Identifying Ugliness, Defining Beauty: A Focus Group Analysis of and Reaction to Ugly Betty

Adria Goldman
Gordon State College

Damion Waymer
Texas A&M University, dwaymer@tamu.edu

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Abstract

This article discusses the ideological construct "beauty" that permeates our society by focusing specifically on socially constructed ideals of beauty and ugliness as they are represented in media text, specifically, in the TV sitcom Ugly Betty. For this study we conducted focus group interview sessions to explore the influence an alternative representation of beauty and ugliness, as portrayed in the show Ugly Betty, has on college aged females' definition and interpretation of beauty—typically questions explored using traditional experimental and other quantitative methods. Moreover, this study provides insights into tensions surrounding how beauty and ugliness are defined and the implications of these definitions for women.

Keywords

Beauty, Ugly, Ugliness, Media, Focus Groups, Sitcoms, Ugly Betty

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A Focus Group Analysis of and Reaction to *Ugly Betty*

Adria Goldman
Gordon State College, Barnesville, Georgia, USA

Damion Waymer
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

This article discusses the ideological construct "beauty" that permeates our society by focusing specifically on socially constructed ideals of beauty and ugliness as they are represented in media text, specifically, in the TV sitcom *Ugly Betty.* For this study we conducted focus group interview sessions to explore the influence an alternative representation of beauty and ugliness, as portrayed in the show *Ugly Betty,* has on college aged females' definition and interpretation of beauty—typically questions explored using traditional experimental and other quantitative methods. Moreover, this study provides insights into tensions surrounding how beauty and ugliness are defined and the implications of these definitions for women. Keywords: Beauty, Ugly, Ugliness, Media, Focus Groups, Sitcoms, Ugly Betty

Beautiful Vs. Ugly? Representation in Ugly Betty

Ugly Betty, a television series which ran from 2006-2010 in the US, is the re-creation of the Spanish telenovela, Yo soy Betty la fea, (loosely translated as, "I am ugly Betty"). The television situation comedy (TV sitcom) was highly successful during its run, winning multiple Emmy and Golden Globe awards. The leading lady of the show, Betty Suarez (played by actress America Ferrera), is a short Latina with a curvaceous shape, frizzy hair, depicted as wearing red eye glasses and blue braces. She is often teased by her co-workers for not being beautiful or attractive. The show is set in New York, where Betty works as the assistant to Daniel Meade—the editor of the fashion magazine, *Mode*. Betty, who is often featured wearing flannel, polyester, and other styles of clothes that do not match in terms of the colors and patterns, stands out as being one of the few unattractive women on the show because she is surrounded by models and other employees who meet the stereotypical beauty standards. The fact that Betty is often teased for being unattractive by employees of the magazine who are attractive—those who are thin, no visible corrective lenses, no braces, fashionable, with straight hair—also draws attention to the physical characteristics that constitutes beauty and its opposite ugliness.

Ugly Betty was chosen for analysis in this study because it differs in several ways from other TV sitcoms that communicate the ideas of beauty, with the largest difference being that the show's leading actress is a woman that does not possess stereotypical attractive characteristics. This show also defines ugly, while other shows usually only directly define beauty (and thus ugliness is implied as being opposite of the beautiful). Finally, *Ugly Betty* features a stereotypical unattractive female who is happy, successful, and kindhearted, whereas in other sitcoms, success and happiness are typically linked to those who are also seen as attractive. Thus, compared to most media images, beauty and ugliness are presented differently in *Ugly Betty*.

For decades, scholars have studied media's influence on audiences. Moreover, researchers have found that media can play a role in shaping and influencing people's identities. Although some of the most cited works about media influence centers on "news" media effects of framing stories, news, and events (Entman, 1992, 1993), news programming is not the only medium that influences societal relationships, expectations, senses of identity, and construction of reality. Entertainment media, such as TV sitcoms can serve a similar function—extending far beyond the function of providing comedic relief for audiences. Within these plots and storylines, messages are often embedded that can create and/or reinforce ideologies beliefs.

For female television audience members, one ideology often created and enforced by media institutions via mediated messages is the concept of beauty. Moreover, several studies have explored the role media play in setting the societal standard for what women must look like to be considered "beautiful" (e.g., Berry, 2007; English, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994; Goodman, Morris, & Sutherland, 2008; Hendriks, 2002; Jackson, 1992). Television is a medium that has vast reach and viewership, and as such it can create and reinforce beauty standards. Take for instance, the majority of TV sitcoms feature a cast in which the female characters typically exhibit the traditional attributes that are supposed to equate to beauty, including but not limited to being thin and having smooth skin, long beautiful hair, and a youthful look (Berry, 2007).

In recent years, however, a TV sitcom emerged that differed in terms of the leading characters and the images presented. This show, *Ugly Betty*, featured a leading lady who supposedly conflicted with the ideal beauty image. At first glance, this television portrayal seemed to challenge the high beauty standards that have been set for women. However, upon closer analysis, the fact remains that the leading lady, although a warmhearted and hardworking individual, is still labeled as being "ugly."

This portrayal of beauty could have numerous influences on female audience members, including: reinforcing current beauty standards (because Betty might be deemed by many as not being an "ugly woman" thus raising the ceiling for what is considered beautiful as well as ugly), creating new and more realistic standards of beauty, exposing the flaws in current beauty standards, or helping create a conversation between audience members about the importance (or lack thereof) of beauty in society. This study explores these possibilities by questioning how women respond to and make sense of the new re-packaging of beauty in *Ugly Betty*.

