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Perceived Personal Attractiveness and Self-Improvement Practices

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the results of a sociological survey of personal attractiveness perceptions and self-improvement practices (exercise, dieting, plastic surgery, learning, etc.) in Yekaterinburg (Russia). The purpose of the research is to identify age- and gender-related similarities and differences in the perceptions of attractive appearance and personality traits among Russians. The survey was conducted in 2019 and covered 680 people of both sexes and different age groups. It also included 33 in-depth interviews with respondents from different age groups. The survey results have shown that people resort to various practices for enhancing their physical shape and personality in accordance with established stereotypes of outer and inner beauty. Younger generations of Russians continue to reproduce gender asymmetry in their ideas of feminine and male beauty. The research has also brought to light a new system of gender inequality: women appear to be much more active in their pursuit of a healthy body and personality growth than men. Inhabitants of Yekaterinburg most frequently resort to such self-improvement practices as exercise and healthy eating. People in all age groups gave lower ratings to such qualities as stamina and productivity at work, which shows their lack of awareness of the role these attributes play in acquiring new knowledge and skills in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

body, attractiveness, beauty ideals, body modification, socio-demographic groups, gender differences

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a call for new ways to approach the complex relations between the social and the biological in the social sciences. The main principles in the study of this biological/social division were laid by Herbert Spencer (1876), Emile Durkheim (1895), and Ludwig Gumplowicz (1885). At the current stage, sociology studies interactions between biological and socio-cultural dimensions in human actions (Jackson & Scott, 2014; Meloni, 2014). The interpretative schemes used to explain the behaviours of social groups and communities now include knowledge of biological reality and the physiological functions of the human organism.

Sociologists' current interest in the body as a bio-social construct is determined by the following factors. The first is the rapid development of medicine and biotechnologies (the Human Genome Project, assisted reproductive technologies, cloning, transplantology, neurointerfaces, exoskeletons, and so on), which raises a number of serious questions regarding the enhancement and modification of the human body in accordance with the dominant cultural standards and ideals or against them (marginal practices of body modification as a form of protest behaviour).

The second factor is the explosive growth of the beauty and wellness industry, which makes these services more accessible for various social groups. Plastic surgery (Higgins & Wysong, 2018), fitness services (Crossley, 2006), nutrition counselling and diet programs (Crossley, 2004), and invasive and non-invasive beauty treatments (Yazdandoost, Hayatbini, Farid, Gharaee & Latifi, 2016) have turned into profitable, actively developing areas and have already become an important part of people's lives. These services are now seen as valuable instruments to enhance one's chances for upward social mobility and success in career and family life.

The third factor is the increase in the perceived value of beauty and vitality and the rise of the healthy living movement. More and more people are trying to prolong their working lives by increasing their investment in fitness and healthier diets. The pursuit of beauty and longevity stems from people's desire to improve their inherent or acquired capabilities. Nevertheless, although new practices and technologies allow us to prevent some diseases and delay death, the fundamental laws of nature cannot be changed, as we still get sick, grow old and die.

Sociology seeks to explain and justify modern practices of body modification, identify the factors that determine the development of such practices, and consider interpretations of the human body as embedded in contemporary cultural and social contexts.

Theoretical framework

The human body is a biological entity that grows, reaches maturity, and ages. The body is also affected by processes of socialization as an individual learns to conform to the established socio-cultural norms. The human body can be transformed in accordance with its owner's wishes. According to Michel Foucault (1975), the perception and use of the body is a social construct. Bryan S. Turner (1984) believed that the body can be seen as a social object constructed, controlled, and disciplined by culture. In the modern world, the body is considered attractive and acceptable until it becomes old (Turner, 1987).

Within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, the body is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). People are simultaneously biological creatures and social agents (Bourdieu, 1990). Social distances and norms characteristic of a specific culture and type of social relationship are "inscribed" into the body. In mid-twentieth-century Russia, for example, name tattoos on phalanges symbolized aggressive masculinity and their owner's belonging to the criminal world. In modern societies, tattoos are often seen as a way to stand out from the crowd and to emphasize one's individuality. When New Zealand Maori women reach adolescence, they start getting traditional female *moko kauae* chin tattoos, considered to be a physical manifestation of their true identity.

