



chapter five

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE: THE BODY AS NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION



chapter outline

Physical Appearance as a Nonverbal Communication Code

Physical Attractiveness

- The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Our Culture

The Body

- Body Type and Shape
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- Height and Status
- The Disabled Body
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Understanding Physical Appearance: Applying the Reflexive Cycle of Nonverbal Communication Development

Summary

chapter objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. understand how people perceive physical appearance as a form of nonverbal communication;
2. improve your understanding of how physical appearance impacts your perception of others, as well as your awareness and management of your own physical appearance;
3. explain the difference between attraction and attractiveness;
4. identify and describe Sheldon's body types, along with their corresponding psychological characteristics;
5. understand the role that clothing and artifacts play in nonverbal communication;
6. define homophily; and
7. discuss various forms of body modification and how normalization affects our view of these forms of nonverbal communication.

case study

AREA POLITICIAN'S BODY AND HEALTH FAIR GAME?

Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey has become a rising star in the Republican Party in recent years. During the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, Christie was considered a potential presidential, then vice-presidential candidate. However, some Republican donors voiced their concerns with the observation that people as heavy as Christie rarely live to an advanced age (Zernike & Santora, 2013). Christie's weight began to be more of an issue than his political stances. In the summer of 2013, Christie acknowledged that he had undergone lap-band surgery, a popular weight-loss procedure in which a silicone band is placed around the stomach to limit food intake. With Christie being at the forefront of potential Republican presidential candidates for 2016, many people believe he had the surgery to lose weight and thus increase his appeal to U.S. voters. Christie dismissed these assumptions, claiming that he had the surgery for long-term health reasons. In November of 2014, Christie was overwhelmingly reelected as New Jersey's governor, and yet the media still drew attention to his weight. *Time* magazine's cover image right after Christie's decisive victory featured his profile all in black, emphasizing his double chin and girth, with a caption that read: "The Elephant in the Room."

Regardless of Christie's reasons for undergoing weight-loss surgery, the connection between physical appearance and politics is especially relevant to our study of nonverbal communication. Research shows that perceptions of political candidates' physical attractiveness play a role in how they are supported and selected (Hart, Ottati, & Krumdick, 2011; Mandziuk, 2008; Schubert, Curran, & Strun-

garu, 2011). Unconsciously or not, we regularly judge people based on their physical appearance. Our weight, height, clothing, piercings, tattoos, and countless other physical aspects all communicate something about us. In Christie's case, his weight offends some people, even to the extent that they claim his girth makes him seem more belligerent or like more of a bully. Media pundits discuss whether his health can withstand the pressures of high office. However, some believe his weight is part of his appeal, in that he's a physical and political force to be reckoned with. So not all people take away the same impressions from physical appearance; the way we present our physical bodies to others communicates different things to different people.

As you work through this chapter, reflect on instances in your life when you have judged (or been judged by) other people for "appearance's sake." Oftentimes we fail to realize how much emphasis we place on our own physical appearance, as well as others'. Each section of this chapter will introduce you to different facets of physical appearance. Use your personal experiences, as well as the research introduced in this chapter, to critique your perceptions of the power of physical appearance in everyday life.



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New Jersey Governor Chris Christie is a captivating, if not controversial figure in national and state politics. Should his physical appearance factor in to perceptions of his suitability as a leader?



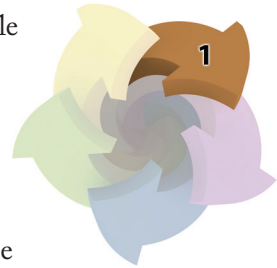
Evelyn: Have you seen our new boss?
Genie: No, what does he look like?
Evelyn: He's really handsome and professional looking.
Genie: Well, it's about time they hired someone who actually looks good. The other two executives didn't last around here because they just didn't have the image.
Evelyn: Exactly!

What does the above conversation teach us? Evelyn and Genie reveal the importance of **physical appearance**—the way our bodies and overall appearance nonverbally communicate to others and impact our view of ourselves in everyday life. You may be thinking, *How can physical appearance*



or the way someone looks be communicative? That's not a bad question, which is why this chapter addresses physical appearance as a nonverbal communication code.

Have you ever thought about how you avoid or are drawn to people who look a certain way? Think about how much time each day you spend grooming yourself. How does my hair look? Does this dress make me look fat? Will people be able to see sweat rings if I wear this shirt? Should I use more hair spray? Should I tuck my shirt in or leave it out? Am I wearing too much perfume? Do these jeans make my butt look good? Am I sexy? All these questions relate to **body image**—the view we have of ourselves and the amount of mental energy we invest in our physical appearance.



While how much we care about our appearance varies from person to person, some of us constantly think about how we look. **Image fixation**—a high degree of concern for one's physical appearance—can promote a constant comparison of self with others and an intense desire to look better. Let's take a moment to think about image fixation. To what degree do we compare ourselves with other people? Do we desire always to improve our looks, or is it healthy to reach a point where we're satisfied? The amount of energy and preoccupation we devote to physical attractiveness reveals how relevant image fixation is in our lives. Many of us care a great deal about physical appearance, first, because it communicates something about us as people, which other people respond to. Second, while most of us would agree that other qualities of a person are more important, appearance influences our interest in getting to know other people or our motivation to avoid them.

People are significantly influenced by aspects of physical appearance such as body shape, size or weight, height, skin color, smell, hair, clothing, and artifacts (such as makeup or eyeglasses) (Aliakbari & Abdollahi, 2013; Barber, 2001; Bonamici, Herman, & Jarvis, 2006; Carney, Hall, & LeBeau, 2005; Markley Rountree & Davis, 2011; Masip, Garrido, & Herrero, 2004; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2004). Take a moment to reflect on all the products that claim to make your body look better. From grocery store aisles featuring low-fat foods to late-night infomercials persuading consumers to transform their bodies, it doesn't take long to realize that physical appearance is an important aspect of people's lives in the United States. While we still tout the greater significance of "inner beauty," outer beauty warrants discussion.

In turn, this emphasis on looks causes us to think about the consequences for people who don't look good. Are they going to get their dream job? Will they ever be asked out on a date? Are they going to find a life partner who will love them forever? Whether we focus on our own physical appearance or tend not to pay it much attention, it's important to realize that physical appearance is a critical code to examine when studying nonverbal communication.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AS A NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION CODE ■ ■ ■ ■

The goal of this chapter is to make you more aware of the role physical appearance plays in your everyday life. You may be thinking, *How can physical appearance communicate something nonverbally?* The connection between physical appearance and nonverbal communication needs to be made for two important reasons: (1) The decisions we make to maintain or alter our physical appearance reveal a great deal about who we are, and (2) the physical appearance of other people impacts our perception of them, how we communicate with them, how approachable they are, how attractive or unattractive they are, and so on. As we move forward in this chapter, we examine physical appearance as nonverbal communication in two ways. First, we emphasize the reality of physical appearance that nonverbal communication research illustrates—summed up easily in the simple statement, “How we look *does* matter.” Second, because we know that physical appearance is so powerful, we also explore the fears associated with the level of attention paid to physical appearance in U.S. culture.

We don’t have to look too hard to find a television show, exercise product, skin cream, or surgical procedure tempting us to change our natural body in some way (Allatson, 2004; Deery, 2004; Gallagher, 2004; LaWare & Moutsatsos, 2013; Moorti & Ross, 2004; Pearson & Reich, 2004; Waggoner, 2004). We’re not advising people *not* to take care of themselves or *not* to work to look good, but part of our purpose here is to expose and critique some aspects of physical appearance and the pressure to achieve a certain standard that create turmoil in people’s lives. Such aftereffects as the rise in eating disorders and elective cosmetic procedures highlight a culture of body customization that goes against our accepting our natural bodies and that can engender low self-esteem (Ackerman, 2006; Bissell & Rask, 2010; Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Hardy, 2006; Jaffe, 2006; Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005).



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Physical appearance is a major nonverbal code in U.S. culture. Think about how important physical appearance is to you; do you judge others and believe you’re judged by them, based on your physical attractiveness?



PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

Before delving further into this topic, an important distinction needs to be made between *attraction* and *attractiveness*. **Attraction** is grounded in the study of interpersonal relationship development. It refers to how we are drawn toward other people interpersonally, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and/or sexually for possible friendship, dating, love, partnership, and marriage (Mulvey, 2006). Attraction is a powerful force in the development of human relationships, but it isn't nonverbal communication per se; it's a psychological variable (Bee & Havitz, 2010; Bugental, 2005; Montepare, 2005; Noller, 2005). In contrast, **physical attractiveness** is a culturally derived perception of beauty formed by features of our appearance such as height, weight, size, shape, and so on. In other words, a mental picture of physical appearance emerges that dictates what *is* and *is not* attractive. The distinction between the two terms is this: You may be attracted to someone you believe to be physically attractive, *or not*. Some people are *attractive*, but we're not *attracted* to them—understand the difference? Thus, while attraction is interesting, in this chapter we choose to focus on physical appearance and attractiveness as a form of nonverbal communication, realizing its role in attraction.

In most cultures, including U.S. culture, people have a particular mental picture of physical features (e.g., weight, size, shape) that define beauty (Poorani, 2012; Venturini, Castelli, & Tomelleri, 2006). Key issues related to the topic of physical attractiveness include sex differences and the influence of culture, both of which will be examined in this chapter. For example, scholars contend that American women feel more pressure than men to be physically attractive (Dohnt & Tigge-mann, 2006; Harrison, Taylor, & Marske, 2006; Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011; Steese et al., 2006). Perceptions of what constitutes attractiveness vary widely by culture (Bloomfield, 2006; Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995; Darling-Wolf, 2003, 2004; Furnham, McClelland, & Omer, 2003; Keenan, 1996).

You might be wondering, *What is the impact of physical attractiveness—our own and others'—on the communicative process?* Do attractive people have an advantage over unattractive people? While these questions would take this whole chapter to address, one aspect of physical attractiveness to mention here is the **halo effect**—people's tendency to attribute positive qualities to physically attractive people (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009). What this means is that just because someone is perceived as good-looking, he or she is also likely to be perceived as credible, successful, and personable—which might prove to be far from the truth if we were to get to know the person. Nonverbal scholars Guerrero and Floyd (2006) explain that attractiveness is important to individuals and their relationships because “attractive people are benefited in numerous ways and penalized in others” (p. 57).

