceptable appearance. They described needing to work harder to appear 'well put together'. This added labor suggests that while *aesthetic capital* remains available in midlife, it becomes less effortless and more conditional, reinforcing Twigg's (2007) argument that aging women must navigate norms of age-appropriate beauty to remain visible.

This notion of conditionality extended beyond age. As valuation theory suggests, beauty is not inherently valuable but is evaluated and given meaning within groups (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Waibel et al., 2021). Participants were aware of situational demands: they altered their appearance depending on workplace roles and social events. These findings underscore how aesthetic value is shaped by context, rather than being a fixed trait.

In social life, participants described experiencing *beauty premiums*. Looking attractive often translated into increased social visibility, ease of interaction and validation, particularly in spaces such as parties, festivals or casual encounters. These findings are consistent with research by Feingold (1992) and Langlois et al. (2000), which shows that physical attractiveness increases perceived likability and sociability which facilitates interpersonal contact. Participants mentioned that being well-groomed or stylish made others more likely to initiate conversation and offer compliments. The narratives also resonate with Kukkonen's (2021) argument that *aesthetic capital* can be converted into *social capital*. Through appearance, participants gained not only attention but also social opportunities such as moments of bonding or inclusion that reinforced a sense of belonging, especially among younger women. Middle-aged participants also reported experiencing social advantages when they felt 'put together'. However, their *beauty premiums* were often more context-specific, functionally oriented and less tied to validation from peers. This suggests that while *aesthetic capital* continues to produce social benefits across the life course, its form and meaning shift with age.

Beyond social life, beauty brought participants access to opportunities and inclusion in high-visibility tasks in the professional context. These findings align with the '*halo effect'* (Dion et al., 1972), whereby attractive individuals are assumed to possess other desirable traits such as competence. Several participants, particularly young professionals, reported being given more tasks, due to how they appeared. This confirms Mobius and Rosenblat's (2006) mechanisms through which beauty enhances professional standing: by increasing perceived confidence, skills and competence. This also echoes Hamermesh's (2011) claim that attractiveness has its greatest impact at the start of one's career, as young women in this study described beauty as a compensatory asset that granted them access and credibility. In contrast, middle-aged participants used appearance more strategically to reinforce authority, highlighting how the function of *aesthetic capital* shifts across the life course.

The workplace dynamics described also support Witz et al. (2003): women perceived as attractive were more likely to be selected for client-facing or representational roles. Employers

implicitly drew on visual branding when allocating tasks where beauty was not incidental but operationalized within organizational strategy.

Additionally, the findings are consistent with Judge et al. (2009), who found that attractive individuals tend to develop stronger core self-evaluations. Participants in this study frequently linked their appearance to confidence, both in professional and social encounters. For younger participants, appearance was often a way to project confidence outward. Looking good helped them to speak up and project confidence in front of other people. For middle-aged participants, confidence was more internally grounded. For both groups, looking good was not merely aesthetic but also shaped how participants carried themselves and how others responded to them.

Despite the advantages, beauty also emerged as a professional liability, particularly for younger participants working in male-dominated environments. Several women reported being underestimated, not taken seriously or sexualized because of their appearance. These findings align with the '*beauty is beastly*' effect, where physical attractiveness clashes with stereotypes about competence and authority in masculine fields (Johnson et al., 2010). This dynamic was further supported by examples of the '*bloopsy*' effect, in which small deviations from professional dress norms, trigger negative judgments about credibility (Rhode, 2010). Middle-aged participants did not report experiencing these beauty penalties to the same extent. While they remained attentive to their professional appearance, their accounts lacked the anxiety around sexualization described by younger women. This absence may reflect a shift in how *aesthetic capital* is perceived with age: middle-aged women may be seen as more authoritative which offers a degree of protection. Additionally, several middle-aged participants also described consciously adjusting their clothing to avoid unwanted attention, indicating a form of embodied awareness that may serve as an additional protective strategy.

In social life, *aesthetic capital* was not only a source of visibility and inclusion, but also a trigger for discomfort and rivalry, particularly among younger participants. Several women described feeling scrutinized by female peers. These findings reflect Winch's (2013) concept of the '*girlfriend gaze'*: a form of aesthetic surveillance among women in which appearance is evaluated, compared and regulated through emotionally charged interactions. Participants often engaged in self-monitoring to avoid standing out and conform to the implicit standards of other women. These dynamics resonate with what Ringrose and Renold (2009) term *'normative cruelties'*: subtle judgments and gossip that enforce dominant beauty ideals within peer groups.

The beauty penalties were further illustrated by patterns of female rivalry and distrust, consistent with findings by Marson and Hessmiller (2016) and Shtudiner et al. (2024). Marson and Hessmiller (2016) showed that attractive women are often perceived as arrogant, leading to exclusion. Shtudiner et al. (2024) found that women behave less honestly toward attractive peers, suggesting that beauty can provoke competition within female groups. Participants echoed these patterns in accounts of gossip and tension when appearing well-groomed. In contrast, middle-aged participants described feeling more autonomous and less subject to peer comparison. This absence of the *girlfriend gaze* in midlife may reflect a loosening of social control within peer groups and reduced competitiveness among middle-aged women. As such, the emotional costs of *aesthetic capital* in social life appear to be age-sensitive, with younger women more frequently caught in the double-bind of needing to 'look good' while avoiding the social risks that come with being visibly attractive.

While many findings matched the literature, some expected patterns were notably absent. Theoretical work suggests that middle-aged women often experience penalties related to aesthetic decline, particularly in professional settings where youth is favored (Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Chambers, 2012). However, these disadvantages were not prominent in the interviews. Middle-aged participants did not describe being overlooked or replaced by younger colleagues. Instead, they reported feeling confident, experienced and valued.

Similarly, the often-cited theme of social invisibility among aging women (Twigg, 2003; 2007) was largely absent. While participants acknowledged the need to adjust their appearance to age-appropriate standards, they did not report being ignored or excluded socially. This absence suggests that middle-aged women with a high socioeconomic status may have more tools to resist or buffer the marginalizing effects of aging. This aligns with Stewart et al. (2001), who found that women in midlife often report increased identity certainty, autonomy and psychological resilience. The middle-aged participants in this study described less peer pressure, greater self-definition and a refusal to invest in beauty for others' approval.

Overall, the findings suggest that *beauty premiums and penalties* both affect women's psychological well-being, but in different ways. Moments of positive recognition such as compliments, attention or inclusion could generate short-term confidence, particularly among younger women. For some, this sense of confidence strengthened self-efficacy and increased assertiveness in social or professional interactions. These findings align with Judge et al. (2009), who argue that attractiveness can enhance core self-evaluations, including self-esteem. However, the interviews also suggest that when confidence becomes closely linked to

appearance, it can feel unstable. A few participants hinted at feeling more self-conscious or uncertain on days when they felt less attractive or less in line with expectations, suggesting that the emotional benefits of beauty may come with a degree of dependency on external approval. This reliance on external approval appeared to increase emotional sensitivity and could undermine longer-term well-being. Several participants described feelings of pressure, doubt and the constant effort to strike the right balance. Based on these accounts, the penalties of beauty often had a more enduring and emotionally taxing effect.