Body maintenance and enhancement require significant investments of time, effort, and money, although the result may still fall short of individual and social expectations. The body as an integral part of a human being may also be seen as a form of commodified physical capital (e.g. the body's shape and active capacity) and be used as an object of self-presentation in various markets, as well as an article of exchange, sale, or rent. Fashion models convert their bodily capital into economic capital. In their turn, clients may hire a fashion model and use his or her body for presentation of goods and services, thus converting it into their own symbolical capital.

In postindustrial culture, the body is seen as a tool for enhancing one's chances in life and realizing one's aspirations. For men and women alike, increasing societal pressure to remain healthy, young, and beautiful for as long as possible is often accompanied by a growing feeling of inadequacy in comparison with the perfect body images circulated by mass media (Sklar, 2015). Body image is created by interactions between one's thoughts, views, perceptions, and attitudes in relation to one's body (Cash, 2004). Evaluation of one's own body against a certain ideal determines the individual's position and status within a social group and social system as a whole. Body image dissatisfaction is detrimental to one's self-esteem and impairs the general quality of life (Clay, Vignoles & Dittmar, 2005). For example, the emphasis on a slim female body in contemporary society has led to the spread of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Polivy & Herman, 2002), unnecessary use of medicine such as laxatives and diuretics (Grogan, 2006), and aesthetic surgery (Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer & Cash, 2009).

Laurie Essig observes that in the modern fluid and fast-changing world, people are trying to maintain control over their lives and their future through body practices

(Essig, 2010). Body enhancement thus starts to be seen as a way of augmenting one's life chances: a girl dreaming of a new nose, lips, or breasts is not much different from her peer dreaming of a posh car, big house, and a rich husband. Body modification practices give individuals a feeling of control, which has an intrinsic value of its own. Luisa Stagi (2008) points out that it has now become important to demonstrate an "appropriate" appearance in the system of social interactions. Such an appearance can be obtained through "body tuning", which helps people adapt more efficiently to various situations in everyday life. Those who fail to copy the ideal models can suffer from low self-esteem when comparing their bodies with these (often unrealistic) "perfect" body images (Carlson, 2002). It was found that if a woman's body does not match the ideal model, it may lead to the deterioration in the quality of life for women aged 18–42 (Mond, et al., 2013). Mass media, in turn, increases the pressure on men and women through the circulation of images of specific male and female body types (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Grogan, 1999).

Starting from the late 1980s, consumerist culture emphasized the importance of personal appearance as a determinant of social well-being. The need to demonstrate a beautiful and sexual body (Featherstone, 1991) turned an attractive appearance into an end in itself and the manifestation of the meaning of life. Chris Shilling (2003) introduced the term "body project" to denote the ways in which individuals relate to their bodies. In their individual choices, people may choose to engage in popular body projects or go for something different. People are generally aware of the available methods of body modification; in contemporary Western societies, there is also a trend for closer connection between a person and his or her corporeality (Shilling, 2003).

In contemporary society, the human body is an instrument that can be used to achieve a higher status, gain certain material benefits, and so on. Consumerist attitudes to the body lead to people's alienation from their bodies, as bodies become objects of manipulation. When contact with the biological body is lost, the body ceases to function as the central axis of a man's world (Sartre, 1943) because self-awareness requires bodily sensory experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Having plastic surgery, like silicone lip augmentation, may result in an alienated relationship to one's own body.

Jean Baudrillard (1994) raises the question of the disappearance of the real (or natural) man due to his growing dependence on the social system, together with the general rise in social control. The body itself becomes subject to the social system's requirements and conditions. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (1987) speak of the "panic body", a body agonizingly molded according to schemes determined by society. Body-centrism has now reached its apogee, since body modifications are often performed in post-modern society an effort to reinforce one's subjective autonomy.

Anne Balsamo (1996) proposes thinking of plastic surgery as "fashion surgery", that is, an instrument for creating multiple identities: the beauty industry and plastic surgery industry offer their clients surgical refashioning of their bodies – opportunities to "try on" various kinds of bodies the same way we try on new clothes. New technologies enable people to "customize" their bodies, which means that the body is turned into a kind of work in progress, transformed and molded to taste throughout

one's life (Shilling, 2003). The body is not fixed absolutely because it is determined by the culture and discourse in which it is embedded. The Body Positive Movement (Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John & Slater, 2019), which challenges the dominant beauty ideals and celebrates "natural" beauty and acceptance, co-exists with body hacktivism (Duarte, 2013), a movement uniting proponents of extreme body modification who call themselves "cyborgs".