Literature Review

Beauty and Media

Beauty standards, their prevalence in the media, and their effects on society have been a subject of growing interest in the research field (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Goodman, Morris, & Sutherland, 2008; Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008; Park, 2005; Rivero, 2003). Although it is quite an ambiguous term, beauty is a concept that is fairly agreed upon throughout society. Multi-dimensional and constantly changing beauty standards are created and embedded within society with the help of the media (Berry, 2007; English, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994). Women face stricter beauty standards that are difficult to achieve, despite their continuous efforts, as female media images are more often one-dimensional and idealistic (Hendriks, 2002).

Highlighting the extremeness of such one-dimensional and idealistic images, some scholars posit that these standards are a form of social control over women and are the result of "a violent backlash against feminism" (Wolf, 1991, p. 10). For example, feminist scholars,

for decades (see Bordo, 2003), have "shed light on the politics surrounding women's quests for beauty and their involvement with body modifications" (Luo, 2012, p. 70). Callaghan (1994), in her edited book for example, illuminated the reality that feminine beauty often serves as a means of patriarchal control that shapes and influences the everyday lives of women via socio-cultural as well as political contexts and norms. Bordo (2003) advanced feminist dialogues on beauty and cosmetic surgery, particularly, by incorporating the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power. More specifically, Bordo argued that although women who discipline their own bodies through cosmetic surgery or diets might seem to experience a sense of power and control, the sense of power is a form of an illusion—a personal achievement only, devoid of political effect and unable to change the oppressing cultural norms and beliefs perpetuated by the beauty system. So Wolf argued that as feminism fights against oppressive constructs such as beauty, the beauty system then in turn "uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement" (p. 10). As such, many feminist writers and researchers believe that the idea of beauty is a damaging and oppressive constraint on women that can cause psychological damage (Jeffreys, 2005).

In this sense, beauty is not a normal human or innate trait, but rather, it is presented as a commodity that can and must be obtained by women—through purchasing products and participating in the various beauty practices—in order to fit with the ideal (Berry 2007; Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Fulfilling the beauty requirements gives women a sense of fitting in and signals status and success. These beauty rituals also lead to the homogenization, edification, as well as standard and definition of beauty for women to follow (Berry, 2007).

Since the definition of beauty is created in part during the socialization process, then beauty must be defined at some point in the process by "mass media vehicles of popular culture" (English et. al, 1994, p. 51). Cultural studies scholars, for example, have explored the phenomenon of beauty from various perspectives ranging from the cultural influences of fashion on beauty and related standards (Craik, 1993) to the cultural practices of cosmetic surgery (Davis, 2003). In one form or another cultural studies researchers argue that media gatekeepers, in part, serve as creators of beauty ideals by presenting images of beauty and attractiveness for audiences and creating icons of beauty through their casting of actors and actresses that possess these beauty qualities (English et al., 1994). When media present a limited range of physical and facial attractiveness among leading characters, stricter beauty standards are created and communicated.

Beauty and Media Research

Several studies have been conducted exploring the prevalence of beauty in different mediums, many of which investigate beauty's effects on audience members. For example, in their edited volume, *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, Simpson, Utterson, and Shepherdon (2004), bring together several already published works into a thematically oriented, cohesive volume that addressed the impact of film on viewers. In this volume, one foundational work takes us back in history to analyze the prevailing myth of cinema's first audiences' reactions to the projections they witnessed—fleeing the theaters in terror (Gunnin, 2004). From the onset, cinema and film have had an impact on audiences. Thus, one should expect that film would also have an impact on a particular audience segment: women. Particularly relevant to the current study are works of well-known feminist scholars such as bell hooks (2004); however, one chapter in particular by Jackie Stacey (2004) stands out—for it captures the essence of film's impact on female viewers and beauty: Stacey's chapter (which was taken from her 1994 titled *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*) highlighted the "complexity of the pleasures of" cinematic identification—that is relating to and identifying with stars in film—as well as raised

questions about the relationship between stars and spectators and the processes of the formation of feminine identities through cinematic modes of address" (p. 125). She argued that female spectators' identities can be transformed through the processes of spectatorship as well as highlights the "contradictions of similarity and difference [between spectators and stars], recognition and separateness which characterize the relationship of female spectators to their star ideals" (p. 126).

Other mediums are also used in studies to explore the relationship between beauty and mediated influence. For example, Tan (1979) explored physical attractiveness in advertisements and its effect on female audience members. Goodman et al. (2008) looked at a different medium—magazines—and still found support for the effect of different media images of beauty on viewers. Similar to Tan, these researchers looked at a type of media marketing in their study on college women's responses to advertising models.

Additionally, Park (2005) conducted a study surveying college women to see the relationship between beauty images in fashion magazines and the women's desire to be thin. Park's research was fueled by the mass media's effect on women's attitudes towards eating and body images. Park found that fashion magazine images had both a direct and indirect effect on college female students' desire to be thin.

Although several research studies focus on the types of beauty images found in magazines and advertisements and their effects on women, other studies explore the effect of televised images not necessarily used for marketing products. Aubrey (2007) found evidence to support the effect of televised beauty images on women, and the study was in response to several other studies which explored whether hypersexual media images caused young people to become irresponsible or obsessed when it came to sexual interactions. Aubrey explored the effect different television programs had on college-aged women's sexual self-concept. To see the effect of different sexual content involving women, or sex scripts, Aubrey used four different television program genres—soap operas, music videos, prime-time sitcoms, and prime-time dramas and found that the amount of television watched per day consumed daily was a negative predictor of the women's sexual self-concept.