This impact differs by age. Younger women more frequently internalized the pressure to continually improve their appearance, reflecting *neoliberal ideals* of self-optimization in which beauty is framed as a personal responsibility (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015). Middle-aged women, by contrast, reported greater emotional distance from beauty expectations. While they continued to manage their appearance, they placed less psychological value on attractiveness and expressed more autonomy in how they presented themselves. This suggests that emotional resilience around beauty increases with age, as women gain more tools to buffer external pressures.

In sum, this study highlights how beauty functions as both a resource and a risk for women with a high socioeconomic status, with its effects shaped by age and context. *Aesthetic capital* proved powerful but conditional, offering moments of confidence and access while also producing pressure, scrutiny and exclusion. These findings underscore the complexity of beauty as a form of capital, one that operates differently across life stages and contexts. The following section reflects on the study's strengths and limitations, followed by the implications and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Strengths and limitations

This section reflects on the strengths and limitations of the study by evaluating its methodological design, theoretical contribution and contextual boundaries. It considers how these elements affect the validity, relevance and broader applicability of the findings.

One of the main strengths of this study lies in its qualitative design which enabled a rich and nuanced exploration of beauty-related experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth accounts of how women navigate *beauty premiums and penalties* across different contexts. Qualitative research is uniquely suited to uncover the experiences and perspectives of people, particularly when exploring context-specific experiences (Lim, 2024). By including both professional and social domains, the study captured how *aesthetic capital*

functions differently depending on situational norms which offers insight into when beauty is rewarded or penalized. Additionally, the inclusion of younger and middle-aged participants added a life-course dimension, revealing how *aesthetic capital* and its consequences evolve across time. This comparative focus adds conceptual depth to existing literature by showing that beauty is not a fixed advantage but a shifting resource shaped by age, context and gendered expectations.

These empirical insights were grounded in a strong theoretical framework, which allowed for a more structural understanding of how appearance operates as a form of capital. Concepts such as *aesthetic capital* (Anderson et al., 2010; Kukkonen, 2021) and capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986) made it possible to interpret *beauty premiums and penalties* not merely as individual experiences, but as structured outcomes shaped by access to economic and cultural resources. The inclusion of Winch's (2013) concept of the *girlfriend gaze* sharpened the analysis of peer surveillance and the regulation of beauty norms among younger women, while Stewart et al.'s (2001) framework of identity development provided insight into the greater autonomy and confidence reported by middle-aged participants. Rather than viewing *aesthetic labor* as a personal preference, the study approached it as a socially embedded practice, shaped by gendered expectations, age and made possible through class-based privilege.

At the same time, the study has limitations. The qualitative nature of the study provides rich, contextualized insights, but cannot offer generalizable conclusions. As Lim (2024) notes, qualitative research typically involves specific and relatively small samples, which limits the applicability of findings to broader populations. While the sample size was appropriate for saturation, findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative. The study focused exclusively on women with a high socioeconomic status who were interested in investing in their appearance. This is also a group for whom *aesthetic capital* is often more accessible due to financial resources and cultural knowledge. While this group is highly relevant for the study of *aesthetic capital*, it also represents a relatively privileged group of women who are encouraged and often expected to invest in their appearance. As such, the findings may not translate to women from different class positions or to women who choose not to prioritize appearance at all. In these groups, beauty may carry different meanings or play a less central role in daily life.

While these sample-related considerations limit the breadth of applicability, other contextual factors further narrow the study's generalizability. The study was conducted within a Western European context, with participants who all identified as white and operated within Dutch

professional and social environments. While this homogeneity enhanced internal coherence, it limits the applicability of the findings to broader cultural settings. As Holla and Kuipers (2015) emphasize, beauty norms are culturally constructed and not universally shared. Aesthetic preferences, grooming practices and the perceived value of beauty can vary significantly across cultural contexts. As such, *the beauty premiums and penalties* observed in this study reflect the dynamics within a particular cultural framework and cannot be assumed to translate across diverse ethnic or international groups.

In addition to contextual boundaries, the study design also posed limitations with regard to temporal depth since the cross-sectional design limits insights into how *aesthetic capital* evolves over time within the same individuals. While age-based comparisons provided valuable contrast, the study offers only a snapshot of participants' experiences at a particular moment. A cross-sectional design makes it difficult to capture the dynamics behind social processes (Wang & Cheng, 2020). A longitudinal design could offer a more layered understanding of how appearance-related practices and the *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* they generate, evolve throughout different life phases within the same individuals.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable contribution to the literature on *aesthetic capital*, *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties*. By comparing two age groups and different contexts, it shows that beauty functions not as a stable advantage, but as a contextual and conditional form of capital: one that can bring privilege but also pressure. These insights carry several implications and suggest directions for future research which will be discussed in the next section.

5.2 Implications and recommendations

This study offers several implications for both academic research and broader discussions on beauty, gender and inequality. By focusing on both *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* across different life stages and contexts, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of *aesthetic capital*: a resource whose value is shaped by age, setting and recognition. This chapter outlines five key implications including recommendations: the dual function of beauty, the psychological consequences, the role of gendered environments, the importance of age and the need for inclusive research.

First, the findings show that beauty functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism across both professional and social domains. In work contexts, *aesthetic capital* granted women visibility, credibility and access. Yet these rewards came with risks. The same appearance that helped

women gain opportunities also exposed them to stereotyping and sexualization. In social settings, beauty offered compliments and inclusion, but also provoked jealousy, peer regulation and emotional discomfort. These dynamics underscore that beauty is not merely advantageous or empowering, but also conditional and contradictory. While theoretical debates have acknowledged this dual nature, this study provides empirical insight into how *premiums and penalties* often occur simultaneously. In highlighting this, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of how beauty operates in everyday life. Future research should build on this by not only examining the benefits of attractiveness, as much of the literature tends to do, but also taking seriously the disadvantages of beauty.

Second, the findings point to the psychological consequences of beauty premiums and penalties. Several participants described how *aesthetic capital* could enhance confidence and strengthen self-efficacy, particularly in moments of visibility. These moments of recognition sometimes helped women feel more assertive in professional or social interactions. At the same time, this confidence was often conditional and closely tied to external approval, making participants, particularly younger women, more susceptible to doubt and pressure. These findings suggest that the psychological impact of *aesthetic capital* warrants further attention. Future research should further examine how *beauty premiums and penalties* affect women's mental well-being and impact their self-worth.