The normative system of contemporary society is much less rigid than that of traditional society. This includes views on how the body should look, how it should be maintained and experienced. Despite the fact that the normative image of a body is a mechanism of social control, modern social systems offer a wide spectrum of options for choosing a body. An individual is left with a choice and has to invest certain effort in molding his or her body in conformity with the selected normative image. Body image and the choice of body enhancement practices depend on the gender, age, ethnic identity, professional, and social background of a person (Blowers, et. al., 2003; Ricciardelli, McCabe & Banfield, 2000). While our individual corporeal nature is biologically determined, culture and society have become an evolutionary adaptation mechanism. The biological and social nature of human being is reproduced in everyday life. A person who wants to be accepted by society has to conform to specific social expectations.

Materials and Methods

Our survey was conducted in 2019 in Yekaterinburg (Russia) and focused on the commonly shared opinions and evaluations concerning attractive body and personality characteristics and practices for enhancing them. The data were analyzed with the help of a combination of methods. The study addressed the following goals: to identify the key characteristics that constitute male and female beauty ideals of Russian people, and the factors that determine the formation and development of these ideals; to reveal the personality, and other characteristics people consider essential for success in professional and private life; and, finally, to consider the most widespread practices of self-improvement including those of body enhancement.

We developed a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions (open, closed, semi-closed). We also developed a guide for in-depth interviews with young people, which comprised three sets of questions aimed at finding out the respondents' perception of male and female beauty; the main practices of building a perfect body; and practices of body enhancement and their health effects. In all the questions, respondents could formulate their own opinion.

The survey covered 680 people of different age groups living in Yekaterinburg. These individuals were chosen with the help of the accidental sampling method ("man-in-the-street" sampling). On average, it took our respondents 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. 30 percent of respondents were men and 70 percent, women. The age distribution in our sample was as follows: people under 30, 51 percent; 31–50, 32 percent; 51 and older, 17 percent. 71 percent of respondents

had higher education, while 48 percent indicated “specialist” in the “occupation” box. As for the income level, 40 percent respondents describe themselves as “middle-class”, that is, they have no difficulties buying basic necessities such as food and clothes as well as acquiring durable goods. Only 9 percent described their income level as low – sufficient only to meet the basic needs. We used Vortex software to process the questionnaire data.

We also conducted 18 in-depth interviews with bachelor’s students majoring in the humanities. Overall, we interviewed 10 first-year students (6 women, 4 men) and 8 fourth-year students (4 women, 4 men). The interviews were conducted at Ural Federal University in the students’ free time. We also had in-depth interviews with 8 respondents aged 30–50 (4 women, 4 men) and 7 respondents aged 51 and older (4 women, 3 men). On average, the interviews lasted 30 minutes. In the next stages, the interviews were transcribed; respondents’ answers to the same questions were grouped to show similarities and differences in their perceptions, which facilitated further interpretation of the results.

Results and Discussion

Our study has shown significant age- and gender-related differences in perceptions of male and female beauty. It should be noted that our physical appearance and personality characteristics are partially hereditary (biologically determined) and partially depend on the environmental factors. With age, it becomes harder to meet beauty standards and to maintain the necessary level of productivity at work. Therefore, more investment of effort, time, and money is required to maintain the desired body image. At this point, a person faces a dilemma whether to be “body positive” and accept the fact that his or her body and its potential are a result of the natural processes of mental and physical development or to try to build a body that corresponds to popular ideals of beauty by using the available means (e.g. exercise, diet, plastic surgery, etc.). Older generations may face additional difficulties since they have to adapt to changing perceptions of attractive appearance and personality in society. Our respondents’ evaluations of the importance of different body characteristics were determined by a combination of biological and socio-cultural factors.