The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Our Culture

Reflect on how important physical attractiveness is in your own life. Are there certain decisions you've made based on physical attractiveness? Let's consider an example. J. R. is a manager at a new



bar and grille called Perky Perks, opening up close to campus. The establishment will have a sports theme, and the primary investors want to attract a young college crowd. One of the investors has made it clear to J. R. that he wants all young women hired as bartenders and servers to have nice “booties and boobs.” While J. R. doesn’t publicize this fact, he has decided to hire only attractive young women who will look good in mini-skirts and cut-off tops. While we may find this example disturbing and J. R.’s hiring practice sexist, this kind of hiring practice does exist. In this example, we can see that physical attractiveness will be an advantage for any of the applicants who fit the desired employee look.

GETTING AND KEEPING A JOB. While physical appearance is a focus for J. R. in his hiring process, ethical or not, his example shows us one case in which physical attractiveness does have an effect on hiring. In fact, physical attractiveness often serves as an advantage when applying for a job, especially a high-profile job; in being hired at a higher salary or wage; and in being perceived as effective in that job (Agthe, Sporrle, & Maner, 2010; Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005; Quintanilla & Wahl, 2014; Shannon & Stark, 2003; Tsai, Huang, & Yu, 2012). With an increasing emphasis on being physically attractive and communicating a professional image in the job-search process, more and more employers seek employees who have a certain look that they believe will build business (Nai-kuo, 2005; Pante, 2006; Thornbory & White, 2006; White, 1995). Unfortunately, people deemed overweight and unattractive are often viewed as unsuitable for certain jobs, which points to the problems and fears connected to physical appearance that we examine in a subsequent section of this chapter (Venturini et al., 2006).

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. In addition to the job context, physical attractiveness affects the educational context as well. For example, students viewed as attractive by their peers tend to be more popular (Bahad, 2001); attractive teachers are perceived by students to be more approachable (Rocca & McCroskey, 2001); and students give higher evaluations to professors whom they deem physically attractive (Montell, 2003; Parry, 2011). The physical attractiveness of college professors seems to matter to students, since some of you rate your professors as attractive or unattractive on popular websites such as RateMyProfessors.com (Moriarty, 2009; Soper, 2010; Toor, 2009; Wilson, 2010). Users have the option of rating a teacher’s physical attractiveness by putting a chili pepper next to the instructor’s name, signifying her or him as “hot” (Edwards, Edwards, Qing, & Wahl, 2007). Think about the professors teaching your courses this semester. Are they “hot” or “not”? What’s the verdict? (Until the semester ends and grades are in, you may want to keep your ratings to yourself or use one of the online rating communities that allows for anonymous postings.) Perhaps some of us are chuckling right now—this is a fun topic. However, when you think about it, the notion of evaluating your teacher’s attractiveness is pretty obnoxious. Take a moment to think about the fears and emotional struggles people, including some of your teachers, have with self-esteem, confidence, and their physical appearance. Is it right for the insecurities many teachers battle every day and carry into classrooms to be judged and exposed with a simple click of a mouse?



DATING, PARTNERING, AND MARRIAGE. Physical attractiveness impacts our dating, partnering, and marriage decisions. If you were asked whether you would rather marry, partner with, or date a person who ranks low on physical attributes versus a person who ranks high, what would you say? Nonverbal communication researchers have explored this question over several decades to learn more about the effects of physical attractiveness on dating, partnering, and marriage. In studies, men were more likely to reject women who were not physically attractive, while women weren't as concerned as men about physical attractiveness when thinking about a potential partner. Men tended to want partners who were more physically attractive than themselves, while women reported that they were more likely to marry men who were similar to themselves in level of physical attractiveness (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rohmann, 1966; Wilson & Nias, 1999).

Research shows that we tend to seek out partners we perceive as equal to us in attractiveness—a phenomenon called the **matching hypothesis** (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976; Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Rade, & Jaberg, 2001). Think about the couples you see each day: Don't most of them “match” in terms of physical attractiveness? While we may think people are attractive when they are more beautiful than we perceive ourselves to be, research shows that we tend to connect with people we perceive to be on our “level.” When we see “mismatched” couples, we often make all kinds of inferences about their personalities, financial success, sexual prowess, or motives for being in the relationship. So why do people tend not to seek out the best-looking partners? One explanation is the risk of rejection. To avoid unwanted rejection, people tend to select a person similar to themselves in physical attractiveness to date, partner with, or marry (Hinsz, 1989; Kalick & Hamilton, 1986).

Take a moment to think about first dates. (Even if you're married or in a committed partnership, we encourage you to think back to your dating days.) Is physical attractiveness an important factor in your decision to go on a first date? What about a second date? We recognize that situations exist in dating and marriage in which physical attractiveness is not always the determining factor for relationship initiation and development. However, studies have established that physical attractiveness does impact dating and marriage decisions. Research indicates that, if a perception of attractiveness is not initially present between two people, the chances of successful dating and marriage outcomes decrease (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006).

REMEMBER

Remember!
5.1

Physical appearance	How a person's body and overall appearance communicate a view of self to others
Body image	View of ourselves and the amount of mental energy we invest in our physical appearance
Image fixation	High degree of concern about physical appearance
Attraction	Grounded in the study of interpersonal relationships; how we are drawn toward other people interpersonally, emotionally, physically, sexually, and/or spiritually for possible friendship, dating, love, partnership, and marriage
Physical attractiveness	Culturally derived perception of beauty formed by features such as height, weight, size, shape, and so on
Halo effect	Tendency to attribute positive personality qualities to physically attractive people
Matching hypothesis	Tendency to seek out dating and marital partners we perceive as equal to us in physical attractiveness

THE BODY

The appearance of your body helps others form perceptions and stereotypes about you, as well as decisions about how to communicate with you (Forbes et al., 2001; Oswald & Chapleau, 2010). In this section, we examine how our bodies play a role in our overall physical appearance, as a code of nonverbal communication. Our study of the body includes type, shape, size, weight, height, disability, skin color, body smell, and hair.

Body Type and Shape

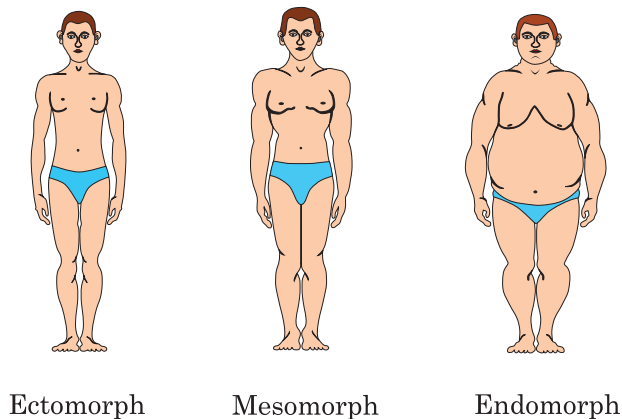
Does the type or shape of people's bodies influence communication? Have you ever avoided interaction with another person because of the shape of her or his body? Whether you've thought about this before, the general shape of our bodies does communicate something nonverbally. In fact, scholars developed a system called **somatotyping** that classifies people according to their body type (Sheldon, 1940, 1954; Sheldon, Stevens, & Tucker, 1942). While much criticism has been leveled at somatotyping over the years, nonverbal communication researchers typically reference the system in the study of physical appearance and body type.

Refer to Figure 5.1 as we discuss the various body types. Bone structure and muscle mass (or lack thereof) differentiate body types, not how much weight a person carries. The first type is the



FIGURE 5.1
Body Types

SOMATYPES



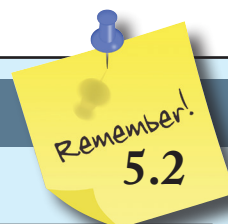
ectomorph. People classified as ectomorphs (ectos) are usually thin, bony (small-boned), and tall. Ectomorphs appear fragile; they usually have flat chests and limited muscular development. The second body type is the **mesomorph.** Mesomorphs (mesos) generally have a triangular body shape with broad shoulders and a tapering at the hip; they are muscular, with a good balance between height and weight, and are usually described as athletic in appearance. The third body type is the **endomorph.** People classified as endomorphs (endos) typically have bodies that are rounded, oval, or pear-shaped; they are usually heavy-set or stocky but not necessarily obese.

Can you think of people or characters in popular culture, media, sports, and so on that reflect the three categories? Borat, Abraham Lincoln, Ichabod Crane, and Pee Wee Herman are appropriate examples of the ectomorphic or tall and skinny body type—sometimes referred to as lanky or a “tall drink of water.” Brad Pitt, Tim Duncan, Kelly Ripa, Michael Phelps, and Laila Ali are appropriate examples of the mesomorphic or athletic body type. Danny Devito, Santa Claus, Rosie O’Donnell, Tony Soprano, and Jason Alexander (who played George on *Seinfeld*) have endomorphic characteristics. What about you—what category reflects your body type?

According to Sheldon’s (1940) theory, each body type has a corresponding psychological type (see Figure 5.1). The ectomorphic body is associated with the psychological type called **cerebrotonic**, described as tense, awkward, careful, polite, and detached. Mesomorphs are connected to the psychological type called **somatonic**, which reflects dominant, confident, energetic, competitive, assertive, enthusiastic, and optimistic attributes. For endomorphs, the corresponding psychological type is called **viscerotonic**, described as slow, sociable, emotional, forgiving, and relaxed. Check out Figure 5.1 again—do the body types and corresponding psychological types describe you? While the body and psychological types may ring truer for some of our self-descriptions than others, remember that some people do make judgments of others based on body type, whether we find that appropriate or not (Portnoy, 1993; Staffieri, 1972; Wells & Siegel, 1961).

Another system for judging body shape, primarily applied to women, is the **waist-to-hip ratio**. Research suggests that an ideal female body has a 0.70 waist-to-hip ratio, meaning that for a woman to be considered proportional, her waist size should be 70% of her hip size (Singh, 1993, 1995, 2004; Streeter & McBurney, 2003; Wilson, Tripp, & Boland, 2005). One study sought to determine if the 0.70 waist-to-hip ratio represented an attractiveness stereotype in other cultures. Male and female subjects from different parts of the world, including the United States, agreed that women with a higher waist-to-hip ratio (above 0.70) were less physically attractive than women with lower waist-to-hip ratios (Singh, 2004). As a surprising additional finding, subjects in this study also believed that attractive women were less faithful to their husbands or partners than were unattractive women. More recent research found that congenitally blind men also preferred a low waist-to-hip ratio in women, even though subjects had never seen a woman's figure; through their sense of touch, blind men in this study preferred the "hourglass" shape in women over other body shapes (Karremans, Frankenhuys, & Arons, 2010).