Third, the findings reveal that the gender composition of the environment plays a critical role in shaping how *beauty premiums and penalties* are experienced. In male-dominated professional settings, beauty often functioned as both a facilitator and a liability. A feminine, polished appearance granted participants visibility and access to opportunities, but it also exposed them to sexualization and stereotyping. Conversely, in female-dominated social environments, beauty operated through peer dynamics, where compliments and inclusion were accompanied by jealousy, competitiveness and judgment. These experiences were uncomfortable but usually carried fewer consequences for status or career progression. This contrast suggests that gendered environments not only influence the value of beauty, but also shape the intensity and meaning of its consequences. In male-dominated settings, penalties tended to be linked to structural power, while in female environments they were more relational and socially negotiated. Future research should examine not only how different gender compositions affect the experience of *beauty premiums and penalties*, but also how power shapes these dynamics.

Fourth, the study highlights the value of adopting a life-course perspective in research on beauty. Younger women described appearance as central to being seen and included, but also spoke about the stress and pressure that came with it. Middle-aged women, in contrast, expressed a greater sense of autonomy and were less preoccupied with the judgments of others. Their efforts around appearance were described more in terms of personal comfort than meeting external expectations. At the same time, the predicted penalty of social or professional invisibility in midlife was not reported. These findings challenge dominant narratives of aesthetic decline and suggest that *aesthetic capital* may evolve and take on new forms with age, rather than simply losing value. To develop this insight further, future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach that explores how beauty practices, meanings and outcomes shift throughout different phases of life.

Finally, the study calls for broader inclusion in future research. All participants in this study were white, high socioeconomic status women operating in Dutch professional and social environments. While this group is well positioned to access beauty-related resources, they are also embedded in fields with strong aesthetic expectations. As beauty norms are both racialized and classed (Holla & Kuipers, 2015), it is likely that *beauty premiums and penalties* take different forms for women with other social positions. For example, women of color or those from working-class backgrounds may navigate other beauty standards, have limited access to grooming resources or different forms of judgment. Future research should therefore explore how beauty operates across race, class and cultural background to better understand how *aesthetic capital* reinforces social inequalities and how *beauty premiums and penalties* are experienced.

This study directly responds to the societal and scientific relevance outlined in the introduction. Societally, it highlights how women face gendered beauty norms. By analyzing how these norms play out across professional and social domains, the study sheds light on the broader structures that reward and penalize women based on appearance. It also shows how these dynamics are shaped by age, offering insight into the aesthetic expectations women navigate across the life course. Scientifically, the study contributes to four key areas: it extends the literature on *beauty penalties*, addresses the underrepresentation of high socioeconomic women in *aesthetic capital* research, bridges social and professional contexts and offers a life-course perspective on how *aesthetic capital* is accumulated, converted and how its consequences are experienced.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums and beauty penalties* within their social and professional networks and how these experiences are shaped by age. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with young professionals and middle-aged women, four central themes were identified: the accumulation and management of *aesthetic capital*, the negotiation of beauty norms and expectations, the experience of *beauty premiums* and the experience of *beauty penalties*.

The findings show that *aesthetic capital* is not innate but actively constructed through the interplay of *economic, cultural and social capital.* To meet situational expectations, women invested in their appearance in various ways. While some described these routines in terms of comfort or feeling good, others described them as strategies of self-presentation, adapting their looks to align with professional roles or social environments.

In professional contexts, a polished and feminine appearance enhanced credibility, facilitated access to opportunities and enabled strategic self-presentation, particularly for younger women compensating for their limited experience. At the same time, *aesthetic capital* carried risks for both age groups. Participants described penalties such as stereotyping, sexualization or diminished authority, especially in male-dominated working environments. These findings highlight the dual nature of *aesthetic capital* in the workplace: while it can yield economic and social advantages, it simultaneously exposes women to vulnerability and scrutiny. In response to this tension, many middle-aged women described greater control over their appearance and more deliberate strategies to avoid misinterpretation and reduce the likelihood of harassment.

In social contexts, appearance similarly offered both benefits and risks. *Aesthetic capital* enhanced social visibility and approachability, particularly for younger women, who described how being well-groomed led to compliments and attention. At the same time, beauty also invited penalties: several participants mentioned feelings of discomfort or judgment in female-dominated environments. An appearance that deviated from the group norm, whether perceived as too polished or not polished enough, could provoke gossip. While middle-aged women noted moments of rivalry or unspoken competition, they tended to describe less peer pressure and more autonomy in how they presented themselves. Together, this reveals that *aesthetic capital* in social life remained a double-edged sword: it can open doors but also requires strategic moderation to avoid social penalties.

Age had an influence on how *beauty premiums and penalties* were shaped and experienced. Younger women described more directly experiencing beauty as a social and professional asset, particularly in gaining credibility, visibility and positive attention. At the same time, they also reported a heightened vulnerability to penalties such as jealousy, peer judgment and sexualization. Middle-aged women also experienced premiums, though these were often more situational and tied to authority rather than desirability. Penalties such as invisibility, which are often described in the literature on aging, were largely absent. While both groups navigated the double nature of beauty, younger women appeared more affected by external scrutiny, whereas middle-aged women reported greater emotional distance and control in managing appearance-related consequences.

Taken together, these insights not only answer the research questions but also point toward broader implications for future research. As discussed, the findings call for more attention to the conditional and relational nature of beauty, the impact on psychological well-being, the role of gendered environments and how the value and consequences of *aesthetic capital* shift across the life course. Future studies might build on this by exploring how *aesthetic capital* operates and how *beauty premiums* and *penalties* are experienced in more diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

In sum, this study shows that beauty functions not as a fixed advantage, but as a conditional and context-dependent form of capital. *Aesthetic capital* becomes valuable when it conforms to dominant norms in gendered environments, yet easily turns into a liability when misaligned. *Beauty premiums* and *penalties* do not occur in isolation but operate simultaneously and often ambivalently, reinforcing gendered expectations in subtle ways. By focusing on age, class and context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of *aesthetic capital* and its role in shaping how women with a high socioeconomic status experience *beauty premiums* and *beauty penalties* across the life course.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

- Welcome and purpose of the research
    - Introduction of the researcher
- Explanation and consent
    - Explanation of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to stop at any time
    - Permission to record the interview
    - Consent form
- Introduction of the respondent
    - Could you tell me a bit about yourself? (Name, age, interest, education)
    - Could you tell me about your job?
        - Type of company, position, how long you've been working there
- Investments in appearance
    - How important is your appearance to you in daily life?
    - What do you usually do for your appearance? (Make-up, grooming, clothing e.t.c.)
        - How much time and money do you spend on your appearance? What does that look like in a typical week?
    - Do you feel like you have knowledge about what looks good?
        - How did you acquire that knowledge?
- Beauty standards
    - Do you feel a certain societal pressure when it comes to investing in your appearance?
        - And within your circle of friends?
    - For the middle-aged group: does aging play a role in this?
    - Are there certain things you notice are seen as 'beautiful' or 'normal' in your social circle?
        - Do you ever feel pressure to meet those expectations? In which situations do you notice this the most?
    - At your workplace, how important do you think appearance is? Are there certain expectations about clothing or grooming?
        - Does this always align with what you personally find beautiful? Or do you feel obligated to present yourself in a certain way?
- Different contexts
    - Is there a difference in how you groom or dress for work compared to your free time? How do you notice that?
    - Are there social occasions where you put extra effort into your appearance? For example, a party.
    - Are there things you do differently with your appearance in important situations, such as a job interview, presentation or first meeting?
- Beauty premiums en penalties in the professional context
    - Do you think appearance or grooming plays a role in how people are judged at work? For example, in hiring, promotions or who gets certain opportunities?
        - Have you ever experienced this yourself or seen it happen to others?
    - Have you ever noticed that some colleagues seem to benefit from how they look or how much effort they put into their appearance?
    - Have you ever experienced a situation where the effort you put into your appearance seemed to give you an advantage at work? For example, job interview, opportunities or treatment.