Table 1. Male Beauty Perceptions of Respondents
(Percent from the Total Number of Respondents)

Indicators	Under 18	18–23	24–30	31–50	51 and older
Fit and athletic body	25	44	58	68	42
Healthy body	27	58	57	65	70
Beautiful face	30	52	48	27	22
Beautiful figure	21	25	37	29	24
Beautiful smile	20	22	41	24	20
Slim body	15	21	28	30	42
Young body	10	14	15	7	12

At the age of 16–17, development of the human body is determined by the natural processes of growth. Few respondents in this group face any health problems. Respondents in this age group do not consider it necessary to exercise regularly in order to enhance their physical strength or attractiveness: *“As long as I feel healthy, I don’t have much to complain about. I’d like to be taller, but it does not depend on me, I was born this way”* (man, 16). Women, however, as our survey has shown, believe that young men look more attractive if they have a slim body and beautiful face: *“I like strong, fit and slim young men with attractive faces, those who take good care of themselves”* (woman, 17). At this age one can get in shape by paying proper attention to diet and exercise. To obtain a perfect face one would have to resort to plastic surgery, but this option is seldom considered by young people.

The body is usually fully developed by the age of 18, which is when young adults become more aware of the need to put some effort into maintaining and improving their physical capacity and fitness. In this age group, the share of men who go to the gym and establish workout routines is considerably higher than in the younger group. Young men seek to build muscle and gain a classically masculine, V-tapered physique. Our study has shown that, unlike older generations, young men in Russia now tend to use cosmetics such as skincare and hair care products: *“I look after myself, I want to be noticed. I use cleansing lotions when I have acne”* (man, 23).

In general, young Russian men continue to reproduce a widespread stereotype of male beauty primarily associated with strength and health. Men strive to have broad-shouldered and lean bodies with well-defined muscles. This ideal male form goes back to antiquity, when a strong physique was essential for those who engaged in physical labour and martial arts. In the modern world, the automation of production has rendered men’s physical labour less relevant, but the pursuit of physical strength continues in gyms and fitness centres. 37 percent of respondents reported exercising regularly to be more attractive to the opposite sex, which indicates the persevering nature of this ideal among young Russian adults. Thus, perceptions of ideal male beauty are a part of the system of gender roles and stereotypes, where men are seen as protectors and providers.

By the age of 24, young men’s perceptions of male beauty undergo certain changes: first, there is a growth in the perceived value of a fit, athletic body among men aged 24–30 and older. This ideal of male beauty has appeared among middle-aged men comparatively recently: 48 percent of respondents reported engaging in sports and other kinds of physical activity in gyms and fitness centres, which Yekaterinburg, like other large Russian cities, has in abundance. *“Nowadays, a man has to be slim. It’s a trend. Actors and politicians set an example. Men with big bellies, those who move little are criticized. You have to look young at any age”* (man, 44). In other words, a significant proportion of Russian men pursue the youthful, fit ideal of the male body. Interestingly, as our survey has shown, there is a growing share of those who try to improve their health through physical exercise and diet in order to be able to stand the pressures of modern life among 31–50-year-olds. *“Men in their forties who take care of themselves and their health look like thirty-year-olds. This is how they prolong their youth”* (woman, 32).

Quite predictably, men of the older age groups have the largest share of those interested in building a healthy, resilient body. 40 percent of respondents in these age groups try to stay in shape by exercising and walking in parks. The survey has shown that men in older age groups share the same image of male beauty with younger age groups. Women tend to have higher standards of male beauty than men themselves. Most men in our sample appear to be ready to embrace the age-related changes in facial appearance; unlike women, they are reluctant to try to slow down these processes or “turn back the time” by resorting to plastic surgery.

Table 2. *Feminine Beauty Perceptions of Respondents*
(Percent of the Total Number of Respondents)

Indicators	Under 18	18–23	24–30	30–50	51 and older
Fit and athletic body	23	44	23	27	16
Healthy body	25	60	58	55	48
Beautiful face	43	35	74	70	52
Beautiful figure	39	25	57	60	48
Beautiful smile	41	22	59	51	46
Slim body	27	21	44	58	44
Young body	16	14	19	11	16

Our survey has shown that feminine beauty standards require a woman to have a beautiful face and figure and to enjoy good health. Some beauty stereotypes seem to be quite pervasive and persistent: for instance, fragile, delicate beauty is still largely seen as a necessary attribute of a “true woman”. Women are harsher judges of feminine beauty than men, which is a remarkable gender-related qualitative difference. Throughout their lives, women consistently strive to improve their appearance. Interestingly, women are more pressured to meet beauty standards by other women than by men. Despite calls for gender equality, Russian women still tend to subscribe to the view that while men don’t need to look attractive at all times, women do: *“I always need to look pretty. Even if I have to pop outside for a minute, I will put on some make-up and wear something nice... Men can’t imagine how much time and effort it takes for a woman to look good”* (woman, 37). Our survey has shown that over 40 percent of women aged 31–50 use cosmetic procedures against signs of ageing that help them look 7–10 years younger. 12 percent of women older than 31 admitted that they would be willing to resort to more radical anti-ageing procedures such as facelifts if they could afford it. In this respect, they adhere to the standards set by many celebrities and digital influencers.