Additionally, researchers have turn to more cultural studies oriented lenses to analyze televised depictions of longstanding archetypes, such as the notion of the beauty and the beast (coupled with textual structure/plots of the shows and humor used within), and how those constructions worked to encourage viewers to accept patriarchy as a natural male trait and to trivialize sexism towards women as a laughing matter (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008). Researchers have also explored how female sitcoms can be liberating and make contributions to feminism objectives and ideals (Southard, 2008). In a similar vein, Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert (2007) explored three television makeover shows (*A Makeover Story*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover*) to see how the idea of beauty was communicated to female audiences. After analyzing episodes of each show, the authors found that this form of television programming communicated the idea that makeovers were a necessary practice women engaged in to become socially acceptable to both men and women. The body was presented as a "product of consumer culture" that women continuously tried to improve on by buying certain products or paying for certain procedures (p. 76). These shows also communicated the idea that women's main motivation for such drastic makeovers was to attract a male companion. In addition, these beauty practices—no matter how extreme—were illustrated as being painless as "the advantages of becoming a 'new you' far outweighs anything else including risks associated with surgery and psychological damage from low self-esteem" (p. 76).

All of these research findings augment and lay a foundation for the current study in a few ways. They each help illustrate the effects of mediated images on young women and help in explaining the ideas of beauty that women may already have when viewing the media.

These studies also present gaps that the current study fills. None explore the role of "ugliness" directly in the media, which is due largely to the fact that ugliness is rarely spotlighted. Although some might argue that plastic surgery can be the result of what some might deem ugly, no scholars have studied specifically what constitutes ugliness.

Young women's ideas of beauty are created in part by mediated images, interpersonal influences, and social comparison. Different mediums serve as key communicators of such idealized beauty images that provide young women with other objects of beauty to which they often compare themselves. Since adverse psychological effects can be a result from this social comparison, it is important to explore how different types of images being presented are interpreted and what connotations are tied with those images and interpretations. In sum, previously mentioned studies explore the effects of traditional portrayals of beauty (glamorized, "beautiful" leading characters), whereas the current study explores a more non-traditional portrayal of beauty standards (unattractive leading characters) to see if these images might have the ability to combat or to help reinforce the current beauty images and standards that young women use when creating their ideas, perceptions, and interpretations of beauty.

While methods such as experiments have been used, overwhelmingly, to study participants' perception of media effects, and cultural studies, critical theory, and ideological criticism have been used to analyze the potentially oppressive aspects of media and popular culture, we argue that a method that allows for having face-to-face discussion enables certain themes to emerge from participants—helping to uncover emergent connections between outside factors and influences on women's identity. Thus, by using focus groups as method guided by a cultural studies theoretical framework, we feel that we are able to better present the complexity found in an analysis of ideological constructs such as beauty and ugliness. In this study, focus groups were conducted with female undergraduates (ages 18+) to investigate issues of media, beauty, and ugliness specifically. By both promoting discussion about beauty and ugliness then presenting a brief media clip of the TV sitcom *Ugly Betty*, the researchers used the show to help facilitate discussions of beauty and ugliness. The following research questions are used to guide this study:

RQ 1: How do some women define and view beauty and ugliness?

RQ 2: What role can an alternative framing of beauty, as depicted in *Ugly Betty,* play in women's interpretation of beauty?

Theoretical Framework

This study, grounded in the cultural studies tradition, focuses on issues of representation and ideology. Cultural studies in general, and cultural studies of popular culture in specific, draw from various theoretical perspectives and approaches (Storey, 1996). For this study, we are using a theoretical framework rooted in ideological criticism (Foss, 2009) to explore how beauty and ugliness are represented in the TV sitcom *Ugly Betty.*

Stuart Hall (2003) proposed, through representation, discourse and image(s) combine to fix meaning. For many marginalized groups this process confines them in a state where they are victimized by stereotypes, and with a mass production of consistent images and discourse, a "reality" (i.e., false reality) is fixed and consumed (i.e., accepted) by the majority. As the public continues to consume this "reality," the system responds by producing (and re-producing) information to support the demand (du Gay et al., 1997). In regard to beauty and media, media help to communicate beauty standards through the images presented to society (Berry, 2007). For example, research shows that models, actors, actresses, and others in the media spotlight traditionally possess the same characteristics—

tall, slim, radiant skin, youthful, etc. The media beauty standards are especially the case for women. These repeating images create beauty ideals which women often feel they must achieve (Hendriks, 2002). Moreover, with the pressure to feel beautiful, become beautiful, and/or maintain an acquired level of beauty, women might undergo several processes ranging from something minimal as applying cosmetics to something riskier to their health such as undergoing plastic surgery. These beauty rituals and the ideological import attached to them can have physical and psychological effects on females directly or indirectly, taking such forms as anorexia nervosa or low self-esteem (Jeffreys, 2005; Krcmar et al., 2008). These adverse effects, derived in part from the unrealistic representations of beauty, best illustrate Hall's (2003) argument that representations are never objective; they are steeped in ideology, and they can produce a variety of meanings negotiated from person to person. Some of these meanings result in women taking less or more drastic measures to achieve ideological beauty standards.

To conduct our analysis, we followed the steps set forth by Foss (2009) for conducting ideological criticism research: select an artifact, analyze the artifact (which involves identifying the ideology in the artifact, analyzing the interests the ideology serves, and uncovering the strategies used in the artifact to promote the ideology), establish a research question, and finally write the critical essay. We have followed this prescription by choosing the show *Ugly Betty* for analysis and by viewing and analyzing the show and what it portrays in terms of beauty and ugliness. However, where this study differs and extends the application of ideological criticism is by then forming the research question that explores how the chosen artifact might influence young women's perception of beauty and ugliness by directly exposing them to the artifact and then analyzing their responses to the artifact and discussion that ensued. Following the methods section below is the presentation of the ideological criticism and the qualitative data results.

However, before we continue, we engage in the process of reflexivity and provide the context in which we are involved with this topic of beauty and media and how that involvement influenced the presentation of results to follow.