    - Have you ever witnessed someone not being taken seriously because of her appearance or the choices she made in that regard?
        - Have you ever experienced this yourself?
    - Have you ever dressed or groomed yourself differently at work to better meet expectations?
- Beauty premiums and penalties in the social context
    - Do you think a beautiful or well-groomed appearance can sometimes provide advantages in friendships or social relationships? For example, making contact more easily.
        - Have you ever experienced this yourself or seen it happen to others?
        - In what situations do you notice this?
    - Have there been moments when you noticed people reacted differently or more positively to you after you put effort into your appearance?
    - And the opposite, have you ever noticed people reacting negatively because you had paid attention to your appearance? For example, jealousy.
    - Have you ever deliberately dressed differently or worn more/less make-up to avoid certain reactions from others?
        - In which situations did you feel that pressure?
- Closing
    - Are there any topics or experiences we haven't discussed but that you feel are important to share?
    - Any questions about the research?
    - Thank the respondent

Appendix B. Thematic Map

Theme	Sub-themes	Sub-sub themes	Summary	Example quotes
Accumulating and managing aesthetic capital	Investing in appearance		Participants describe the continuous effort they put into building and maintaining their appearance as a form of aesthetic capital. This includes both daily practices as well as long-term investments. Participants discuss how much time and financial investment is required to maintain their appearance.	*"During the week with make-up and hair, I'd say about twenty to twenty-five minutes. On the weekend I spend more time, especially on Fridays when I wash and blow-dry my hair – then I'm busy for about an hour. And if I'm going out on the weekend, I can easily spend forty-five minutes in front of the mirror".*
	Building beauty knowledge		Participants learn how to improve their appearance through a mix of self-experimentation, online research and inspiration from social media or peer groups. This knowledge becomes part of their capital and is continuously updated in response to beauty trends.	*"I think I do look at social media a lot—like TikTok or Instagram—and you just see fun things come by. Often they share product codes, like 'this jacket is this code' and 'these pants are that code,' and then I just order it and see if it looks nice on me too."*

Navigating beauty norms and expectations	Workplace dress codes		Even in the absence of formal dress codes, women report strong implicit expectations regarding grooming and clothing.	*"We're given quite a bit of freedom, but you will get side-eyed if you show up very casually. So like a hoodie or a sporty sweatshirt wouldn't be acceptable, or ripped jeans".*
	Social norms		Unspoken societal expectations shape how women feel they should present themselves. These norms are reinforced through subtle feedback, media imagery, and everyday interactions, influencing grooming practices and appearance-related choices.	*"I've often been asked that when I didn't wear makeup. If I didn't wear makeup, people would ask if I was sick [...] In that sense, you do feel a certain pressure to do something about your appearance, from the outside world. In terms of wearing makeup. It's kind of seen as normal for a woman to go out wearing makeup".*
		Peer conformity	Participants report adjusting their appearance to match that of their friends or social groups, especially in female-dominated settings.	*"Look, everyone here is really aware of what looks good and what the trends are. And when you see that in others, you want it too and do not want to be left out. So, you put in the effort to fit in".*
	Strategic self-presentation		Many participants describe tailoring their appearance based on who they will be seeing. This strategic presentation allows them to manage impressions.	*"If I'm meeting new clients, I usually lean towards wearing a suit or a really neat dress. So usually when I have client meetings, yes, and presentations too—I do make a bit more of an effort [...] I think it is strategic. In law, it is important to look neat. Especially when meeting new clients. So I do consciously choose to dress formally. I do feel I get taken more seriously and that the client also feels they're being taken seriously".*

Experiencing beauty premiums	Confidence		Participants feel more empowered ans self-assured when they look their best. This increased confidence enhances their social interactions and professional performance.	*"I think it also has to do with confidence. That I felt comfortable in that conversation because of how I looked. That I felt confident and maybe dared to say more and show more of myself".*
	Career	First impressions at work	Some participants describe receiving favorable treatment during job interviews or networking situations due to their polished appearance.	*"In the beginning, you're really dependent on other colleagues for how much work you get, what kind of work, and so on. And male colleagues tend to give more and nicer work to the women who dress like that".*
		Representational roles	Attractive or well-groomed women are often selected to represent the company in public events, reinforcing the link between beauty and professional visibility.	*"At a trade fair, they really look at who looks representative [...] the one who always wears her hair in a ponytail with the same blouse and the same old pants is not chosen to go. That's just how it is."*
	Social validation and attention		Compliments from friends, interest from strangers, and positive feedback are all cited as ways that appearance leads to social rewards.	*"For example, when I go to a party or when I go out, I do notice that if I look good, people are quicker to give a compliment like, "Oh, you look great," or "That's a nice outfit." And then you do end up talking to someone more easily".*

Experiencing beauty penalties	Gendered assumptions	Stereotypes	Women report assumptions that they are less competent or intelligent becasue of how they look.	*"Someone once said to me, 'You got that job because you've got a pretty face.' And I could've hit them for that. I thought, do you even know how long I studied?".*
		Sexualization	In some workplaces, participants experience inappropriate comments or are not taken seriously due to being sexualized.	*"If I look at colleagues, then some men will comment on a certain woman's style of clothing. They'll say she's not very feminine, she doesn't often wear dresses or heels. And then they view her differently. Women who do wear heels and dresses—they'll say "Wow, you're hot," and blah blah. But about that other colleague, they'll say "Yeah no, I wouldn't go for her."*
		Misrecognition	Attractive women are sometimes mistaken for assistants, especially in male-dominated environments.	*"I walked into a meeting and someone ordered coffee from me, and then I sat down and led the meeting. If a man had walked in, I don't believe he would have asked him that."*
	Peer judgment and jealousy		Participants describe being subject to jealousy or judgment from other women, particularly when they wear stylish clothing or receive visible attention.	*"Especially with women among themselves. Women can be really mean and jealous. So if you're really pretty or wear nice makeup or have fancy stuff—like a designer bag or something—there will always be women who give you a look or make a comment".*
	Emotional discomfort		Women often experience insecurity, stress or anxiety about their appearance, particularly when they feel they are either too dressed up or not dressed enough for a situation.	*"You can never really get it right. Because it can't be too much, but also not too little, so you kind of have to land somewhere in between. Because if it's too much, you get comments like, "Wow, that's over the top," and if it's too little, you get, "Ugh, she's so boring." So you kind of have to find a balance or something".*