SHELDON'S BODY CLASSIFICATIONS AND PERSONALITIES



Somatyping: System that classifies people according to their body type

1. Body Type	2. Personality
Ectomorph: Person who is thin, bony, and tall; fragile-looking, with a flat chest and limited muscular development	Cerebrotonic: Tense, awkward, careful, polite, and detached
Mesomorph: Person with a triangular body shape—broad-shouldered and tapered at the hip; muscular and proportioned by height and weight; usually described as athletic	Somatonic: Dominant, confident, energetic, competitive, assertive, enthusiastic, and optimistic
Endomorph: Person with a rounded, oval, or pear-shaped body; usually heavy-set or stocky but not necessarily obese	Viscerotonic: Slow, sociable, forgiving, and relaxed

Preferences for body types do vary from culture to culture, especially for women (Ciochin, 2013; Furnham et al., 2003). In fact, some ethnic groups within the same culture may exhibit variation in their body type preferences. For example, in one study black Americans rated larger women as more attractive than did white Americans (Cunningham et al., 1995). In cultures where food is abundant (e.g., the United States, where exercise and diet peddling are multibillion dollar industries), people have to work out and watch what they eat to maintain the preferred mesomorphic



and ectomorphic body types. In these cultures, being thin and in shape signals that people have the time and money to eat right and keep to a fitness plan. In contrast, members of cultures in which the food supply is limited tend to prefer people, especially women, with endomorphic body types because their weight is a sign of wealth and prosperity (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006).

Weight

As we alluded to in the opening case study for this chapter, body weight is a nonverbal cue, even if you haven't ever thought of it that way. We've established that perceptions about body type vary from culture to culture, but so do perceptions of weight (Furnham et al., 2003). In many cultures around the world, body weight isn't the obsession it is in the United States. Increased pressure from the media, advertisers, and companies that want to make a buck off of people's weight insecurities contribute to the problem (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). In fact, a few years back, a TV news broadcast announced that technology giant Hewlett Packard had developed a camera with a "slimming feature." The feature actually reduces the middle and enlarges the outside edges of a picture, a technique that removes 10 pounds from people's appearance in photos (MSNBC, 2006).

The media constantly portray young, thin, attractive people doing all kinds of amazing things and finding success, while overweight characters are ridiculed. Media provide a barrage of "perfect bodies" with the message that we, the viewers, must do all we can to lose weight and become fit or we will be unlovable or unacceptable in society. The amount of media pressure on this one nonverbal cue is enormous (Martin & Gentry, 2005; Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2013; Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012). In addition, the growing and very real problem of **obesity**—the medical designation for being significantly overweight—and its detrimental effects on health lead Americans to spend a lot of time listening to messages or reading books about weight loss, thinking about how they can lose weight, or attempting to lose weight.

In the United States, the epidemic of obesity has gained national attention, as obesity rates have risen sharply in the past few decades. Recent studies have estimated that 15% to 17% of American children and adolescents are overweight or obese, with other estimates going as high as 23% or more in areas of significant poverty or among members of minority groups (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Rich et al., 2008). According to the American College Health Association, about a third of U.S. college students are overweight, with a rise in the proportion of obese students from 8% in 2000 to 11.3% by the close of the decade, prompting some universities to offer weight-loss courses for college credit (Lipka, 2010). With obesity reaching new levels among children as well as adults, various research teams continue to investigate perceptions of obesity, endomorphic body types, and anti-fat prejudice to determine if attitudes have changed over time (O'Brien, Latner, Ebnetter, & Hunter, 2013; Politano & Politano, 2011). Studies consistently show that a significant aversion to endomorphic and obese body types still exists. So as more and more children suffer from obesity in U.S. culture, the significant cultural stigma attached to being overweight persists, and perhaps even deepens (Puhl et al., 2013).



Most women in the United States aren't happy with their current weight and have a strong desire to be thin—a reality fueled by the media (Darlow & Lobel, 2010; Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, & Carey, 2005; Puhl et al., 2013; Quick, 2013). Body and weight dissatisfaction is particularly pronounced among adolescent girls in American culture (Richardson & Paxton, 2010). According to the Women's Sports Foundation (2006), 56% of American women report being on a diet. Eve Ensler (2006), author of *The Vagina Monologues*, believes the following:

Body hatred has been defined as a personal problem. But it is a social problem, a political problem, a cultural problem. It is not accidental or incidental. It is induced, injected, and programmed. We Americans like to tell ourselves we are free, but we are imprisoned. We are controlled by a corporate media that decrees what we should look like and then determines what we have to buy in order to get and keep that look. We are controlled by our mother's idea of how we are supposed to look, and our father's idea. We are controlled by other women's ideas. (p. 216)

The obese woman in our culture is often ridiculed and cut off from opportunities because she's perceived as lazy, slow, and unattractive (Polk & Hullman, 2011; Venturini et al., 2006). Obese women are perceived as having bad attitudes and are often described as “fat and bitchy,” while overweight men are perceived as being “funny and jolly,” like Santa Claus (Richmond, McCroskey, & Hickson, 2012). Women tend to be denied the more positive “fat and jolly” description afforded to men. The ideal weight for women adheres to a narrower, more rigid standard compared with that for men, meaning that men can carry more extra weight than women before they are deemed heavy or overweight. Perhaps some of us can think back to parents and family members who embraced the “growing boys” attitude. When male children eat too much and gain weight, it's more often accepted because they're “growing boys,” but the pressure on girls not to grow too much is significant. While the country is increasingly concerned with juvenile obesity (and its connection to a whole host of health problems, chiefly diabetes), gender differences are still prevalent. In many American homes, it's considered okay for men and boys to eat a lot of food because it's seen as fuel to support their hard work, while women and girls who may work just as hard are encouraged to eat lightly so they don't gain weight.

While women continue to face long-standing social pressure to be thin, men are increasingly feeling the pressure to stay fit and youthful by enrolling in diet and fitness programs; male children and adolescents are increasingly affected by the pressure to be fit and respond to health concerns about the consequences of a lifetime of weight problems (Koch et al., 2005; Lee, Misra, & Kaster, 2012). Unfortunately for both males and females, **eating disorders**—clinically diagnosed or undiagnosed disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa—emerge from an obsessive desire to control one's weight. Given the amount of media attention and obsession with weight in our culture, is it any wonder that eating disorders are a problem?



Height and Status

Evelyn: Have you seen the new shift leader?
Genie: No, what's he look like?
Evelyn: Oh my gosh, girl. He's tall, dark, and handsome!
Genie: Wow . . .
Evelyn: Come with me. I'll show you his schedule so you'll know when he's working.

Physical appearance is important to Evelyn and Genie, as it is to most of us. What does their conversation reveal about preferences for height, as a nonverbal cue? Heterosexual women in American culture tend to like men who are tall and handsome (Re & Perrett, 2012). Tall is still preferable to short, in general, especially when it comes to men in our culture, and that can be a self-esteem downer for men who struggle with their lack of height. Americans' views of and preferences for government leaders, especially presidents, are affected by their height; in fact, voters have elected the taller of the presidential candidates in almost every contest in the 20th and 21st centuries (Tenner, 2004). Many of us can remember our parents telling us to “stand up straight.” Reflect on those reminders; your parents coached you on posture because standing up straight makes you look taller. Research over four decades consistently shows that perceptions of more height equate with more credibility, status, power, and dominance (Egolf & Corder, 1991; Galobardes et al., 2012; Stabler, Whitt, Moreault, D'Ercole, & Underwood, 1980; Valtonen, 2013; Vrij, 2001). Posture is even more important in a public speaking situation in which an audience (live or mediated) is looking at you and judging your credibility (Andersen, 2004; Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2013).

Height in women is a bit of a mixed bag. Some people believe that the same judgments of enhanced credibility and status that apply to tall men also apply to tall women. But some women—especially those who gained above-average height in their puberty years, when they towered over boys their age—see height as a disadvantage, socially and professionally. They may intimidate male bosses, co-



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Height has different connotations depending on gender, ethnicity, culture, setting, and many other factors.

workers, and dates simply because of their height advantage. We don't believe this is appropriate, but for some tall women, it's a reality they face.

The Disabled Body

Since we're discussing the body as a nonverbal cue, have you ever considered the communicative properties of the disabled body? Some of you reading this text live with a physical disability every day. Others of you understand the issues from a distance because you have a family member or friend with a disability. Still others have no experience with people who have physical disabilities. Usually, the knowledge or clue that a person is living with a disability is based on physical appearance, but this is not always the case (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). We remember a student who constantly took flak for having a handicapped sticker on his car and parking in handicapped spots at the university. This student was a very tall man who walked with a confident stride and appeared to have no physical disability. Turns out he had a degenerative joint disease—one that would leave him seriously impaired within a few short years—and his doctors said that the shorter the distances he walked, the better.

We all need to think about nonverbal communication between able-bodied people and people with disabilities. Consider some social situations where able-bodied people avoid making eye contact with people who have disabilities, such as at a shopping mall, in an elevator, in a college classroom, or at a doctor's office. Many of us were taught that "it's not nice to stare," but it's also not nice to deny someone with a disability the same kind of eye contact we give able-bodied people. On this issue, one of our students who uses a wheelchair told us that she is frequently ignored in restaurants when she goes out to eat with her friends. Servers look to her dinner companions to provide her order, as if she were mute—not just in a wheelchair—and thus unable to order for herself. On those rare occasions when she is asked for her order, waitpersons make less eye contact with her than with other people at the table, as though they're uncomfortable even looking at her. Another possible explanation she offers is that servers may feel that they'll be perceived as staring at a person who is disabled, rather than just giving normal eye contact. How many of us able-bodied people change our nonverbal behavior toward people with disabilities, thinking we're being polite when we're actually being anything *but* polite?

Another example emerged from an observation one coauthor of your text made when he recently got onto an airplane. A gentleman in a wheelchair was poised at the top of the jet bridge, waiting for an airline employee to help him to his seat on the plane. As the employee walked toward the man and began to reach out his arms, as though to lift him, the man waved him off and said, "Don't you go grabbing at me!" The man wanted the employee to respect his situation and wait to be instructed as to how to help him, rather than assuming he would have to pick the man up to assist him onto the plane, as he did for other passengers with disabilities.