As first author, I am an African American woman and assistant professor; I have studied media, identity, and women since I was an undergraduate. I am only about 6 years older than the participants in the study that follows. Working with this topic, these focus groups, and critically interrogating beauty is interesting yet somewhat difficult. As a faithful viewer of *Ugly Betty* who was a bit refreshed to see a new portrayal of beauty, I wondered how others would interpret these images. I have never been considered stereotypically beautiful; thus, this topic and show resonates with me. The second author, an African American male, served as the first author's project advisor. His interests lie in issues of communication, race, social class, gender, and identity. In sum, we believe that women continue to be oppressed by lofty standards, thinking they can achieve unachievable beauty standards; thus, this research area should be pursued with much fervor. And this is our goal in this research endeavor.

Method

This study uses focus groups to gauge *Ugly Betty's* influence on college-aged female audience members' perceptions of beauty. College-aged females are part of a technologically savvy generation that has grown up with television and sitcoms. These females also live within rife, peer pressure filled communities where parental oversight is virtually nonexistent.

The purpose of this study is to explore how women make sense of mediated images of beauty. For goals such as these, methods involving discussion with or amongst the

participants are most helpful. Face-to-face interactions with groups of individuals allow for a dialogue in which themes about a particular topic are able to emerge.

Focus Group as Method

The authors conducted focus groups to assess the influence of media images of beauty on college-aged female audience members' perceptions of beauty. Focus groups can be used to obtain this same type of information and is credited for being faster and less costly than individual interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). But more importantly, focus groups are an optimal method for discussing media's influence on beauty because beauty is a socially constructed standard; as such, it is key to see how a group of women in the same peer group would view and discuss beauty. Thus, this method allows the researchers to address, adequately, the research questions.

According to Krueger (1994) focus groups are "carefully planned discussion[s] designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 6). A moderator is carefully selected to guide discussion and to create and maintain a comfortable environment for dialogue. During the focus groups, the women were shown a carefully selected clip of *Ugly Betty* and were asked a series of questions pertaining to their perceptions of beauty and its importance for women. The clip was a small section of the first episode from the first season of the sitcom. The clip featured the leading lady, Betty Suarez, at a job interview interacting with another cast member who is her antithesis in terms of beauty and attractiveness. During the interaction, Betty's friendly attempts to converse are shot down by the other character's harsh and cold attitude. The other character was a fashion model who met the traditional standards of beauty. Viewers see that the male interviewer rejects Betty, due to her appearance, for the employment position. The clip is concluded. This clip is chosen because by having two cast members representing two different physical appearances, the female participants are able to see how the TV sitcom defined beautiful and ugly.

Participants were seated around a table where their body was concealed and they were able to see each participant involved in the discussion as well as the moderator. Research on focus groups as a methodological practice suggest that participants are arranged so that they could provide and receive eye contact from the focus group moderator and each other, and they should be placed behind tables so that they do not feel uncomfortable being completely exposed to everyone in the room (Krueger, 1994). Considering the discussion topic, these arrangements were adapted, especially given that some participants may have felt insecure about their own physical appearances if it does (or does not) match with the media clip shown or other participants in the room.

Recruitment of Participants

Three focus groups sessions were constructed consisting of 11 members per session in order to answer the study's research questions. Although the most common rule of thumb is that most projects consist of four to six focus groups (Morgan, 1996) and that the traditional recommendation that focus groups be composed of 10 to 12 participants is of doubtful value" (Krueger, 1998, p. 17), only a small number of focus groups (and the slightly larger size of ther groups) were warranted since the project dealt with a homogenous group of individuals (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Thus, 33 female participants (25 Caucasian and 8 African-American, Latina, Asian, Asian Indian, Latina/White) participated, with ages ranging from 18 to 21 with an average age of 19. Students attended a large rural research university (with more than 20,000

undergraduate students) in the Southeastern US. Given the university's location and demographics, in an attempt to have a more diverse participant pool, participants were recruited from across the university (10 total majors and 9 of them outside of communication), and they represented majors such as health/nutrition, economics, biology, marketing, English, and political science.

Data Generation and Collection

The first author, a female, moderated each focus group. All sessions were audio and video taped—common practice within research that uses this method (Morgan, 1997). A female graduate student operated the camera and tape recorder and code names were assigned each participant. The moderator and camera operator of the focus group sessions were familiar with the topic being discussed (and should be) and were "compatible with the group to be interviewed" (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 21). As the prior research studies referenced above show, women encounter strict beauty standards presented in the media and reinforced in society; thus, focus groups consisting of only female participants guided by a female moderator allowed for a deeper and more candid discussion of the role of beauty, its definition, and importance.

After completing consent forms and being introduced to the study and topic, the moderator asked the group of women a series of questions about their view of beauty and ugliness, its importance in society, and its prevalence in the media. Once the questions were complete, the women viewed the short clip of *Ugly Betty*. At the time of the interviews, participants also completed a brief survey that requested demographic data.

After viewing the clip, the female participants were asked another series of questions in parallel format to those asked during the pre-media exposure discussion in order to see whether the previous discussion and media clip provided the women with other means of viewing and discussing beauty and ugliness. Following the post-media exposure discussion, participants were debriefed and provided with the research team's contact information. All comments made during the taped sessions and the notes taken by the first author counted as data.

Data Analytic Techniques

After the data were gathered, the authors identified and verified previously transcribed interviews against videotapes, changed names and locations to preserve confidentiality, and began analyzing data.

Each of the authors first watched the videos and then read and analyzed the transcripts of participants. The multiple readings by all parties ensured that the authors' potential different perceptions about beauty and ugliness and media would be addressed via reading and discussion. As the reading and rereading of transcripts and watching the video occurred (stopping the recordings frequently to discuss the meaning of statements), the authors began the process of memoing, comparing and interrogating categories using generative questions, and developing themes using grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001).