Appendix C. List of original quotes

1. Ik denk doordeweeks met make-up en haren dan denk ik twintig vijfentwintig minuten of zo bezig. In het weekend ben ik wel langer bezig en dan zeker op vrijdag dan doe ik dan mijn haar ook wassen en föhnen dus daar ben ik dan wel echt een uur mee bezig. En ja als ik ergens naartoe ga in het weekend dan kan ik wel drie kwartier of zo wel voor de spiegel staan.
2. Ik draag eigenlijk wel altijd gewoon nette kleren. Ik heb mijn sieraden om, ik heb altijd wel gewoon make-up op, mijn haar verzorgd. Ja, eigenlijk gewoon verzorgd.
3. Nou ik moet zeggen ik heb wel qua make-up dan wel wat duurdere producten en qua haren heb ik echt allemaal haarproducten van de kapper. Dus het zijn allemaal wel wat duurdere producten. Maar ik moet ook wel zeggen dat je daar best lang mee doet. Dus de aankoop an sich kan prijzig zijn. Maar als ik het doe, je doet er wel langer mee.
4. Nou als ik gewoon naar make-up kijk en kapper en nagels. Als ik dat een beetje zie dan zou ik zeggen honderdvijftig euro per maand. En als ik ga kijken naar Botox en fillers dan is dat zeg maar zeshonderd euro in de drie maanden.
5. Je moet er meer voor doen om er goed uit te zien. Als je jong bent heb je geen rimpels, ben je niet grijs, ja is alles nog strak en stevig. Nee ik vind wel echt dat je daar rekening mee houdt.
6. Nou ja, één keer in de tien weken ga ik naar de kapper. Ik laat mijn haar verven en twee keer per jaar ga ik met een vriendin naar de Botox.
7. Ja, ik ga denk ik elke drie maanden naar de kapper om mijn haren te laten verven en knippen. Ik laat ook mijn wenkbrauwen doen. Soms doe ik ook een gezichtsbehandeling.
8. Ik denk dat het meeste wel echt is via social media. Vroeger ben ik echt begonnen met Beauty Gloss heette zij. Zij was de eerste Nederlandse dame die YouTube filmpjes maakte allemaal over beauty en make-up en haar producten. Dat soort dingetjes vond ik altijd wel heel leuk om te kijken. Maar ik merk dat ik nu denk ik wel echt meer via social media producten voorbij zie komen. Maar ik moet wel zeggen omdat ik dus zo'n gevoelige huid heb, zoek ik wel het meeste echt op via internet. Dus ik kijk wel echt wat komt er echt als beste uit. Dus de merken leer ik wel echt kennen via social media. Maar wat ik uiteindelijk koop is wel echt op basis van onderzoek naar wat is het beste uit de test gekomen.
9. Vroeger smeerde ik Nivea op mijn gezicht en dat werkte prima. Ik had nergens last van. En nu heb ik wel een dagcrème dat ik denk van nou er moet een zonnen factortje in zitten en een beetje vitamine.
10. We worden er best vrij in gelaten, maar je wordt er wel op aangekeken als je heel casual aankomt, Dus in een hoodie of zo, of een sportieve trui zou je niet aan kunnen of een spijkerbroek met gaten.
11. Dus ik kleed me anders als ik op de zaak ben. Zakelijker dan dat ik in mijn privéleven doe. Hè, dus inderdaad ook ik heb ook wel inderdaad zo af en toe een spijkerbroek aan. Maar dan is het meestal op de casual Friday. [...] andere dagen ben ik echt in pak. Niet in mantel pakjes, dat hoeft niet. Maar ik draag inderdaad wel broekpakken of een lange rok.
12. Nee, het is wel vrij, maar ik kan bijvoorbeeld als ik op kantoor ben en ik weet dat er geen klanten komen kan ik nog best een spijkerbroek aan hebben met een scheur, een hippe scheur dan. Maar als jij in de showroom staat of op een beurs, ja dan zorg je gewoon dat je een nette outfit aan hebt. Dan ga je trouwens sowieso niet in een spijkerbroek. Maar dat zijn eigenlijk een beetje ongeschreven regels.

13. Dat heb ik ook heel vaak als vraag gekregen als ik dan een keer niet mijn make-up deed. Als ik dan mijn make-up niet deed, dan vroegen mensen of ik ziek was. [...] Wat dat betreft voel je dan wel een bepaalde druk om iets aan je uiterlijk te doen, vanaf de buitenwereld. Qua make-up dragen. Het wordt toch als normaal gezien om als vrouw zijnde met make-up de deur uit te gaan.
14. Ja, kijk er wordt niet letterlijk tegen je gezegd van je moet make-up dragen of je moet slank zijn maar ik denk gewoon meer dat het is dat dat een soort normaal is wat heerst. Je ziet het op social media constant filmpjes van niemand gaat zonder make-up zichzelf op TikTok of op Insta posten zeg maar dus make-up is wel gewoon normaal en ook wat ik net zei van denk wel dat er een soort alle influencers die je op social media ziet is een soort perfect plaatje en je ziet dat dan toch constant voorbij komen dus je bent er toch wel mee bezig.
15. Ik denk gewoon dat ik ouder worden moeilijk vind zeg maar. Omdat ik me wel heel jong voel. Heb ik gewoon zoiets van ja weet je, je wil eigenlijk je kijkt in de spiegel en dan denk je van ja, er is niks mis mee. Maar ja, als je iets kan doen zeg maar waardoor dat de buitenkant past bij de binnenkant dan.
16. Je moet wel snappen dat je op je vijftigste niet meer het zelfde aan kan dan wat je op je twintigste aan doet. Maar je hoeft er ook niet als een geitenwollen sok bij te lopen. Op mijn leeftijd kun je je echt nog leuk kleden.
17. Ik merk zelf ook bij vriendinnen in [stad in Nederland] dat zij ook veel praten over wat anderen aan hebben. Dus je weet ook dat als jij er niet bij bent dat dat ook waarschijnlijk over jou gebeurt. Iedereen is gewoon heel veel mee bezig.
18. Kijk, iedereen is hier gewoon echt op de hoogte van wat er goed uit ziet en wat de trends zijn. En als je dat bij anderen ziet, wil je dat toch zelf ook en er niet buiten vallen. Dus je doet dan toch moeite er voor om er bij te horen.
19. Ik denk wel dat de meeste vrouwen het wel belangrijk vinden bij mij in de omgeving inderdaad om er verzorgd uit te zien. Als ik zo een beetje kijk hebben de meeste vrouwen allemaal wel nette nagels en de haren mooi en altijd wel een make-upje op. Dus ik denk dat ik wel in een omgeving zit waar mensen dat wel belangrijk vinden. [...] Als ik met vriendinnen afspreek en ze hebben hun make-up gedaan en hun haar mooi, dan wil ik daar niet als een zwerver zitten.
20. Druk is misschien een groot woord maar ik doe wel altijd mijn make-up en haren als ik met mijn vriendinnen afspreek. Ik weet dat zij dat ook doen dus dan wil ik niet als enige dat niet doen. Dus ja, eigenlijk als ik het zo zeg is het misschien wel een bepaalde druk.
21. ik doe gewoon wat ik zelf lekker vind. En misschien dat je onbewust toch weet dat dat een bepaald clubje iets doet en een ander clubje weer niet zeg maar. Maar ik hou wel eigenlijk een beetje vast aan wat ik zelf vind.
22. Dat denk ik ook omdat je nu meer de ervaring hebt. En natuurlijk is het belangrijk om, kijk wat je, ik zeg ook altijd tegen iedereen van. Draag wat je zelfvertrouwen geeft. Als je lekker in je vel zit en je vindt dat je leuke kleren aan hebt, dat is belangrijk.
23. Als ik nieuwe cliënten ontmoet, dan neig ik meestal wel naar een pak of echt een net jurkje. Dus meestal als ik cliënt ontmoetingen heb wel en presentaties, dan doe ik ook meestal wel iets meer mijn best. [...] Ik denk wel dat dat strategisch is. In de advocatuur is het wel belangrijk om er netjes uit te zien. Helemaal als je nieuwe cliënten ontmoet. Dus ik kies er dan wel bewust voor om mij echt netjes te kleden. Ik heb dan toch het idee dat ik serieuzer genomen word en dat de cliënt ook het idee heeft dat hij serieuzer genomen wordt.
24. Zoals ik al had gezegd heb ik eigenlijk altijd een broekpak of zo iets aan. Maar als ik bijvoorbeeld weet dat er een belangrijke klant komt, dan zorg ik wel dat ik echt een