All of us—able-bodied and disabled—need to be more aware of our verbal and nonverbal communication with people who have disabilities. People with disabilities are challenged when



it comes to managing information about their disability; communication with them is often triggered by indications of disability (Braithwaite, 1991). The physical appearance of a person with a disability can lead us to make assumptions about what that person is capable of doing as well as how we should communicate with him or her verbally and nonverbally (Braithwaite, 1990, 1996; Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 1997; Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). We may also need to be cued as to what a person with a disability needs or expects of us, as the airplane example suggests.

A prejudice still exists toward people with disabilities, but perhaps that prejudice is decreasing. One recent study showed photographs of faces and asked subjects to rate the attractiveness of the people in the photos and to indicate their willingness to pursue a romantic relationship with them (Marini, Wang, Eitzbach, & Del Castillo, 2013). Later, subjects were given a packet of information on one of the people in the photos; the packet included a full photo revealing that the person was in a wheelchair. The people in the photos were actually models from a recent issue of *New Mobility* magazine. While one third of subjects indicated that they would be unwilling to date or marry a person in a wheelchair, two thirds responded that they had no issue with becoming involved in a romantic relationship with a person who has a physical disability, such as being in a wheelchair. As an interesting side note, subjects in the study who had experience with people with physical disabilities (meaning they had friends, family members, or coworkers with disabilities) were far more accepting of disability and more likely to be in a relationship with someone with a disability than were those subjects who didn't have personal relationships with anyone with a disability.

What interactions have you had with people who have disabilities? When you talk to people in a wheelchair (assuming you're not in one yourself), do you tower over them, making them look up the whole time, or do you find a way to stoop or sit down so the conversation can occur on a more parallel level? Do you get louder when you speak to blind people, if you even speak at all? Do you get louder when you speak to deaf persons, or over-enunciate your words (which actually obstructs lip reading)? If you walked to class with someone whose legs were in braces or who relied on permanent crutches, would you think to slow your pace to match his or hers? Whether we are able-bodied or disabled, an awareness of our nonverbal communication with people who have disabilities enhances our social competence and prepares us for meaningful and respectful relationships.

Skin Color

Skin color is an important dimension of physical appearance that has communicative power, as much as we would like to downplay it. Attention has been given to racial and ethnic issues in the past century due to racism and stereotypes based on people's skin color (Keenan, 1996). In fact, an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* addressed the still-prevalent discriminatory perceptions of skin color. One of Oprah's guests was an 18-year-old high school girl named Kiri Davis, who made a documentary film about skin color in America (Davis, 2005). She interviewed several of her friends for their self-perceptions about appearance and replicated an experiment from 50 years ago



in which African American children were presented with two identically dressed baby dolls—one with black skin and one with white. The children were asked which baby doll was the nicest and why, as well as which doll they looked like. The children overwhelmingly viewed the white baby doll as being nicer than the black doll because “white was good,” even while selecting the black doll as the one that looked like them.

Oprah interviewed the documentarian and other guests, but one person was especially memorable: an African American woman whose greatest concern when she became pregnant was that her child would have dark brown skin, just like hers. She’d experienced a great deal of ruthless teasing and discrimination as a child and as an adult, and hoped her son wouldn’t have to suffer through the same thing. Indeed, her baby did have a skin tone just as dark as hers, and he grew up being tormented, mostly by his lighter-skinned African American peers, to the point that he struggled with depression and thoughts of suicide. The conclusion reached in the documentary and Oprah episode was this: While we’ve made some strides, if you think we’re past skin color discrimination in America, think again. Unfortunately, people in the United States and other countries around the world are still categorized, stereotyped, and discriminated against based on the color of their skin (Bloomfield, 2006; Boswell, 2005; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010).

In addition to perceptions of skin color related to ethnicity, we react to skin color in other ways. For example, if a Caucasian looks too pale, we may think the person is sick or not taking care of himself or herself. People who blush or have a natural reddish skin tone can be perceived as embarrassed (or heavy drinkers), while a red neck can communicate anger.

Americans aren’t the only ones to place perhaps undue emphasis on skin color. In 2013, the woman who was crowned Miss America was, for the first time in the pageant’s history, an Indian American (meaning her roots are in India, not that she’s a Native American or American Indian). By Indian standards, Nina Davuluri isn’t considered exceptionally beautiful, because her skin color is too dark to rank her among the most admired of women. One of the most popular cosmetic procedures for women in India is skin whitening; research shows that Indian women feel an increasing pressure to conform to Western beauty standards, which include the lightening of one’s skin color (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Basu, 2013).

Now let’s talk about attempts to modify skin color by tanning—a practice ridiculed by darker-skinned individuals and warned against by dermatologists but still employed by many people. Tanning is big business in America! Besides the availability of products for tanning, many spas and salons offer tanning services. Tanning salons—businesses offering “fake” tanning—have been around for a long time but are still popping up everywhere, offering tanning bed sessions, spray-on tans, and creams and lotions that give your skin the exact level of “bronzing” you desire. Despite clear and overwhelming evidence that tanning beds are unsafe and unhealthy, their use is on the rise in the United States. Nearly 30 million Americans tan in salons each year, most of whom are women between the ages of 16 and 49 (Robb-Nicholson, 2009). People who use tanning beds report that, although they understand the risks, they still believe that a tan makes them look health-



ier. There's even a pill you can take that tans you from the inside out, meaning it alters your body chemistry to make your skin darker. Clearly, skin color impacts our perceptions of ourselves and other people, and serves as yet another cue of nonverbal communication.

Body Smell

A pleasant body smell is something that many of us spend part of our day attending to and maintaining. In fact, most of us think of smell as an aspect of our physical appearance; we may say, "I'm going home to clean up," which usually means we're going to shower and make ourselves smell better to prepare for being around others. Those of us who live in hot climates become especially sensitive to this issue. For women and men alike, it's a balancing act in terms of how much scent, body powder, cologne, or perfume to use, since smell is an integral part of our overall appearance.

Can you think of a neutral smell? We first talked about this in Chapter 3 on environment, and you may recall that the research on **olfaction** (the role of smell in human interaction) indicates that no neutral scents exist (Andersen, 2004; Dimitrius & Mazzarella, 1999). Each day, Americans, as well as people from other cultures around the world, bathe, shower, deodorize, brush, floss, wipe, sanitize, and freshen to cover up natural body odors. If smell wasn't important, we wouldn't buy so many products and go through so many routines. We use our scent to communicate our personalities, and to attract others and be perceived positively by them, for the purposes of making good impressions and developing relationships (Furlow, 1999; Low, 2006; Miller, 2010; Sorokowska, 2013; Sorokowska, Sorokowski, & Szmajke, 2012).

Research on olfaction is fascinating; studies have found a connection between perfume scent, evaluations of job applicants, and perceptions of physical attractiveness (Aune, 1999; Baron, 1983).

While a subtle whiff of perfume might cause someone to be more physically attracted to you, it's that "subtle" part that's important. We encourage students not to wear cologne when interviewing for a job, scholarship, internship, or the like, because nervousness or activation in the body can enhance the strength of a scent. You could overwhelm an interviewer and lose a job opportunity, all because your cologne was too strong. You might think about this for social situations as well; your cologne might increase in effect on a first date, due to nerves, when at home before the date it smelled "just right." At any rate, smell and scent are



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Countless products on the market are designed to produce pleasant-smelling aromas.

key nonverbal cues related to physical appearance, so it's important to be mindful of the decisions you make in managing your body smell in both personal and professional situations.

As we've mentioned regarding other aspects of physical appearance, culture plays a huge role in forming expectations of smell (Hastings, Musambira, & Ayoub, 2011). In the United States, any trace of natural body odor or sweat is considered bad. That's why we spend so much time and money dousing ourselves with soaps, perfumes, lotions, deodorants, and mouthwashes. In fact, if a bad odor is detected in a room or from a person, communication may come to a stop or be very difficult to achieve. But in an increasingly "global village," body odor becomes a complicated issue. You may find yourself working overseas or with people from another country or culture where the emphasis on body smell is not the same as in the United States. In some cultures, the predominant foods people eat cause their skin to emit a smell that people from another country aren't familiar or comfortable with. In these cases, it's not bad body odor; it's just a cultural symptom that an outsider may not understand or adopt.

Hair

Are you a short-haired, long-haired, or no-haired person? What are your preferences in terms of the length of your own hair? What hair length do you find attractive on other people? Do you like blondes, brunettes, or redheads? These questions introduce another important feature of the body connected to our physical appearance—it's all about the hair.

HAIR COLOR. Many of us have formed perceptions of other people based on the color of their hair. We've heard "blonde jokes" and perhaps made the statement, "She's a dumb blonde." What can we learn from these comments? Right or wrong, we do form impressions of other people based on their hair color. In addition to our perception of other people's attractiveness, hair color tends to influence our evaluation of people's personality and intelligence. People with blonde hair, especially women, are stereotyped as less intelligent or "ditzzy," while people with red hair are perceived as hot-tempered or fiery. As we've discussed, people with brown or dark hair, especially men, are included in the more positive description of "tall, dark, and handsome." Take a moment to think about the perceptions you have of people based on their hair color. Do you associate red hair with anger? Blonde hair with decreased intelligence?

Blonde, brown, and red tend to be the most typical colors associated with hair. Ah, but that reflects the youth of many of our readers. What about grey hair—something many of you don't have to think about but will someday? A highly successful industry—one consumed with hair dyeing, streaking, and highlighting—continues to attract consumers who wish to alter or mask this particular nonverbal cue of physical appearance. While some believe that hair dyeing is the number one most useful and affordable anti-aging process around, once again, we see evidence of an American culture that glorifies youthfulness and disdains the natural aging process. Men are catching up to women in this arena, given the increasing popularity of such products as Grecian Formula for Men,



which some men apply to their hair, mustaches, and beards to turn back the clock. “Washing away the grey” can take years off a person’s appearance, but what does that say about the person and the culture within which she or he lives? Should people feel pressured to cover up their age?