Using inductive analysis that prescribes linking and relating sub-categories by denoting conditions, context, and consequences, categorical groups of responses based on the structure of the interview guide, interviews were examined to answer the research questions by identifying repetitive themes and concepts that addressed the questions until the list became repetitive and exhaustive (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process allows researchers to analyze the data without making assumptions and involves paying close

attention to the data beginning at the point of data collection. Throughout the iterative process of analysis, the researchers wrote memos that summarized relationships between codes, captured insights and impressions into the data, and elaborated on key conceptual issues (Glaser, 1978). Themes of responses were derived through a method of constant comparison and evaluation of the transcripts, looking at causal conditions, context, and interactions. Finally, the researchers examined the central ideas that emerged from the aggregate of concepts and made inferences and recommendations based upon them.

Third-Party Approval

The above mentioned university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for this study. All steps were taken to ensure ethical research practice to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality.

Organization of Results

It is important to note that participants were asked a uniform set of questions that asked participants about the influence media (e.g., TV, movies, advertisements) play in shaping society's view of beauty for women including their own. We also, asked them to evaluate beauty standards for women, and asked them the role beauty (or lack thereof) plays in success in society, their careers, and romantic relationships. What emerged, then, were different emphases about beauty and media influence, as well as identity constructions surrounding beauty on which members of our three focus groups spontaneously focused.

Focus Group Results and Interpretations

Our findings display our participants' perceptions and identity positionings about beauty and ugliness in society in general, and how a show like *Ugly Betty*, reflects and at times reinforces discourse and societal practices propagated in part via media. In the major themes or sensemaking patterns found in their discourse, many of our participants struggled with defining ugliness and viewed beauty as a personalized concept (in the eye of the beholder). What follows, is first a discussion of emergent themes that surfaced in the discussion prior to the media clip. These themes presented below serve to address RQ1. Next are the themes that emerged after the participants watched and then discussed the media clip. These themes serve to address RQ2.

Three themes emerged in terms of RQ1:

1. beauty as a personalized concept;
2. beauty as closely related to confidence;
3. beauty as defined by certain physical characteristics.

Beauty as Personalized Concept

Beauty as personalized concept is defined as relative, non-universal definition of beauty, meaning that beauty means different things to different people. For example, participants said that "beauty was in the eye of the beholder"; Lisa answered, "But I mean, like everyone has different taste. Like what I think is beautiful might not be what you think. So it's kind of like based on your own perception or where you're from." Rose said, "I think everyone has a different concept of what is beautiful and what is not. Like to some people, some people… blonde hair and blue eyes is the way to go. For others it's brunette. Or bigger

boobs, bigger butt, thinner waist. It just depends on the person." Participants, in a follow-up question, were asked if a universal beauty standard existed. Some participants identified a few standards—The Golden Rule for a symmetrical face and the preference for thin over fat or tall over short.

Beauty as Importance of Confidence

Beauty as importance of confidence is defined not as a physical attribute but as an attitude state, meaning that if a woman carried herself as beautiful, then she by definition is beautiful. For example, participants were encouraged to describe beauty in terms of what it meant to them personally. It is here that the confidence theme arose. Judy stated beauty is about "Being comfortable with how you feel and how you perceive yourself." There was also a distinction made between being confident and being cocky, the latter of which was deemed a quality of unattractiveness. Monique stated, "I kind of think at the same time with confidence, like some people are like cocky or like you know they carry themselves with too much strut and they think they're too classy for people. And I just think that's a turn off for a lot of people. I think even for like guys when they see women like that." While confidence was linked to beauty, a lack of humility in conjunction with confidence was deemed less than beautiful.

Physical Beauty as Beauty

Physical beauty is defined as the stereotypical mediated and socially constructed and accepted standards of beauty in contemporary society. In response to this line of questioning, physical characteristics were abundant in participants' descriptions despite them saying beauty is a personalized concept and in the eye of the beholder.

Physical characteristics were abundant in the description of beauty during this initial discussion. Lily responded, "I think there are always going to be some qualities that are deemed more attractive. Like, you know thinner as opposed to fatter or something. Or maybe taller as opposed to shorter. I mean, it really depends." Continuing to include weight as a factor in physical beauty, Zara stated, "In terms of physical beauty, I don't think it's beautiful to be like stick thin. I mean, women were made to have curves and I mean if you're born that way [thin] that's one thing, but if you try and make yourself that way, I don't think that's beautiful." Zara overtly deems drastic thinness as being a sign of unattractiveness. She also subtly, and perhaps unknowingly, classifies natural weight as being a characteristic of beauty. While Lily's response matches the traditional framing of beautiful weight (thinness) explained in past literature, Zara disagrees and shines light on the beauty of natural, healthy weight.

Another characteristic mentioned, further defining the relationship between beauty and physical features, was the concept of natural beauty. Ashley stated, "I think people can end up coming like over done if over processed, like so many beauty products and things. Too much make up, too much tanning, too much hair dye can detract from someone's natural beauty." Related to this idea of natural beauty was the concept of physical uniqueness and individuality. Elizabeth responded, "Also, with like plastic surgery and stuff you lose your uniqueness when you get plastic surgery. Because then, like, everyone looks the same. Part of beauty is kind of the unique, being and having something no one else has." Both Ashley and Elizabeth contributed to the definition of beauty by explaining what characteristics were not attractive—those things that take away from a women's uniqueness. Unlike more traditional views of beauty, plastic surgery was looked down on by the females because it took away from a woman's individuality rather than adding to her beauty.

Following the definition of beauty, the participants were asked to define or describe ugliness for women. This was asked to assess the women's pre-existing views and definitions of ugliness and to see if it matched how ugliness was traditionally framed in society and by media. The discussion ultimately focused on two themes—physical ugliness and inner ugliness.