van mijn netste pakken aan heb. Ja, ik ben gewoon echt het visite kaartje en dat wil je ook uitstralen.

25. Daar ben ik wel mee bezig. Maar dat heeft ook mee te maken, je hebt maar een moment om een goede indruk te maken natuurlijk. De eerste indruk vind ik wel belangrijk. Als je toch kijkt naar de chemie en zeker bij vrouwen is het toch van wat heeft iemand aan.
26. Ik denk dat een eerste indruk belangrijk is en als ik mijn make-up doe of me mooi kleed heb ik meer zelfvertrouwen zodat ik een betere eerste indruk kan geven.
27. Ik vind het zelf ook gewoon mooier als ik mijn haar doe en ik denk dat ik dan toch wat zelfverzekerder ben. Als ik dan een presentatie moet geven vind ik het wel fijn om daar zelfverzekerd te staan.
28. Ik voel me dan mezelf wel een stuk zekerder als ik weet dat ik er goed uitzie en ik denk dat je dat ook wel moet uitstralen bij een presentatie of inderdaad ook bij een sollicitatie wat je net zei. Als je dan uitstraalt dat je zelfverzekerd bent dat dat echt wel een beeld geeft. [...] Ik denk bijvoorbeeld ook als ik zelfverzekerd een presentatie sta te geven dat je ook makkelijker oogcontact maakt en ja ik heb ook wel eens dat ik dan na een presentatie een compliment krijg over hoe ik mezelf presenteer, hoe ik stond te presenteren dus ik denk dat dat ook wel iets zegt over hoe zelfverzekerd ik voor een groep sta en hoe de boodschap dan zeg maar overkomt.
29. Ik denk ook dat het met zelfvertrouwen te maken heeft. Dat ik me zo op mijn gemak voelde in dat gesprek door hoe dat ik er zelf uitzag. Ja dat ik daar gewoon ook vertrouwen door kreeg en ook wel ja misschien iets meer durfde te zeggen en meer van mezelf durfde te laten zien.
30. Ik denk wel dat als ik make-up op doe en mijn haren doe dat ik daar zelfverzekerder door wordt. En dat dat dan bij kan dragen aan contact maken met mensen. [...] Dat je daardoor toch makkelijker met iemand het gesprek aan gaat.
31. Nou misschien ook wel in contact leggen. Ik denk dat je dan ook wel weer terug gaat naar die zelfverzekerdheid. Ik denk als jij je lekker en fijn voelt in je vel dat je dan die zelfverzekerdheid ook uitstraalt. En dat je dan makkelijker met vreemden contact maakt. En dat misschien mensen ook wel eerder op jou afstappen.
32. Ik geloof wel dat dat zo is ja, dat daar echt wel naar gekeken wordt. Een leuk koppie en leuke kleding en leuk karakter. Maar daar kun je echt, ja, daar kun je denk ik wel meer mee bereiken. Dat denk ik wel. En misschien is een directeur ook wel gecharmeerd van: nou, dat is een leuk type. Die is wel leuk als mijn secretaresse of weet ik wat voor functies.
33. Ik heb dat zelf wel een keer meegemaakt ja, voor de functie die ik nu doe. Daar waren meerdere kandidaten en wij bleven met zijn drieën over en kijk ik zeg niet per se knap ik heb het dan maar meer over uitstraling en verzorgdheid. Die andere was een vrouw en die kwam wel een beetje uit een wat suffe branche en ja zo zag ze er ook een beetje uit. Misschien stom om te zeggen. Ze was wel gewoon intelligent en ze zal haar werk best goed doen. Maar ja ja ik heb haar toen gezien en gesproken en vond nou niet dat ze echt een hele positieve energieke uitstraling had en ja ik denk wel dat dat bij mij geholpen heeft dat ik deze rol gekregen heb.
34. Nou, nu op mijn werk merk ik dat ik vaak leuke kleding aan heb. Dat iedereen daar veel over tegen mij praat en heel aardig doet daarover. En ik ben tegelijk begonnen met iemand anders en die heeft dat wat minder. Je merkt wel overduidelijk een verschil in hoe mijn collega's, vooral mannen collega's mij behandelen en haar. [...] zij zoeken mij vaker op via de mail om mij werk te geven. Terwijl ze kunnen het ook naar haar sturen. Ze zoeken gewoon veel meer contact met mij dan met haar.