Let’s talk about the more “creative” uses of hair dye. Both of your authors remember their mothers pointing out egregious misuses of hair dye that could be found just about anywhere at any time of the day; however, times have really changed on this front. Many of our college students view their hair as just another blank canvas on which to display their “art.” We’ve seen large streaks of color corresponding with a particular holiday, pink-and-purple mohawks, one student who had a yellow (yellow, not blonde) spiked hairstyle that reminded us of the crown on the Statue of Liberty, and many other colorful forms of self-expression. Many male and female students alike now enjoy adding highlights to their hair, giving them that “just-surfed look.” What nonverbal cues do these hair-dyeing processes communicate about a person? Do they say “free spirit,” “over-commercialization,” or “weirdo,” from your perspective? If you’re a person who likes to experiment with your hair color, you may or may not consider this tendency to be an act of nonverbal communication, but this aspect of physical appearance has communicative power, just like the many others we discuss in this chapter.

HAIR LENGTH (QUANTITY). Do you like short or long hair, both on yourself and others? Hair length or quantity of hair is another factor to consider as part of our overall physical appearance. The advice to men about hair and looks is mixed. Some younger men who want to be viewed as more mature are advised by hair stylists to let their hair grow out to conceal a baby face (Masip et al., 2004). The male coauthor of your textbook likes to keep his hair short (military style). When he was going to interview for a job, his hair stylist told him that it would be better not to cut his hair so short because he would look like a high school kid to potential employers. While the times continue to change regarding hair length and credibility, still the predominant position or most conservative approach is for men with longer hair (below the collar) to cut or trim it for job interviews so they’ll be viewed as professional, serious, and credible. Of course, it depends on the job and the workplace, because some interviewers for high-tech jobs would rather the men look like many of their employees, who often sport long hair, informal clothing, and so forth.

Women with long hair are often perceived as having sex appeal. However, many professional women cut their hair to a shorter length to enhance their credibility and downplay their sexuality; some pull their hair up or back while at work and let it down at home. A recent study examined the “power of the bob,” meaning a shorter haircut for women who want to be perceived as powerful and credible (McMurtrie, 2010). As we’ve said, perceptions about hair length in the workplace are changing, but just be aware that women with long hair in professional settings may still be resented by their female colleagues and viewed as incompetent and less intelligent by men.

As we explore hair length and its influence on physical appearance, it’s important to think about hair loss. What impact does hair loss have on physical appearance? Men and women who live with baldness or lose their hair due to medical conditions (such as alopecia) or treatments (such as che-



motherapy) may turn to medication, extreme comb-overs, hairpieces or plugs, hair replacement surgery, baseball caps, and so on to hide their hair loss (Cao et al., 2012). Before we criticize these efforts, remember that having hair may be critical to someone's attempts to regain a sense of self and normalcy, and to recover self-esteem that a serious illness or unexpected medical condition can damage (Thompson, 2009). Hair-loss products and services represent a multimillion-dollar industry in the United States. While some people want to hide their hair loss at all costs, others embrace the bald look, such as the musician Daughtry, who believes his bald head contributes to his rocker image.



Baldness can have positive or negative impacts on perceptions of physical attractiveness, depending on one's culture and personal preferences.

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BODY HAIR. In U.S. culture, women are expected to shave their armpits and legs. However, in many other cultures around the world, women don't shave these areas and their appearance is positively regarded. Americans also have interesting rules or expectations about men's body hair—chest, arm, leg, and pubic hair are acceptable (to most people), but not back hair. How arbitrary is *that*? You may agree with this rule, but did you ever think about where it came from? Because of such illogical expectations, yet another multimillion-dollar industry devoted to altering our physical appearance has developed. Salons and medical spas offer waxing services and laser removal procedures to keep hair away; do-it-yourself kits are also available in any drugstore, if you're brave enough. Probably one of the best scenes depicting a man caving in to pressure to wax his body hair comes from the movie *The 40-Year Old Virgin*, in which lead actor Steve Carell actually had some of his own chest hair waxed and removed, to add realism (and pain) to the scene.

FACIAL HAIR. Medications, hormones, and genetics can cause women to grow facial hair, which is often viewed negatively because facial hair is linked with masculinity. Men's and women's perceptions of men with facial hair vary (Dixson, Tam, & Awasthy, 2012). For example, research shows that women tend to view bearded men positively but that men tend to feel more tense and anxious around men with facial hair than around those who are clean-shaven (Barber, 2001). According to some perceptions, the more facial hair a man has, the more he's seen as masculine, mature, hardworking, confident, and dominant. On the other hand, clean-shaven men tend to be viewed by women as youthful, sleek, and vigorous. One drawback for bearded men, at least in U.S. culture, is that they can be perceived as less trustworthy, as though they're hiding something (Kalick, Zebrowitz, Langlois, & Johnson, 1998; Saha, 2012).



HAIR MANIPULATION. Perhaps some of us have noticed people who touch or manipulate their hair. What messages do these nonverbal adaptors send? Hair manipulation may impact the impression others have of us, especially if such behavior is interpreted as a sign of nervousness or anxiety. In a job interview, such nonverbal cues are viewed negatively. People taking public speaking classes, especially women, tend to touch or adjust their hair while speaking. Students also mess with their hair a great deal while taking tests, so touching our hair can be a way for some of us to adapt to high-anxiety situations. Hair manipulation can also be a nonverbal cue of attraction, termed **preening behavior**—nonverbal cues sent to potential courtship partners to let them know it’s okay to approach us and initiate conversation.

REMEMBER

Remember!
5.3

Waist-to-hip ratio	Body measurement of the waist in proportion to the hips
Obesity	Medical term for being significantly overweight
Eating disorders	Clinically diagnosed or undiagnosed conditions related to eating behavior (e.g., bulimia, anorexia nervosa)
Olfaction	Role of smell in human interaction
Preening behavior	Nonverbal cues sent to potential courtship partners to let them know it’s okay to approach and initiate conversation

CLOTHING

One of the ways we manage our physical appearance is by making decisions about our clothing. You might be thinking, *How does clothing communicate nonverbal messages?* Let’s first examine the most common functions of clothing, then explore how clothing is a nonverbal cue related to appearance.

Functions of Clothing

Clothing does communicate something nonverbally to people in our daily interactions (Aliakbari & Abdollahi, 2013; Pante, 2006; Rainey, 2006; Thornbory & White, 2006). According to communication scholars Knapp, Hall, and Horgan (2013), attire provides the following functions:

1. **Decoration:** We use clothing to decorate our bodies for everyday exhibition, such as wearing a T-shirt that supports a certain cause or group. We also decorate ourselves with clothing for special occasions, such as costume parties, holidays, weddings, formal outings, and sporting events.
2. **Protection:** Another function of clothing is protection from intrusion or natural elements, such as inclement weather. In some occupations, certain attire is required because it protects the body from harm (e.g., hard hats, back braces, eye protectors, masks, plastic gloves, bullet-proof vests, hazardous material suits).
3. **Sexual attraction:** Situations in which we want to be noticed and appear sexually attractive to other people can influence our decisions about clothing. Going out on a romantic date, having a special evening at home with our partner, or going out to a club with friends are a few situations in which our clothing choices may be designed to promote sexual attraction.
4. **Concealment:** We also use clothing as a general means of modesty—meaning that in most, if not all, cultures, the body is covered, even if only minimally. The function of concealment also means that we use clothing to hide or mask certain features of the body. During job interviews, applicants may wear long sleeves to hide tattoos, dark-colored clothing to camouflage extra weight, or oversized clothing so that a slender build isn't as evident.
5. **Group identification:** Sporting events, campus gatherings, and political rallies exemplify a few social contexts in which people wear clothing to celebrate and publicize their group identification. Many of us have sports jerseys in our closets, because we're proud to be affiliated with and support our favorite teams. Some of us are members of a campus group, political party, or club; when we attend such groups' events, we may be encouraged to wear clothing to indicate our affiliation nonverbally.
6. **Persuasion:** Researchers have found that certain types of clothing, such as uniforms, can persuade others to comply (e.g., follow directions, obey traffic instructions, donate money, pick up garbage, deposit money in parking meters; Lawrence & Watson, 1991; Young, 1999).
7. **Status:** Studies over several decades have examined people's responses to high-status clothing—clothing that communicates achievement, professionalism, or financial success (Fuchs, Prandelli, Schreier, & Dahl, 2013; Lefkowitz, Blake, & Mouton, 1955; Long, Mueller, Wyers, Khong, & Jones, 1996). In most of these studies, people dressed in high-status clothing affected other people's behavior and received better responses than did poorly dressed people.



OUT OF THE CLASSROOM



onto the page

The clothing we wear reveals a great deal about us; our fashion preferences, income, culture, and profession are only some things our clothing communicates to others. Advertisements for particular brands of clothes are almost inescapable during our normal, day-to-day lives. With so many choices out there, why do people make the clothing decisions they do? What are the motivations and reasons behind a particular dress ensemble (or lack thereof!) as opposed to another?

During one of our communication class sessions, we asked students to discuss the clothes they were wearing, as well as their reasons for wearing them. We went around the room and listened to students explain their clothing choices, but some students were reluctant to share their perceptions, so we treated the exercise as an icebreaker speech for a simple grade. More students then began to discuss their clothing choices and what they wanted to communicate through those choices.

Matt liked to wear Affliction, Tapout, and Venum clothing. These brands all center on the world of mixed martial arts (MMA), of which Matt was both a fan and a competitor. He liked to wear these clothes because they communicated his passion for and affiliation with MMA fighting. Drianna preferred to wear business casual clothes to class. Drianna was the office manager of a local business, so she wore clothes that communicated her professional and supervisory role within the company. Evan favored informal clothing, mainly T-shirts with band logos or musical instrument brands on them. Evan was an aspiring musician, so his clothing choices were a show of solidarity for fellow musicians. At the end of the class discussion, it was apparent that most people had widely different reasons for picking the clothes they wore.

Do you intend for your clothes to communicate something about you and your personality? What types of judgments do you make about others based on their clothing? In both your social and professional life, it's important to remember that clothing usually serves a purpose beyond necessity; clothing communicates status, social class, cultural background, and so forth. As a subset of your overall physical appearance, clothing is one of the most significant nonverbal cues people notice about you before any verbal information is exchanged. As you reflect on the motivations behind your choice of clothing, remember to be open about other people's choices, as well as their reasons for choosing their clothing styles.