Physical Ugliness

Physical ugliness is defined as the socially accepted standards that are considered not beautiful. During the pre-video discussion of beauty, the participants generally agreed that there was no universal definition. However, with ugliness, the emphasis was on the difficulty of defining only physical ugliness. While physical characteristics were mentioned by some of the women, the dominant idea among the females was that there was no way of characterizing someone as physically ugly and that it was more so characterized by inward qualities than outward. Ashley said, "Physically I don't, I don't think I ever go through my day and look at someone and think 'oh their ugly'…I can't think of something physically that I would categorize as like ugly or something." Alice discussed how the idea of inner ugliness comes with age: "I think like as you get older or you've gotten older, I feel like you look more inward for beauty or ugliness." In terms of the universal definition of ugliness, Jasmine said it is, "I don't know if there is a universal standard." Of course, it is possible that the females did not feel comfortable discussing characteristics that created physical ugliness out of fear of insulting or offending other women in the study. Mentioning physical characteristics of beauty does not carry a big risk of offending someone, as beauty traditionally has a more positive and socially acceptable definition.

However, with the negative definition attached to ugliness, potentially linking someone in the focus group to one of those physical characteristics may cause a bigger threat.

Inner Ugliness

Inner ugliness is defined as the personality and attitude traits that would be considered not beautiful including but not limited to meanness, rudeness, and overly cynical. Descriptions of inner ugliness were much more prevalent in participants' responses. Inner ugliness was characterized as a person's negative attitude or bad personality: Amy stated, "Attitude…the cockiness thing. I mean that's huge. I mean…doesn't matter what she looks like, if a girl is too much into herself or something like that, you're just like that's not cute." Here, the participant explains how the inner quality (cockiness) is more important than a person's physical appearance. Having a bad attitude was also identified as a characteristic of inner ugliness and was believed to be more important than a person's physical appearance. Alicia said, "I know people who, when we first meet them they're really pretty and you're just like 'wow.' And then you talk to them and then at the end of it you're like 'oh my gosh, they're not pretty anymore.'" "I think you're ugly too if you don't have any substance to you. Like you know, there's a lot of girls that I feel like will, you know, look very gorgeous all day long and make sure they're constantly like checking their appearance but they don't do anything fulfilling with their day." Comments like this show how participants understood inner ugliness as being equal to having a bad personality or attitude and outweighed physical appearance. It is also interesting to note that earlier participants noted confidence as a sign of beauty; thus, it appears it is a thin line between confidence/over confidence and inner ugliness.

The Video Introduction of the Clip of Betty and the Model

First, media depictions of beauty and ugliness on *Ugly Betty* were effective. Participants were able to identify the dichotomy established: the model represented beauty, Betty represented ugliness. When participants were prompted to address Betty's physical appearance, what emerged was an agreement Betty was ugly according to society's beauty standards—though they felt she wasn't naturally ugly: 1) "they dumb down her looks." Jessie added, "She's like one of those girls you're like 'she could be really pretty, but let's take her out of that suit. Let's do this."

When participants were prompted to address the model's physical appearance, what emerged was an agreement that the model was beautiful according to society's beauty standards. Physical descriptions included: tall, skinny, pleasing to the eye, good fashion sense, and tight hair. The group generally agreed that, while society's standards deem her as attractive, they personally felt as if she was only outwardly beautiful and ugly within because she was characterized as: snobby, bad attitude, grumpy, snarky, dismissive (to Betty), bitchy, and a witch.

Post-Clip Discussion of Beauty

The idea that beauty was based on a person's own definition did not re-emerge during the second discussion on beauty following the clip. It appears as if a new interpretation of beauty emerged. Perhaps the women began to realize, after the second discussion, that there were some similarities in their responses with those of the other participants. In regards to the first research question, the discussion about beauty left the participants no longer feeling strongly that beauty was difficult to define. By talking about beauty's definition, the women no longer explained it as being personalized to specific people. This is not to say that the women no longer believed beauty was "in the eye of the beholder," but they no longer devoted the discussion time to discussing how this is so. Instead, they used the discussion time to explain the ways in which beauty is actually defined.

Following the clip and during the second discussion, confidence did re-emerge but it was not as dominant as in the pre-media discussion. At this point, the women included confidence in a different theme—the description and importance of inner beauty—something that was not initially discussed as strongly. When first asked this question in the beginning of the session, confidence was the only inner quality that was mentioned numerous times and a stronger emphasis was placed on outer qualities. However, after viewing the *Ugly Betty* clip, the women mentioned several inner qualities that were necessary for beauty. For example, several of the participants said that beauty was defined as being friendly, not rude, having a nice personality, being intelligent, and having a good attitude. Macy described a beautiful person as followed: "Yeah, like they're smiling when they enter the room. And you can see their personality is nice and friendly. Judy commented that a beautiful person has "a warm fuzzy feeling over a cold harsh attitude."

The descriptions of inner beauty included much of the language used when the women discussed Betty and the model. Qualities that were considered to be positive in Betty—her attitude, confidence, personality, smart, etc.—were used in their interpretations of beauty.

Also, the opposite inner qualities deemed as unattractive, possessed by the model, were included as well—for example, being nice and friendly as opposed to be rude and dismissive like the model. The similarities in the definitions suggest an influence of the nontraditional framing of beauty and ugliness on the participants' definition of inner beauty.

In response to RQ 2, the alternative framing of beauty in *Ugly Betty* could have played a role in the women's definition of beauty. Although confidence, an aspect of inner beauty, was mentioned in the pre-video discussion, a stronger emphasis was placed on inner qualities following the clip, and the descriptions matched those of the characters.