35. Uiteindelijk doe ik gewoon veel sneller meer kennis op dan haar, waardoor ik uiteindelijk dat ook weer kan gebruiken. Omdat iedereen mij meer kansen geeft dan dat ze haar geven.
36. In het begin ben je best afhankelijk van andere collega's dus hoe veel werk je van hun krijgt, wat voor werk en zo. En mannelijke collega's geven toch meer en leuker werk aan de vrouwen die zich zo kleden.
37. De buitendienst die gaan altijd naar de beurs en dan een paar mensen van de binnendienst ter ondersteuning, daar wordt dan wel een keuze gemaakt. Wie staat daar representatief op zo'n stand? En degene die altijd met een beetje plek haar in de staart met altijd hetzelfde bloesje aan en dezelfde oude broek. Daar wordt niet voor gekozen om die mee naar de beurs te nemen. Terwijl die misschien ook leuk vindt om mee naar de beurs te gaan of die misschien ook als die daar zou staan best goed zou kunnen verkopen. Maar daar wordt dus wel echt naar gekeken. Ja dus er wordt echt wel onderscheid gemaakt in wie ziet er representatief uit en wie kan iets voor ons verkopen of Ja, maar dat heeft natuurlijk ook wel te maken met op zo'n stand ben je ook het visitekaartje van het bedrijf. En wat wil je als bedrijf uitstralen?
38. Je ziet inderdaad wel dat het team dat echt de klanten binnenhaalt, dat zijn wel mensen die er allemaal goed uitzien. Als je er niet heel verzorgd uitziet dan mag je daar niet bij zijn.
39. Ik merk wel van als iemand binnenkomt en het is meteen een leuk typetje dat is wel iemand die snel al naar buiten gaat. [...] Als je dus inderdaad naar klanten gaat, dan zie je natuurlijk ook wel bepaalde typetjes die ze sneller naar een klant sturen.
40. Dat zie je wel, dat je dan meer aandacht krijgt. Ja, dus dat valt dan gewoon zelf op. Als ik gewoon onvoorbereid dan opeens in de stad beland, dan is dat toch anders dan wanneer je echt in een leuke outfit, waar je misschien net iets meer in ziet en make-up wat leuk, iets verzorgder of zo, dan zie je dat wel. Dan heb je dus sneller contact of zo.
41. Als ik bijvoorbeeld naar een feestje of zo ga of als ik uitga dan heb ik wel van als ik er goed uit zie dat mensen sneller een complimentje geven van o wat zie je er goed uit of wat heb je iets leuks aan. En dan heb je toch wel sneller contact met iemand. Dus ik denk dat dat zeker wel helpt.
42. Ik merk bijvoorbeeld wel van als ik naar een festival ga en ik koop een nieuwe outfit en ik doe mijn haar leuk en ik doe make-up op dat ik dan wel dat mensen mij wel vaker aanspreken. Dat is dan niet per se alleen mannen, maar dan zijn er ook vrouwen die dan sneller naar je toe komen van waar heb je dat jurkje vandaan of tasje vandaan en dan ja heb je toch een gesprekje met iemand.
43. Als ik vind dat iemand er leuk uit ziet dan ben ik toch eerder geneigd om met diegene een babbeltje te maken. Je hebt ook makkelijk een aanspreek punt he, dus van 'wat een leuke rok heb jij aan' of iets.
44. Het is sowieso wel een mannenbranche en we zijn gewoon een jong bedrijf met jonge medewerkers en soms worden daar wel eens grapjes gemaakt onderling. En ik weet wel van toen ik aan het begin daar kwam werken dat ik daar soms wel eens moeite mee had want je bent dan natuurlijk aan het aan het inwerken en ja als je dan bijvoorbeeld net iets niet begreep dat er dan een opmerking werd gemaakt van dat het er aan ligt dat je blond bent. Dat ik denk van ja het heeft daar totaal niks mee te maken. Ik ben hier gewoon net nieuw en ik moet ook gewoon ja leren hoe het hier gaat.
45. Ze hebben wel ooit eens tegen mij gezegd van je hebt die baan gekregen omdat je een knap koppie hebt. En toen kon ik ze wel in elkaar slaan. Want ik dacht, weet je hoe lang ik gestudeerd heb.

46. Bijvoorbeeld wel op vrijdagmiddag borrels. Dan wordt er wel open over collega's gesproken, vrouwelijke dan. Over wie er goed uit ziet en wie niet. En ja, ik kan nu wel tegen opmerkingen maar er hebben ook vrouwen gewerkt die dat niet zo kunnen. [...] Het zijn gewoon een beetje haantjes. En als ze dan allemaal een drankje op hebben dan worden ze wat losjes en dan zeggen ze wel eens wat. Het zijn ook allemaal best jonge mannen.
47. Als ik bijvoorbeeld naar collega's kijk dan sommige mannen die zich dan uitspreken over de kledingstijl van een bepaalde vrouw. Dan zeggen ze zij is niet echt super vrouwelijk, ze loopt niet echt vaak in jurkjes of op hakken. Dan wordt daar wel anders naar gekeken en dan vrouwen die met hakken lopen en jurkjes, dan zeggen ze, jee, je bent wel knap en geil blah blah. En dan over die ene collega niet. Dan zeggen ze ook wel echt van ja nee, die zou ik niet doen. Daar wordt dan ook echt zo open over gesproken. Wel echt vrijdagmiddag borrelpraat.
48. Ik heb bijvoorbeeld wel eens gehad dat ik vrijdag na werk naar een etentje ging dus dat ik wat anders aan had dan normaal en dat je dan opmerkingen krijgt zoals zo een feestje vanavond. Ja, daar zit je op werk niet echt op te wachten.
49. Ja ik werk met heleboel mannen in de mannenmaatschappij. Dus dan zijn jurkjes en mantelpakjes niet altijd de beste keuze zeg maar. Dus dan probeer ik gewoon zelf een beetje aan te passen en gewoon casual te kleden.
50. Ik heb in mijn vorige werk toen ik bij [bedrijf] werkte toen kwam ik een beetje later de vergaderzaal in en daar zaten wat externe mensen. En ik kom daar helemaal netjes binnen en toen bestelde die meneer koffie bij mij. Want die dacht dat ik iemand was die de koffie verzorgde. [...] Toen ging ik dus gewoon daarbij zitten en mocht ik de vergadering leiden. Dus was op zich ook best apart.
51. Ik denk dat dat zeker is met vrouwen onderling. Vrouwen kunnen echt gemeen en jaloers zijn. Dus als jij heel knap bent of mooie make-up of je hebt bijvoorbeeld mooie spullen weet ik het, een designer tas of zo dan zijn er altijd wel vrouwen die je een blik geven of ja of dat je daar een opmerking of zo over krijgt.
52. Ja, vrouwen zijn natuurlijk best wel pittig. Dus ik denk dat ja, ik denk dat onderling jaloezie dat dat best wel veel voorkomt. En dat ze denken misschien ja, loopt ze weer met dit of heeft ze weer iets gekocht? [...] Ja, vrouwen onderling die ja, die kunnen er best wel wat van. En dat ze elkaar misschien dan ook wel iets in de weg zouden leggen.
53. Ja, want je hebt natuurlijk ook dan juist vrouwen die dan denken van komt zij aan met een knappe koppie en kaap die mannen voor mijn neus weg. Dus dat er een beetje jaloezie is onder de vrouwen.
54. Ik denk wel dat er veel wordt gekeken naar de buitenkant en je kunt het ook niet altijd goed doen. Want het mag niet te veel zijn maar ook niet te weinig dus dan moet je er een soort van tussenin zitten. Want als je teveel bent dan krijg je reacties van wat overdreven en als je te weinig bent dan krijg je reacties van wat een saaie is zij dus je moet daar een soort balans in vinden of zo.
55. Hoe vinden ze dat ik eruit zie weet je wel. [...] Maar als ik nou naar een verjaardag ga of zo, er zijn altijd mensen die je niet kent weet je wel, dan ben ik altijd wel, dan kan ik goed vijf outfits thuis aan hebben gehad en uit hebben gedaan. En dan weer wisselen, wat mijn vriend dan ook zegt, waarom wissel jij tien keer van outfit? Omdat ik het gewoon niet weet wat ik aan moet.
56. Als je kijkt naar een feestje, gewoon een verjaardagsfeestje, waar iedereen verder casual is en je komt er aan in je glitterjurk, dan is dat toch wel wat ongemakkelijk. Je valt gewoon letterlijk op en dat is dan niet per se je bedoeling. [...] Ik heb weleens gehad dat ik overdressed was, dan voel ik me toch niet op mijn gemak.