Expressions of Personality and Culture

Clothing is also a nonverbal expression of our personality and culture. You may wear a T-shirt that expresses a way of life or an attitude; that choice of clothing has communicative power. Think of all the T-shirts you see around your college campus that depict humorous sayings about drinking or pot smoking; what messages do those shirts send? Let's take a moment to consider a short list of some outrageous phrases we've seen on T-shirts and sweaters. What type of personality is someone trying to express by wearing a T-shirt that says, "Spank Me," "For Sale," "I Taste Good," "Reject from the Thelma & Louise School of Etiquette," or "I'm out of estrogen and I have a gun!"?

Beyond expressions of personality, clothing also communicates and celebrates our cultural beliefs. The brightly colored gowns and matching headpieces worn by some African women, the beautiful saris (draped dresses) many Indian women wear, and the beaded outfits and elaborate feather headdresses displayed by leaders of Native American tribes are but a few examples of cultural expressions of clothing. In some cultures, women are expected to keep their heads covered, while in the Jewish culture, the men traditionally wear kipot (Jewish hats). Many Jewish people wear kipot only while praying or studying religious texts, but more traditional Jews wear kipot for the entire day. One of the most extreme examples of cultural clothing comes from news footage of women in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule, forced to cover themselves in public from head to toe; the images of those blue burkas are seared in our minds.

Dressing to Connect with Others

In addition to clothing as a nonverbal expression of personality and culture, some of us dress a certain way because we feel that other people are going to like us more because of our clothing selection. Can clothing influence popularity? In fact, clothing can be beneficial to our interpersonal relationships. When we achieve **homophily** with others, or a perceived similarity in appearance, background, and attitudes, our relationships and level of popularity in other people's eyes are enhanced. We tend to like people whom we perceive to be similar to us, and this includes similarity in the clothes we wear. But the need for homophily can create pressure—peer pressure to conform and be trendy, seeking clothing that reflects current fashion trends (which can put pressure on the pocketbook as well). Some level of social appropriateness or fitting in is understandable, but we also encourage the "different drummer" in each of us.

One example of homophily and appearance comes from the world of work, where casual Friday and dressing down on the job are becoming increasingly prevalent (Geller, 2006). Even in the presidential campaign of 2012, candidates adhered to a casual Friday tradition by dressing more casually for their Friday public appearances (Givhan, 2011). While the trend toward more casual dress in the workplace is popular, casual Friday is not without its controversies. Some believe that if people can function effectively at work in casual clothing on Fridays, what's to say they can't be effective in such attire the rest of the workweek? Others believe that casual Friday or dressing down erodes a professional person's credibility, so it's a trend that should go away (Leszcz, 2013).



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Clothing appropriateness is something to consider and research when looking for a job.

REMEMBER

Remember!
5.4

Decoration	How we decorate our bodies for celebrations and special occasions
Protection	How we use clothing to protect our bodies from intrusion or harm
Sexual attraction	Ways clothing helps draw sexual attention from others
Concealment	How clothing helps us conceal features of our body we don't want others to see
Group identification	How clothing allows us to communicate or celebrate a group we identify with or connect to
Persuasion	Ways clothing influences others' behavior
Status	How clothing communicates social and professional class
Homophily	Perceived similarity in people's appearance, background, and attitudes that benefits relationships

ARTIFACTS

In addition to clothing, **artifacts** such as jewelry, eyeglasses, cologne, and makeup are temporary or mobile aspects of physical adornment that provide clues about our personalities, attitudes, and behaviors and that nonverbally communicate something about us to other people (Breitenbach,

2005; Crymble, 2012; Roberti & Storch, 2005; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006). You might think of a piercing or tattoo as an artifact or form of body decoration; however, we prefer to think of it this way: Artifacts are temporary—you can take off your jewelry or wash makeup off your face. While some tattoos, such as henna tattoos, are temporary, most are permanent. Most piercings are permanent, unless a hole goes without jewelry long enough that it heals shut. So in most situations, piercings and tattoos are permanent; thus, we prefer to view them as body modifications and will discuss them in the next section of this chapter. For now, let's consider a few categories of artifacts and how they communicate nonverbally.

Jewelry

The most common artifact that comes to mind is jewelry. How many of us are wearing jewelry this very second, as we explore this topic? Rings, bracelets, anklets, watches, cufflinks, necklaces, earrings, nose rings, pins, and so on are examples of jewelry many of us wear on a daily basis. What nonverbal message does jewelry send? Wedding rings serve as a great example of how jewelry can inform us nonverbally about other people. If we're out on the town with friends for a fun evening and notice an attractive person across the room, one clue to figure out his or her availability is to look for a ring. If we notice a ring, we're led to believe that our person of interest isn't available. On the other hand, if we don't see a ring, it may be okay to approach, buy the person a drink, and ask for a phone number. However, we suggest caution here, in that some married men in the United States do not own or wear wedding rings, while many, if not most, married women do.

Take a moment to think about how jewelry communicates nonverbally. How does jewelry communicate status? Does a Rolex watch communicate a different image than a Swatch? A different message is certainly sent by diamonds versus rhinestones. What does too much jewelry communicate—possible compensation for insecurity about attractiveness? Some people in U.S. culture and in other parts of the world like to wear crosses, typically as necklaces or lapel pins. Should you assume that everyone who wears a cross is a member of the Christian faith? Was this the image Madonna wanted to communicate when she wore multiple crosses while singing “Like a Virgin”?

Eyeglasses

In addition to jewelry, eyeglasses (including sunglasses) also send nonverbal messages. For example, people who wear glasses are often perceived as being more intelligent and honest but also more nerdy than those without glasses. You've probably heard the old rhyme, “Boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses,” but is this still the case? Women with glasses may be viewed as brainy or studious, but glasses are also a fashion statement. Popular eyeglass styles and shapes seem to change constantly. For a while, large-framed eyeglasses were in style, then it wasn't long before the skinnier frames and no-rim glasses began to be seen as hip and cool.



The way people use and wear eyeglasses also sends nonverbal signals. For example, people who chew on their glasses may be perceived as nervous and tense. People who push their eyeglasses up into their hair or onto their forehead may send a signal that they're willing to be approached—they attempt to make direct eye contact without the distraction of glasses. Just as we mentioned about hair color, eyeglasses can be seen as an artifact of the aging process. Many people with perfect eyesight in their youth find themselves needing glasses, contacts, or reading glasses when they reach their 40s or 50s. People who wear reading glasses are interesting to watch; they often use their glasses when trying to articulate or emphasize an important point, in conversation as well as in public speaking situations.

Then there are those who wear sunglasses indoors (such as rapper Lil John and actors Jack Nicholson and Bill Cosby). What nonverbal message does this behavior send? One possibility is that the wearer doesn't want anyone to see how bloodshot his or her eyes are, which could be an indication of alcohol or substance use. Another interpretation is that the wearer is covering up a black eye, which is often a telltale sign of physical abuse. Yet another view is that it allows wearers control over other people—they can see your eyes, but you can't see theirs. Or perhaps they simply believe it makes them look cool. Some people have medical conditions that make their eyes extremely sensitive to light; so they aren't trying to send a nonverbal message at all—they're just trying to see! Teachers, trainers, or anyone in a public speaking situation may perceive audience members wearing sunglasses as hostile, threatening, or bored. The distraction to the speaker comes from the fact that you don't know who or what they're looking at, if they're interested, or even if they're awake! There's something unsettling about not being able to see someone's eyes, at least in American culture, but be careful not to rush to judgment before you know someone's reasons for shielding his or her eyes.

Makeup

Speaking of billion-dollar industries, we could go on forever about the cosmetics industry—but we won't. Just realize that some critics suggest that contemporary beauty practices (such as the application of makeup) are done *by* women, not *for* women—meaning that the real beneficiaries of all the stuff women put on their faces are the sex industry, cosmetic surgeons, and the fashion and cosmetics industries (Jeffreys, 2005; Morris & Nichols, 2013).

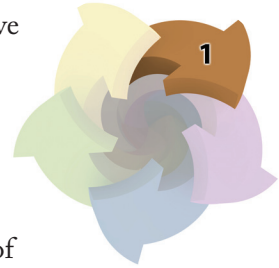
Given that criticism, let's take a moment to examine cosmetics and the nonverbal messages sent by people wearing them. Makeup is a common artifact, worn primarily by women and increasingly by men in American culture. Stage makeup or cultural uses of cosmetics (such as war paint for rituals) belong in their own unique categories, but everyday makeup applied in the extreme is of interest to us for the nonverbal signals it sends. Unwittingly, some women use makeup products that look downright odd, but we agree that the perception of odd is in the eye of the beholder. However, extreme shades of eye shadow (especially in opposition to one's skin color); overly drawn, dramatic eyebrows with no resemblance to those found in nature; too-dark or overdone applications of blush (such that the wearers look as though they've been punched in the jaw); dark lip liners that don't



match the lipstick; and extreme shades of lipstick (which can alternately make people look ghostly or as though they've been punched in the mouth) draw undue attention and can send the wrong signals. Overdone makeup is, to many people, reminiscent of prostitutes.

Now, lest you think your authors old fogies who prefer conservative makeup, think again. We appreciate this form of body decoration as much as the next person, but we think it's important to consider what message makeup sends nonverbally—something many people forget to do before they leave the house. Granted, sometimes we don't want to send a signal at all—we just want to conceal a zit or discoloration so as not to attract negative attention. But an extreme use of this artifact can send a signal of insecurity, trying too hard to be noticed, or a general lack of self-awareness. Another factor that adds confusion to the mix is some men's reactions to women's makeup. Often, heterosexual men will say they prefer a natural look, meaning women wearing little to no makeup. But these same men will crane their necks and risk bodily injury to check out a woman wearing heavy makeup, as though the makeup nonverbally signals that the woman wants attention and the men are obliged to give it to her.

Men's use of makeup is a controversial subject. Clinique was one of the first companies to develop a line of men's cosmetics, although men have been slow to embrace such products. For some reason, bronzers are pretty well accepted, but, illogically enough, they're typically not viewed as a form of makeup by the men who wear them. But with the acceptance now of the metrosexual (a media-generated description of heterosexual men who are more concerned with their appearance than the stereotypical straight man is), cosmetic products for men are gaining acceptability (Flocker, 2003; Mullen, 2003). If you can easily tell that a man is wearing makeup, what nonverbal signal does that send? What kinds of judgments do you make about his personality?