Although physical characteristics were mentioned in the definition of beauty following the media clip, participants overwhelmingly altered their articulation of how they described physical beauty. Unlike the first discussion where the females listed actual physical features of beauty, this time when asked how they would describe beauty the women expressed physical beauty as being about the presentation of self. Macy explained how a good presentation of self was necessary and not hard to do: "Yeah, well groomed and well kept. You don't have to put a lot of effort. Like you don't have to be completely done up [to be beautiful]." When the females described Betty, they made special effort to highlight that Betty was not ugly, but her presentation was ugly. Additionally, they described the model as being overly glamorized or too "done up" to the point where it looked ridiculous. For this reason, combined with her attitude, the model was not considered to be very attractive in their eyes. Describing "beauty as presentation" in the discussion of the characters and in the discussion of beauty after the clip suggest that *Ugly Betty* prompted other discussions about what counted as beautiful. This finding provides initial support for the second research question, as the alternative presentation of beauty via the *Ugly Betty* clip potentially influenced participants' interpretation of beauty. Like their explanations of differences between Betty's physical appearance and presentation, their definition of beauty now focused on how beauty was more so about how people presented themselves. They had a new way of describing physical beauty for women that was not present in initial discussions of beauty.

Post-Clip Discussion of Media's Influence on Beauty and Ugliness

After the women were asked to focus in on the influence of the media, they agreed that it did have an influence on their beauty standards. However, for this question, the women described the media's role of influencing their ideas of beauty and ugliness in a negative light. Media was held responsible for creating unrealistic images that led to unrealistic standards—a role mentioned earlier, but now was being described as being negative. For example, Rose mentioned unrealistic images in magazines: "I think it's kind of a problem because if you look at magazines, models typically seem to be stick thin and then girls get this false impression that to be pretty or beautiful you have to be a stick figure and that's just completely unrealistic to have to starve yourself to achieve that beauty." She identifies media's influence as "a problem" and then her use of sarcasm—"to starve yourself"—helps to show the media's role in this negative light. Another label given to the media as influencers also contributed to its negative role. Some of the women stated that the media were also hypocrites for not matching their images with their claims.

In terms of *Ugly Betty,* the women explained that the show was an example of media trying to break the mold and present new images and avoid the hypocrisy. Other examples of shows and products that attempted to do this (e.g., Dove and *How to Look Good Naked*) were mentioned and commended for their efforts. Zara responded, "Well, I think in the mainstream TV, it is becoming more prevalent to show like different types of people…so that's helping to sort of bridge the gap between what is real beauty and what the media presents as beauty." Others acknowledged shows that enforced stereotypes, but gave credit to those that are trying to make a difference. For example, Lily stated, "I think there's definitely some shows that almost critique it [the beauty industry] too. It's like, where there are some shows that are going to enforce the stereotypes, there are others that, maybe even subtly, make you think about it [those stereotypes] more."

Additionally, during the second discussion following the media clip, the inability to define physical ugliness did not re-emerge. This is suspected to be because of the discussion. There is still the possibility that discussing physical characteristics of ugliness was uncomfortable and too risky for the participants. Regardless, after the first discussion, the women no longer considered the lack of a definition for physical ugliness to be an important theme to discuss.

Additionally, unlike the physical ugliness theme, the definitions for inner ugliness did re-emerge in the second discussion and they were linked to having an ugly attitude or personality. The only difference in their definitions of inner ugliness was that the comments in the second discussion pertained more to how a person should act properly towards people or within interactions. When asked what ugliness is, Judy responded, "Rudeness. Just being closed off and dismissive." Monique used a personal anecdote which helped illuminate this definition as well: "My roommate is very quiet, she doesn't have, like, people skills. And that's kind of what turns her off for people, you know, turns people away from her." Sharing her personal experience about her roommate helped to define inner ugliness as not being able or willing to communicate with others. Both Judy and Monique's comments are examples of the responses for inner ugliness in the second discussion that mirrored the characteristics given to the model from the media clip. The model was described as being rude, dismissive, and unwilling to converse with Betty. Furthermore, these inner qualities she was deemed to possess were also why she was described as being ugly on the inside despite her attractive outer appearance.

The women still described a negative attitude as being a big characteristic of inner ugliness. However, the clip influenced them by providing them with a new way to define this negative attitude. Another similarity between the pre- and post-video discussion was the participants' belief that inner qualities were more important than physical characteristics. Lisa stated, "I think it's personality both ways. Like women are always saying things like, she's not cute but I like her personality…if they're cool then we give them more credit for their looks or if you don't think they're cool you take away from their looks." Note how Lisa still does not use the term "ugly," but explains the opposite of cute as simply being "not cute." Although during an earlier part of the discussion physical ugliness could not be defined, now it clearly shows that the opposite of attractiveness can be identified even if it is not labeled as being ugly. During the discussion, the women still refused to define physical ugliness, but continue to be averse to what they deem as inner ugliness, thus assigning greater import to this construct.

While openly defining ugliness for women, the discussion and other participants' comments did not encourage the females to change their understanding of inner ugliness. Rather, they continued to discuss it in the same manner.

Discussion

While the motives for creating such a show as *Ugly Betty* are unclear, there are multiple interpretations that could arise from the analysis of this show. This show could exist to serve as a parody of the fashion industry, which is often credited as being a key communicator of beauty requirements. Some may argue that this show existed to illustrate how women who are not necessarily attractive can still find happiness and be successful. A different assumption, which sparked the initial interest in this study, is that this show could be responsible for re-framing the idea of beauty by showing females what they *should not* look like. While *Ugly Betty* presents some positive characteristics of stereotypically physically unattractive women, the fact remains that Betty is still being labeled as "ugly." The question is: do these images of the "ugly"—yet intelligent and kindhearted—young woman positively

or negatively shape the way in which young females talk about, make sense of, and define beauty for themselves? No one in the sessions viewed themselves as ugly. No one in the sessions deemed themselves as beautiful. Perhaps these new portrayals of ugliness present a more realistic experience for women? We doubt it because the women said that the producers were clearly trying to portray Betty as ugly though they did not find her naturally ugly, but actually pretty. If this is what media is depicting as ugly, then does the show *Ugly Betty* indirectly raise the ideological bar for what counts as beautiful?