It should be noted that women aged 18–23 share with men the opinion that an attractive body should be fit and athletic. They go to gyms along with men and have the same views about the ways of building an attractive body.

Our study has found that many men and women in all age groups adhere to the cult of healthy eating. 28 percent of women and 20 percent of men under 18, 43 percent of women and 28 percent of men aged 24–30 maintain healthy eating habits. In the middle-aged and senior age groups, more people are now oriented

towards following the guidelines on nutrition they get from the mass media: *“I knew about the importance of healthy eating before. But now in all medical talk shows on TV they keep saying that you need to look after yourself by eating healthily. So, I started limiting myself and now I feel better than I used to”* (woman, 62).

Our study has brought to light the key factors that affect contemporary beauty standards in Russia. 41 percent of our respondents under 18 are not fully aware of the influence of their family, friends, and mass media on their perceptions of beauty and claim to be fully independent in their views on beauty. Twice as many young women as men believe that their views on this question result from their own attempts of self-improvement (27 percent and 14 percent, respectively). Young adults under 24 reported the impact of social networks on their ideas of beauty (25 percent women and 18 percent men).

34 percent of respondents aged 31–50 believe that their views might have been influenced by their friends and family and by celebrities. The cultural imperative to stay young as long as possible makes people resort to different strategies for maintaining a youthful body shape: 71 percent of our respondents in the age group of 24–30, 72 percent in the age group of 31–50, and 75 percent of those aged 51 and older think that their beauty ideals are not shaped by any external influences.

Images of beautiful people in magazines, TV, and social networks stimulated 28 percent of our respondents under 30 and 18 percent of respondents aged 31–50 to engage in wellness and body enhancement practices. 3 percent of young people under 30 and 6 percent in older age groups are interested in modern technologies of appearance enhancement.

The study has shown that older people are more aware of the role of appearance in career development. 22 percent of respondents under 30 believe that employers may consider appearance as a hiring criterion. This opinion is shared by 27 percent of respondents aged 31–50, and 34 percent of respondents in older age groups. About a half of our respondents believe that the importance of an attractive appearance depends on the type of occupation.

The majority of respondents (81 percent in the age group below 30; 69 percent in the age group of 31–50; 67 percent of young people below 30; and 57 percent of middle-aged respondents) point out the importance of a neat and well-groomed appearance for producing a professional and respectable image at a job interview. The ability to communicate with one’s boss effectively was ranked third in importance by 55 percent of respondents aged 24–50.

Facial beauty is seen as important for career development by 68 percent of women under 30 and by 35 percent of women aged 31–50. About half of our respondents in all age groups believe that it is crucial to look healthy.

In addition to physical attractiveness, there is, however, another side to success in life – so-called inner beauty, certain personality traits that make us attractive in the eyes of others despite our imperfections or blemishes. People’s views on what constitutes inner beauty are formed through communication with others, reading books, watching films, and socializing. In many cases, inner beauty proves to be no less important than outer beauty.

Table 3. Respondents' Perceptions of an Attractive Male Personality
(Percent of the Total Number of Respondents)

Indicators	Under 18	18–23	24–30	31–50	51 and older
Intelligence	33	51	59	54	51
Respect for others	29	34	49	55	59
Willpower, patience	28	22	34	44	39
Friendliness	26	25	38	43	49
Mental balance, poise	24	24	35	44	39
Communicative openness	21	22	27	24	20
Responsibility	17	25	31	35	39
Stamina and productivity	8	9	10	12	15

Men in all age groups rank intelligence at the top of the list of attractive qualities. This result may reflect the enduring social expectation that men should play a major role in decision-making in all kinds of activities, including politics, warfare, production, and family life, while women should accept secondary roles. In Russia, despite the progress made in the struggle for gender equality, men continue to hold the vast majority of decision-making positions: the corresponding stereotypes in the public consciousness persist (Sillaste, 2016). Respondents in the youngest age group (below 18) attach less importance to intelligence than other age groups, which, in our opinion, could be explained by the fact that young people are not fully aware of the role of intellect in success and professional achievement.