MODIFYING THE BODY

In this chapter, our purpose was to cover the reality of physical appearance; we said upfront, “Looks do matter.” We’ve explored some aspects of physical appearance, as well as their effects on human behavior. But we do have some fears or reservations associated with this complex topic. Physical appearance has become so important in our culture that waves of people talk on a daily basis about **body modification**, meaning the more permanent methods of changing the way we look (Covino, 2004; Davis, 1995, 2003; Frasure, 2003; Heyes, 2007; Oliver, 2006; Pitts, 2003; Rowsell, Kress, & Street, 2013). The number of people getting tattoos, piercings, and cosmetic procedures has increased dramatically in recent years (Blum, 2003; Selwyn Delinsky, 2005). In 2012, more than 10 million cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures were performed in the United States, with breast augmentation being the most prevalent (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery,



2013). In 2012, women accounted for 90% of all cosmetic procedures, totaling more than 9.1 million procedures (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2013). For Asian and Asian American women, the fastest-growing and most common cosmetic procedure creates a crease over each eye, since most Asians do not have extra skin or creases in their eyelids that make their eyes look larger.



Beauty at Home and Overseas

The beauty industry, regardless of culture, has been around for much of the history of mankind. In the United States today, the beauty industry is heavily marketed through television, print, new media, and many other outlets. Think about how many advertisements you have seen today marketing beauty products such as makeup, cologne/perfume, clothing, jewelry, etc. Beauty is marketed to you on a daily, almost inescapable basis. Ever wonder how beauty marketing is altered because of culture?

Researchers Pamela Morris and Katharine Nichols analyzed the ways beauty products are marketed in the United States compared with France. The purpose of the study was to examine the cultural idea of female beauty through the types and trends of advertisements used in each culture. Major findings indicated that U.S. publications include more ads for hair and makeup products than do French publications, which in turn include more ads for lotions and perfumes (Morris & Nichols, 2013). As far as overall tone of advertisements was concerned, U.S. publications showed more smiling models, whereas French publications featured more “bizarre” and “sexy” displays from models. Perhaps the most interesting difference was the type of people featured in beauty ads: U.S. publications focused more on women

(e.g., working women, nonworking women, women as decoration) alone, whereas French advertisements showed more men pictured with family members and celebrities in endorsement roles. Whether the difference between the number of men and women depicted in ads is related to cultural-normative sex/gender roles remains to be researched.

From the information described above, what do you believe the findings indicate about U.S. sex/gender roles? Do you believe beauty products are marketed more fiercely to women than to men in U.S. culture? Manly publications, whether in traditional print or online, tend to market to particular groups, with men and women being key (but oftentimes separate) demographics. From a cultural perspective, what do you believe is behind the difference between French and U.S. marketing techniques? How do our marketing styles reflect our culture? The next time you see an advertisement in a magazine or online banner, be critical about the styles and tones used in the ad. You might be surprised by the patterns you notice.

Do you want to know more about this study? If so, read Morris, P. K. & Nichols, K. (2013). Conceptualizing beauty: A content analysis of U.S. and French women's fashion magazine advertisements. *Online Journal of Communication & Media Technologies*, 3(1), 49-74.



We don't want to suggest that people should *not* care about how they look or *not* strive for good health. Instead, we want to talk about the *need* to modify ourselves, this process of customizing our bodies to match up to some idealized beauty standard. We know our readers are adults and can make up their own minds about body modification, but the constant pressure to improve our physical appearance can take a toll on our emotional stability and warp our priorities in life. You've probably seen or read about people, mostly women, who are addicted to cosmetic surgery—those people who have multiple surgeries but are still never happy with the way they look. There's actually a term for this problem; body dysmorphic disorder is a preoccupation with a bodily defect and a propensity toward cosmetic surgery (Ackerman, 2006; Ehsani et al., 2013). Our concerns and fears about body modifications, including piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic procedures, don't stem from worries about "going under the knife" or a fear of botched medical procedures. The real danger is the increasing dissatisfaction with our natural selves, fostered by the constant talk about enlarging, reducing, buffing, bulking, filling, piercing, whitening, suctioning, tattooing, and tightening various parts of the body. As we explore this important topic, consider the pros and cons of body modification, thinking about what you believe you'll gain if you modify your body in these ways. We first examine piercings and tattoos as forms of body modification that have nonverbal communicative power, and then we address the cosmetic procedure issue.

Piercings

Very simply, **piercings** are holes in the skin created for the purposes of wearing jewelry and expressing oneself. They are an ancient yet increasingly popular form of body modification, sometimes viewed as body art, that can send nonverbal messages (Lim, Ting, Leo, & Jayanthi, 2013; Riley & Cahill, 2005). An increasingly popular extension of the piercing phenomenon is **stretching**, the practice of expanding a healed piercing by wearing larger and larger gauges to widen the hole in the ear lobe. While this type of body modification is a popular form of self-expression (even rebellion) for some people, others cringe at the sight of the large, gaping holes in people's ear lobes. (Even more cringe-inducing is the sight of someone with large holes and drooping ear lobes, once the gauges are removed.)

Researchers have attempted to learn college students' motivations for getting body piercings (of all types), as well as their sources of influence (Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004; Johncock, 2012). Multiple studies indicated that the majority of students held a positive image of body art, viewed it as a form of self-expression and a way to be unique, and reported that friends (not family) were major influences on their decision to acquire body art. The studies also indicated that body modification is perceived as a rite of passage, whether social or cultural. Other research into piercing has examined the following connections: piercing and a higher incidence of suicide attempts (Hicinbothem, Gonsalves, & Lester, 2006); the relationship between engaging in healthy behaviors and the likelihood of getting tattoos and piercings (Huxley & Grogan, 2005); the correlation between piercing and mental health (Stim, Hinz, & Brahler, 2006); how piercing relates to



masculine development (Denness, 2005); and tattooing and body piercing as risk-taking behaviors and self-harm, just as eating disorders are considered risky behavior and a means of harming oneself (Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2005; Holbrook, Minocha, & Laumann, 2012; Preti, Pinna, Nocco, & Mulliri, 2006).

For some people, there's no limit to the location of the piercing. One study distinguished non-intimate piercing locations (e.g., ears, eyebrows, lips, bellybutton, nose, tongue) from intimate locations (e.g., nipples, penis, vagina) and explored characteristics of people choosing to receive intimate piercings (Caliendo, Armstrong, & Roberts, 2005). People with intimate piercings described themselves as young; well-educated; less likely to get married; of sexual orientations that included heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual; and having had initiated sexual activity at an earlier age than the average person in the U.S. population. Their purposes for getting intimate piercings included uniqueness, self-expression, and sexual expression.

Other research explored a possible link between body piercings and tattoos (body modification) and the sexual behaviors of young adults. Participants were divided into a control group (people with no body modifications) and people with body modifications. A total of 120 young adults were surveyed regarding their sexual orientation and sexual behaviors. The findings indicated that subjects with body modifications had their first intercourse statistically earlier and were more sexually active than subjects who did not modify their bodies (Nowosielski, Sipiski, Kuczerawy, Kozłowska-Rup, & Skrzypulec-Plinta, 2012). However, no statistically significant differences emerged for sexual orientation, sexual preferences, or one's likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Participants with body modifications were more likely to describe themselves as having more liberal attitudes toward sexual behavior, but not necessarily toward risky or dangerous sexual practices.

How are body modifications perceived by potential employers? Scholar Nancy Swanger (2006) examined the perceptions of college recruiters and human resource managers toward interviewees who had visible body modifications; almost 90% of recruiters and managers viewed the tattoos and piercings of interviewees negatively. So we understand that you want to be true to yourself on a job interview, but you can still do that while camouflaging, rather than flaunting, your tattoos and removing jewelry from some of your piercings (including earrings on men), given the potential for employers to view these body modifications negatively.



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What are the possible nonverbal messages sent by someone with a piercing or multiple piercings?

Tattoos

In addition to body piercings, **tattoos**—temporary or permanent ink messages and symbols placed on the body—are also an increasingly popular form of body modification (Gloss, 2005; Rowsell et al., 2013; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006). While tattooing used to be viewed as an act of deviance (something only soldiers, convicts, bikers, and drunken people did), today's tattoos are often planned in advance and well thought out in terms of both design and body location (Forbes, 2001; Modesti, 2011; Selvin, 2007). All sorts of people now get tattoos—people you wouldn't expect to have them. Some people get tattoos in tribute to other people; for example, the former director of our campus women's center got a tattoo on her shoulder in honor of her best friend, who died of cervical cancer (R. W. Williamson, personal communication, March 7, 2007). One piece of advice: Try to avoid tattooing the name of your current love interest on your body; we hate to be pessimists, but you might live to regret that decision. Shows such as TLC's *America's Worst Tattoos* showcase people who regret a poorly drawn or conceived tattoo and seek out celebrity tattoo artists to fix their "mistakes."

Studies have found some negative trends regarding people who choose to get tats and how they are perceived. For example, scholar Nicholas Guégen (2012a, 2012b) found a strong effect of increased alcohol consumption and earlier-than-expected sexual activity among people who chose to get piercings and tattoos. Researcher Gail Pfeifer (2012) examined how tattooed health care workers were perceived by middle-aged and older patients; results indicated that men with tattoos were rarely received positively, while women with tattoos were almost never received positively by patients. In addition, in terms of professionalism, women with piercings were viewed less favorably than women without piercings. Another study found that adolescents with tattoos were significantly less likely to go to college after high school graduation than were adolescents without tattoos (Silver, Rogers Silver, Siennick, & Farkas, 2011).

What nonverbal signals are sent by someone who has a visible tattoo? Is the person an exhibitionist, a risk taker, a sadist (a lover of pain), or just a free spirit who views her or his body as a blank canvas, primed for artistic expression? Conversely, what nonverbal signals are sent by someone who gets a tattoo on a part of the body that she or he can't see—that only others can see? A few years back, a friend had a large sunflower (about 6 by 6 inches) tattooed on her lower back. (Yes, we know this is fondly called a "tramp stamp.") We found this interesting because obviously she could see the tattoo only in a mirror—why get a tattoo mainly for other people to see? But hold your horses—even Barbie now has a tattoo on her arm, as well as a tramp stamp! Many parents are thankful that the tattoos are stick-ons that can be removed, but the Barbie doll is purchased with tats in place (*NBC Nightly News*, 2009).