Implications for Future Research

This study actually leads to more questions than it actually answered. Some might deem this as a sign of the lack of strength of the project and its subsequent analysis. However, we feel it is the greatest contribution of the study. For example, an interesting question arises as we reflect on the women's discussion (or lack thereof) of physical ugliness. One possibility addressed earlier is that the women may have felt uncomfortable discussing beauty and ugliness in a group of females. Although they expressed that they could not define ugliness, it was clearly identifiable as they discussed Betty's "ugly presentation." However, upon further discussion of the data we realized that the object of our research had an affective influence on our subjectivity.

The first author, an avid viewer of *Ugly Betty,* began to worry if participants would feel comfortable discussing beauty and ugliness with her based on the way participants assessed her (the researcher's) beauty—for the first author wears eye glasses, did not dress in designer clothes, does not have long hair, does not have a slim body frame. Did participants consider any of the researcher's qualities to be "ugly"? If they did, would participants be willing to express this? Were discussions hindered at all by the researcher's appearance? Would the researcher have been offended to hear her characteristics mentioned? Would that have affected how she conducted remaining sessions? What role did her ethnicity play in the way participants discussed beauty and ugliness? In one session, the first author was the only African American present and in others, she was one of two. Participants identified culture as being an influence on the way women create, follow, and evaluate beauty standards. At one point, an African American mentioned how Black Entertainment Television (BET) communicated different beauty standards than Country Music Television. The participant would not go into further detail when probed. It is possible that the participant felt that she was the only one to consider what was depicted on BET as being beautiful and thus withheld here perceived "minority" opinion.

Conversely, if the moderator met all traditional beauty standards, participants who did not meet these standards may have felt uncomfortable. This suggests that future research on beauty and the popular culture that involves focus groups might need to be conducted virtually with no images available or by allowing participants to use an avatar. Either approach, however, likely would influence the results of the data—for people might judge the avatar on what they deem is physically beautiful or ugly or people might be more willing to share or conversely might be more reticent to open up about discussions of ugliness with people they have no image (real or virtual) of. Both are interesting avenues for future research.

Furthermore, the aforementioned questions based on the first author's experiences conducting these focus group interviews highlight that researchers at times can be and are affected by their topics of inquiry. At multiple points, the first author was excited to know that the definitions of beauty and ugliness in the minds of other women were beginning to change and were no longer restricted to the traditional definitions. The first author felt connected with the participants. This sheds light on further directions for future research.

Perhaps it is time for researchers in popular communication to more closely analyze and share how we might be strongly influenced by our own research topics, even when we believe otherwise.

Although the current study produces several noteworthy findings, it is not free of limitations. Focus groups are a viable qualitative research method for assessing the way in which individuals feel about and discuss certain issues. In this study, the focus groups helped to assess how the women discussed beauty and how the discussion changed after exposure to the *Ugly Betty* media clip. However, even with these findings, there is always the possibility that other influences played a part in the subsequent discussion following the clip which could not be assessed by the focus group method. For example, perhaps the women were reminded of personal stories after viewing the clip that they then shared in the second discussion. Perhaps the discussion itself, absent the video clip, would have generated the new definitions and perceptions of beauty and ugliness. However, there is no way to assess if this was so via this method. What can be said is that some changes of definition and perceptions of beauty did change shortly after viewing the clip—whether the clip primed the responses or not.

A related limitation is that it is difficult to ascertain whether the influence observed was temporary and the result of the information and images provided via the clip or because of a change in the females' actual beliefs. More specifically, since the focus group sessions each happened in one day and follow up discussions were not conducted, there is no way to determine if the women carried these influences with them and still used them in their discussion of beauty and ugliness after the study session had ended. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if alternative presentations of beauty and ugliness as depicted in *Ugly Betty* play a role in altering women's definitions and perceptions of beauty and ugliness long-term.

Conclusion

Beauty and its effects on female viewers have been topics of several research studies in the past. Those findings illustrate how media's portrayals of beauty influence the way in which women evaluate themselves and others based on beauty standards that can be unrealistic. Until the current study, no research explored the influence of mediated images of both beauty and ugliness. As images of ugliness began to appear in the mass media, we deemed it necessary to explore the influence of these images on women's evaluation of beauty. When considering media and reviewing literature on beauty, it was clear that the traditional packaging of beauty was the same across several mediums. However, the show *Ugly Betty* took an alternative route by introducing "ugliness" and presenting beauty in a different way.

Although limitations were present, the focus group sessions with college-aged females made a strong contribution by illustrating the influence of open discussions and an alternative presentation of beauty. This study presents new information for the field of beauty, ugliness, and media. This study not only shows how and why beauty should be studied, but also demonstrates an innovative use for focus group by using it, guided by cultural studies frameworks, as a means of analyzing both popular media and its influences simultaneously. It appears that more can be revealed, via research, about the role of beauty and ugliness (whether positive or negative) in media, in society, and especially in the lives of women. Because of that fact, coupled with the reality that beauty standards continue to be oppressive to many women, this research area should be pursued feverously.

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Author Note

Adria Goldman is an assistant professor at Gordon State College where she specializes in the study of TV shows and their influences on perceptions of socially labeled minority, oppressed, and/or underprivileged groups.

Damion Waymer is an associate professor of communication at Texas A&M University. His research projects address fundamental concerns about issues of diversity in general and issues of race, class, and gender, specifically, and how these social constructions shape and influence the ways that various audiences receive, react, and respond to certain messages.

All correspondence can be made to Damion Waymer, PhD. Texas A&M University, Department of Communication, 4234 TAMU Bolton Hall, College Station, TX 77843 Email: dwaymer@tamu.edu; Phone: 979.845.5500.

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