We found that there are significant differences in the attitudes of representatives of different generations towards such qualities as “respect for others”. 34 percent of respondents in the age group of 24–30 believe that respect for others is a necessary moral quality; this opinion is shared by over half (59 percent) of respondents in the age group of 51 and older. This contrast can be explained by the orientation of younger generations, who grew up in the conditions of the market economy, towards more individualistic values than older generations. The older generation brought up under socialism largely adheres to the principles of collectivism, which requires people to behave respectfully towards others, regardless of their social status or job title (Arutyunyan, 1979). A lack of respect for others diminishes the value of such qualities as friendliness.

We found considerable age-related differences in our respondents' evaluations of responsibility. In comparison with a collectivistic orientation, an individualistic orientation may result in lower levels of organizational commitment and responsibility. These feelings are enhanced through collective activity, when a group of people work towards a common goal. Russian people of older generations generally have more experience of collective work than representatives of younger generations: “*When I was young, I had to participate in the construction of a new enterprise. I was in charge of hundreds of people. I spent days and nights at work... At that time, commitment was valued highly*” (man, 67).

Table 4. Respondents' Perceptions of an Attractive Feminine Personality
(Percent of the Total Number of Respondents)

Indicators	Under 18	18–23	24–30	31–50	51 and older
Intelligence	47	43	57	65	60
Respect for others	46	45	62	72	68
Willpower, patience	36	38	22	28	26
Friendliness	47	44	63	68	74
Mental balance, poise	27	29	43	51	58
Communicative openness	25	28	29	31	34
Responsibility	23	25	29	34	38
Stamina and productivity	4	7	8	10	9

Our study has revealed considerable differences in people's perceptions of the personal qualities that women need to develop in order to be successful in their professional and family lives.

In terms of personality traits, our respondents tended to place higher demands on women than on men. For example, in the age group below 18, respondents chose "intelligence" as an important quality for women 1.5 times more often than for men. Interestingly, in comparison with men, women set the bar higher for their own sex. In older groups, the share of those who seek to acquire new knowledge and improve their computer literacy skills to be successful at work is growing steadily: *"I had to change my job. I used to work with specific data collection software and then I had to teach myself to work with different software. Nobody helped me, I did everything myself. There are no men doing this job in my environment. It is considered difficult and tedious, which is why it is mostly women who do it"* (woman, 58)

Respondents consider such qualities as respect for others, friendliness, and mental balance to be more important for women than for men. There are also age-related differences in respondents' perceptions of the qualities women need to achieve success in professional and private life: for example, senior respondents chose the aforementioned qualities 1.5 times more often than young respondents.

Our study has revealed an interesting paradox: while respondents (both men and women) evaluate intelligence highly, they do not give much importance to stamina and productivity in the workplace (this quality was chosen by 8–15 percent of men and 4–9 percent of women in all age groups). This is quite surprising because this quality has been considered crucial for success in professional and family life throughout the history of mankind. The reasons why the younger group rated productivity at work lower than other qualities can include the lower involvement of adolescents in household chores and their lack of interest in intellectual pursuits. As for older groups, they might consider stamina as less significant because they associate this quality with physical strength rather than with mental exertion and therefore think of it as a quality necessary mostly for manual workers. There is a popular stereotype that physical jobs require more stamina than intellectual ones.

Overall, our respondents' perceptions of an attractive personality are quite contradictory and sometimes inconsistent: on the one hand, they attach great

significance to intellectual and cognitive pursuits but, on the other, they do not think that it is necessary to have stamina and be productive to achieve success in life. In other words, there is a lack of understanding that cognitive skills can be formed and developed only through conscious and persistent intellectual effort. Stamina has not lost its former significance even now, in the digital age, as all sectors of economy are undergoing digital transformation and the jobs that consist of manual and routine tasks will soon be rendered obsolete by the development of artificial intelligence. Stamina is necessary not only for manual labour but also for creative and cognitive activities (Campa, 2015).