57. Ik praat dan voor mezelf, ik ben vrijgezel en als ik ergens binnenkom en dan heb ik niet dan ja dan kom ik gewoon ergens binnen en dan vind ik het eigenlijk wat mensen van me vinden dat vind ik dan iets minder belangrijk. Voorheen vond ik het heel belangrijk wat andere mensen van me vinden. Maar dat heb ik nu niet meer. Dus nu is inderdaad what you see is what you get. Ik ga me niet anders voordoen dan wat ik ben. Die tijd heb ik wel gehad.
58. Ik denk dat ik daar vroeger mee bezig was. Ik deed nog gewoon mijn eigen ding, maar dan ben je er wel meer mee bezig van is dit niet overdressed of ben ik niet underdressed? Ja, dan ben je een beetje allemaal twijfelachtig hè?

Appendix D. Information letter and consent form

Master Thesis on beauty premiums and penalties in the professional and social context

Researchers

Luna Brekelmans, TSB, Tilburg University

Introduction

This information letter contains important information about this study and corresponding rules. Please read this letter carefully and ask any questions, before agreeing upon participation.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

Background and purpose

This study is part of a master's thesis for the Master Health, Wellbeing, and Society and explores how women with a high socioeconomic status experience both the advantages and disadvantages of physical appearance in their social and professional lives. While being considered attractive can bring benefits, such as positive attention or career opportunities, it can also come with challenges, like being judged differently or facing unrealistic expectations. Research has mostly focused on the benefits of beauty, but less is known about the difficulties that can come with it. Through interviews, this study aims to better understand these experiences and how beauty plays a role in women's personal and professional interactions.

Nature and duration

The study consists of a interview, which will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will take place either in person or via Zoom, depending on the participant's preference. The study will be conducted over the next few months, with a planned completion date of June 15th, 2025.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY INVOLVE?

Contents

If you choose to participate in this study, you will take part in one interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will focus on your personal and professional experiences with beauty norms, as well as any advantages (beauty premiums) or challenges (beauty penalties) you may have encountered due to your appearance. You will also be asked about your perspectives on beauty standards and how they might have changed over time. Your responses will remain strictly confidential and anonymous, and you may choose to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time.

Potential negative consequences of participation

While this study does not involve any physical risks, some topics may be sensitive or personal, such as experiences of exclusion, unfair treatment, or societal pressure related to beauty norms. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you are free to skip a question or stop the interview altogether. Your well-being is the priority, and all responses will be treated with care and confidentiality.

PARTICIPATION INFORMATION

Voluntariness of participation

We ask your consent to participate in this study, which applies for the length of this study. Participating in this research is voluntary. You have the right not to take part in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time, without any negative consequences, and without giving any reason. You are free to skip questions or tasks that you do not feel comfortable with.

The researchers can terminate the study if necessary. The decision to terminate the study can be made to protect your health and safety, or because the research plan stipulates that individuals who do not meet certain conditions or do not follow the instructions, cannot participate

[For personal data] What rights do I have?

You have the right, in principle, to request access to and rectify, erase, restrict or object to the processing of your personal data. For more information: www.tilburguniversity.edu/privacy-statement

Confidentiality

Your research data will be pseudonymized (that is, all information that will be directly linked to you will be replaced by a code name or number known only to the researchers). Any personal information is not released without your written permission. The research results that are published will in no way contain confidential information or personal data from or about you through which anyone can recognize you, unless you have by way of our consent form explicitly consented to mentioning your name.

Reward/Reimbursement

Participating in this study will not be rewarded.

Research Data Management Policy
The pseudonymized research data will be stored safely for a period of 10 years. Only the researchers have access to this data. When the results of this study are published or presented at conferences, no information will be presented that can reveal your personal identity. [If applicable:] In case you want to delete your data, you can contact the research team until XXX.

Data processing

All personal data collected during this study will be handled with strict confidentiality and in accordance with privacy regulations. The interview will be audio-recorded with your consent and later transcribed using Microsoft Word. During transcription, all identifying information will be removed or anonymized/pseudonymized to ensure your privacy.

The anonymized/pseudonymized transcripts will then be analyzed using qualitative data analysis software such as ATLAS.ti to identify key themes and patterns. The findings will be reported in an aggregated manner, meaning that no individual participant can be identified from the results.

The anonymized/pseudonymized data will be securely stored and will only be accessible to the researcher. After the completion of the study, the anonymized data will be archived for a period of 10 years in accordance with university guidelines, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Participation

If you decide to participate in this study, you can sign the attached informed consent form.

Contact

Any questions about this study can be directed to:

Mariëlle Cloin

j.c.m.cloin@tilburguniversity.edu

If you have any questions, concerns or objections that you would like to report to anyone other than the researcher, please contact the Ethics Review Board of Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences via email erb@tilburguniversity.edu.

Attachment

Informed consent form

Master thesis on the experiences of beauty and premiums and penalties of women with a high socioeconomic status within their professional and social contexts

Researchers

Luna Brekelmans, Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg University

Signature

By signing this informed consent form, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Signing this form does not interfere with your right to withdraw from this study at any time without an explanation.

By signing this informed consent form, I (the participant) confirm that I have read and understood the entire information letter and confirm that:

- I have read and understood the entire information letter that belongs to this study.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that these questions were answered to my complete satisfaction.
- I had sufficient time to decide whether I would participate or not.
- I know that participation is completely voluntary.
- I know that the duration of the study is until July 2025
- I know I can decide to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences and without providing any explanation.
- [For personal data] I know I have the right, in principle, to request access to and rectify, erase, restrict or object to the processing of my personal data.
- I know that my research data will be processed as described in the information letter and only the researcher team have access to this data.
- I give permission to use my research data for the purposes that are mentioned in the information letter that belongs to this study.
- I give permission to store my research data for the period of 10 years.

I hereby voluntarily agree to participate in the study:

Master thesis on the experiences of beauty and premiums and penalties of women with a high socioeconomic status within their professional and social contexts

Name participant:

_____

Signature: Date : ____ / ____ / _____

_____

In case of online informed consent:

☐

To be completed by the researcher(s):

I hereby declare that I have fully informed the above-mentioned participant about this study.

Name researcher:

_____

Signature: Date : ____ / ____ / _____

_____