Our study has brought to light the practices our respondents use to improve their physical, mental, and social characteristics. Self-improvement and self-development are deemed crucial in all age groups. 48 percent of women and 35 percent of men under 18, 65 percent of women and 54 percent of men aged 18–30 engage in different practices of self-improvement. In the group of middle-aged respondents (31–50), the share of such people is smaller (48 percent of women and 41 percent of men) while only every third respondent in the senior age group engages in self-education and self-improvement practices. The unwillingness or inability of middle-aged and senior respondents to work on self-improvement may be explained by the fact that by the age of 40–50, people have already developed a set of habits that determine their way of life and that are quite hard to transform. Not all people in the middle-aged and senior groups are fully aware of the role lifelong learning plays in today's dynamic world.

Our analysis of self-improvement practices has shown that the majority of our respondents associate this process with enhancing their health and building a strong, attractive body: *“For me, self-improvement means primarily working on my appearance. A woman always has to look good. You have to exercise regularly, go to the gym, to your facialist, stick to a diet”* (woman, 34).

Respondents reported that they use gym workouts and dieting to boost their health. Interestingly, in the youngest group (below 18), 45 percent of women and 32 percent of men exercise regularly: this share increases in the group of 18–30-year-olds (47 percent of women and 52 percent of men). In other age groups, the share of those who regularly engage in physical activity decreases: among 31–50-year-olds, 45 percent of women and 36 percent of men do so, while among those at the age of 51 and older, 34 percent of women and 23 percent of men report this. As for eating habits, in the youngest group (below 18), every third woman and every fourth man reported having healthy eating habits: this proportion persists in all other age groups.

In this regard, we should note the effect of a large-scale healthy lifestyle promotion campaign that targeted all socio-demographic groups and was conducted through education institutions, mass media, and social networks. This campaign has succeeded in raising public awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and the role of individual effort and initiative in creating an active, healthy, and attractive body.

More than half of young and middle-aged respondents use clothes to highlight what they perceive as their “strengths” and conceal the “flaws”. In older age groups, this share is 25 percent: *“I am really picky about the clothes I wear. It takes me a lot of time to choose clothes for myself; there are imperfections that I need to hide with*

a certain kind of clothes. Therefore, I need to be very careful with what I choose to wear” (woman, 47).

Plastic surgery merits special attention in this respect. Plastic surgery is divided into reconstructive and cosmetic surgery. The latter is mostly used by healthy people. A survey has shown that the majority of American medical students would like to specialize in rhinoplasty and breast augmentation because these procedures are most in-demand among healthy people. Fewer students are willing to master peripheral nerve surgery in the wrist and forearm (Agarwal, Mendenhall, Moran & Hopkins, 2013). While the purpose of reconstructive surgery is to restore bodily functions and help sick people, cosmetic surgery focuses on appearance enhancement and thus becomes a means for improving people’s psycho-social wellbeing. Many people in contemporary society are concerned about the correspondence of their appearance to social standards and try to look young for as long as possible: *“I think that plastic surgery is now becoming more and more accessible because the standards of life are improving and medical technologies are developing. So, I consider that it is acceptable and right to use the services of a good specialist to remain attractive” (woman, 44).* Our study has shown that only 9 percent of young and middle-aged respondents and 14 percent of senior respondents are willing to resort to plastic surgery. 74 percent of those who find this option acceptable are women.

Conclusion

The survey results have led us to the following conclusions. First, in large Russian cities such as Yekaterinburg (Korablyova & Merenkov, 2019) Russians of all age groups are interested in enhancing their appearance in accordance with existing beauty stereotypes. Second, there is a persisting gender asymmetry in male and female beauty ideals even among the younger generation. Third, a new system of gender inequality has emerged, different from the one produced by patriarchy and characterized by male dominance in social and cultural life. Our study has shown that women are generally much more willing to spend time, effort, and money on increasing their intellectual capacity than men. Fourth, the main practices of improving appearance include exercising in gyms and fitness centres and following a diet. Even though plastic surgery is now becoming more affordable, people in all age groups are wary of its dangers, which is why it received lower ratings in our survey. Fifth, people of different generations tend to reproduce the same moral values, for example, respect for others. On the other hand, there is a growth in the perceived importance of intelligence across all age groups, which seems quite logical in the current conditions of digitization: many spheres of public life are now being restructured around digital communication. Sixth, such qualities as stamina and productivity at work scored low in all age groups, which is a surprising result since decreased workplace productivity may be an impeding factor to learning new information, acquiring new skills, and keeping up with the accelerating pace of technological change. Finally, the most popular strategy of working on one’s inner beauty is self-education.

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