Perceptions of tattooed people certainly have changed over the past couple of decades, since the days of the "tattooed lady" who was considered a carnival freak (Doss & Ebesu Hubbard, 2009). A lot of people used to look down on someone with a tattoo, especially a tattooed woman. Even though today's tattoos are more generally accepted, watch out for that job interview if you have a visible tattoo.



WHAT WOULD YOU DO



The company you work for has asked you to conduct interviews for a receptionist position that just became available. After reviewing 25 résumés, you've narrowed the field down to five individuals. You've contacted all five applicants and set up interviews. You interview each person, and at the end of the day you can't decide between a nice young lady named Bianca and a nice young gentleman named Charles. Bianca has impressed you to the point that you feel she's almost overqualified for the position. She arrived 15 minutes early for the interview, was dressed professionally, has three years' experience as a receptionist, and was extremely personable. She has three visible tattoos—one above her chest area, one on her ankle, and one on her arm. Charles has an impressive résumé (but not much experience), a good work ethic, and answered most of the questions satisfactorily. Charles has no visible tattoos and could be trained to fill this position.

Using this story and what you've learned from this chapter about physical appearance, *what would you do?* Would you hire Bianca or Charles? Would you take physical appearance into consideration for the job? Is it more important to find the right candidate with the most experience or someone who looks the part and can be trained? Would you hire Bianca under the condition that she finds a way to conceal all her tattoos? Or would you hire Charles and take time to mold him into the employee you want him to be?

Cosmetic Procedures

Have you ever thought about getting cosmetic surgery? AMC's popular series *Freakshow* showcases a wide variety of unique body modifications, often ones that require extensive procedures or even surgery. If you're someone who would never get a full-on surgery, what about cosmetic procedures such as Botox injections, varicose vein or stretch mark removals, or collagen injections in your lips? Beyond having fat sucked from your hips or getting breast implants, a whole series of procedures are now advertised by cosmetic surgeons, laser spas, and salons across the world. Below are some of the most popular procedures of body modification today, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (2013):

1. *Breast augmentation*: Most common cosmetic procedure in the United States, a process of enlarging the breasts through the insertion of implants
2. *Liposuction*: A process of suctioning fat from the body
3. *Gastric bypass or lap-band surgery*: Medical procedures that partition a part of the stomach, thus reducing the amount of food a person is able to consume, with rapid, major weight loss as the main result

4. *Botox*: An injection of a toxic substance that temporarily paralyzes muscles and skin tissue, typically applied to the forehead and around the eyes, for the purposes of tightening skin on the face, reducing wrinkles, and making people look younger
5. *Body wrap*: A temporary body modification related to water weight, available at many salons and medical spas, in which clients are wrapped tightly in material (sometimes cellophane) and placed into warming beds for the purpose of ridding the body of water and toxins and generating weight loss
6. *Laser treatments*: Lasers applied to the face or other areas of the body marred by acne or skin discolorations, so as to produce a more consistent skin tone
7. *Facelift*: A surgical procedure in which the skin on the face (and sometimes neck) is detached, lifted up, and reattached to defy the natural aging effects of gravity and to create a tighter, more youthful-looking face



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Botox injections are an increasingly popular form of cosmetic procedure in the United States. What's your view of such a procedure? Is it just another useful beauty tool or a crazy thing to do, to get injected with a toxic substance, to camouflage a wrinkle?

While we don't want to get into an argument about the pros and cons of such body modification procedures and treatments, we do want to ask a question: What nonverbal signals are sent when someone alters his or her physical appearance in such ways? Some people who have liposuction or gastric bypass surgery may be criticized because they didn't attempt to lose weight or tighten fatty places the "old-fashioned way" (through diet and exercise). But many people *have* tried repeatedly to lose weight or tone up after losing considerable weight, and results just aren't possible for them. For some morbidly overweight people, their knees or lungs can't manage exercise programs, and gastric bypass or lap-band surgeries actually save their lives. So we realize that this is a complicated and emotional issue.



The Televisual Makeover

A lot of the stigma of getting a cosmetic or medical procedure is removed or lessened because millions of viewers can now watch it happening, courtesy of the televisual makeover, an offshoot of home makeover shows (Deery, 2004; Sukhan, 2013; Tait, 2007; Weber, 2005). As psychotherapist Irene Rosenberg Javors (2004) explains, “Television as a medium offers us enough of a safe distance from reality to allow us to witness it as passive viewers without having to risk anything” (p. 35). Makeover culture has become a major focus in the United States in recent years, in part because of numerous TV shows, websites, and magazines that focus on losing weight and transforming the body (Allatson, 2004; Covino, 2004; Davis, 1995, 2003; Frasure, 2003; Gallagher, 2004; Heyes, 2007; Moorti & Ross, 2004; Oliver, 2006; Pearson & Reich, 2004; Rodrigues, 2012; Waggoner, 2004).

One of the longest-running and most popular body transformation shows in the United States is NBC’s *The Biggest Loser*. The show features overweight contestants who compete for a quarter-million dollars by trying to lose the most weight possible throughout the season. Contestants are selected from a variety of backgrounds and are paired with trainers who seek to help them rebuild their bodies, body image, and self-esteem.

Another televisual makeover show is TLC’s *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which features very young girls participating in child beauty pageants, oftentimes going to extremes of preparation and competitiveness. The show has been criticized for oversexualizing girls at an incredibly young age and placing superficial values on a pedestal for young girls to strive toward above qualities of character. In some instances, the parents emphasize competition and winning over other, arguably more important aspects of the girls’ lives, including education, nutrition/health, and learning to cooperate with others. One particular mother–daughter team, June Shannon and Alana Thompson (later featured on the hit TV series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*), gained infamy when mother June was documented boosting her daughter’s pageant performance through the use of “go go juice,” a mixture of Red Bull and Mountain Dew that packs a caffeine punch equivalent to two cups of coffee.

Feminist media scholar Cressida Heyes (2007) explains that the televisual makeover show’s goal is to “revolutionize appearance, in the course of which the participants’ lives, and even their very selves, will also be transformed” (p. 20). Heyes further suggests that, particularly at “the reveal,” children are often uncomfortable with their parent’s new look, but friends and family save the day by arguing that “if the participant is doing what makes her or him happy, then it can’t be wrong” (p. 24). But is it wrong? Today’s ease of transforming ourselves into someone else could be viewed as dangerous. One of the main criticisms of the televisual makeover show is that participants’ emotions and concerns aren’t addressed at all or in any depth; there’s little room for trouble or fear in this fantasy world of change. A contrasting criticism is that participants are offered too much counseling by people unqualified and uncredentialed to offer such advice—such as Jillian Michaels on *The Biggest Loser*, touted as the “toughest trainer in the world,” who often acts as the contestants’ shrink but has no credentials to provide psychological counseling.

The Trouble with Normalization

We recognize the allure of televisual makeover shows, past and present, and understand the magical and fantasy-like quality of these shows that can be quite inviting and inspiring. After all, seeing a frog converted into a prince overnight is always going to hold some entertainment value. At the same time, our fear about this physical appearance fetish or compulsion is that shows such as these and other forms of persuasion bring the process of modifying our bodies into a normal part of conversation. The expectation to transform ourselves and be the best we can be becomes an *everyday message*. **Normalization**—the process of making a viewpoint or action about something such a normal and everyday part of reality that it can't be questioned—benefits the cosmetic surgery and procedures industries. It destigmatizes cosmetic surgery, making it a more acceptable part of daily life and less the exception than the rule (Brooks, 2004; Davis, 1995, 2003; Mocarski, Butler, Emmons, & Smallwood, 2013). Normalization also allows features of the televisual makeover story to come to life as we are encouraged to place ourselves in the characters' shoes and try to make ourselves meet impossible standards (Heyes, 2007; Tait, 2007).

Some of the research we reviewed in the piercings and tattoos sections deals with this normalization phenomenon. One study of attitudes toward body piercings found that people now perceive this form of body modification to be normative, meaning that it's now so commonplace to see people of all ages with piercings that the practice goes without question (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2004). The more something becomes accepted or normalized, the less we question it or think to ask: Is this good for me? Why am I even considering doing this? Some voices, particularly those of feminist scholars, urge us to expose normalization and examine the demons we're chasing with all this motivation to alter our natural bodies. Scholars such as Kathy Davis, Victoria Pitts, Virginia Blum, and Sheila Jeffreys, whose work we cite in this chapter, approach this topic from different angles but with the same level of concern about what people, particularly young women, are doing to their bodies.

You may be thinking, *What's the problem? What's the trouble with all this attention to physical appearance?* (If you think that, you've been affected by normalization.) Here's one problem: These everyday messages and stories create turmoil in people's lives and can adversely affect health, evidenced by the rising statistics of eating disorders, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and cosmetic surgery (Ackerman, 2006; Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Hardy, 2006; Jaffe, 2006; Ile, 2012; Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005). Normalizing a culture of body modification and undergoing procedures—whether they're related to weight loss, use of steroids to bulk up body mass, piercings and tattoos, or cosmetic alterations and the like—may give us feelings of increased self-esteem and confidence, but those highs tend to be fleeting, not lasting. At the end of the day, you're still the same person *inside*. If you think that losing weight will make you a new person, just talk to people who've lost a lot of weight; many of them will tell you that they still have problems—*different* problems perhaps, but problems nonetheless.



REMEMBER

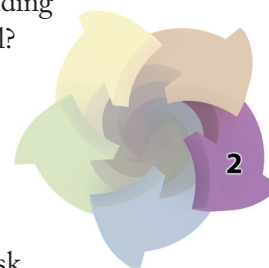
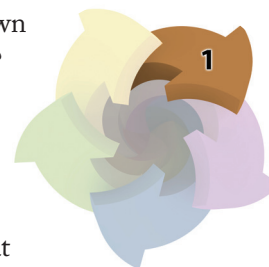
Remember!
5.5

Artifacts	Temporary aspects of physical adornment other than clothing (e.g., jewelry, eyeglasses, cologne, makeup) that provide clues about our personalities, attitudes, and behaviors and that nonverbally communicate something about us to other people
Body modification	More permanent methods of changing physical appearance (e.g., piercings, tattoos, cosmetic procedures)
Piercings	Form of body modification created by putting holes into the skin for the purpose of wearing jewelry
Stretching	Practice of expanding a healed piercing by wearing larger and larger gauges to widen the hole in the ear lobe
Tattoos	Form of body modification involving temporary or permanent ink messages and images placed on the body
Normalization	Process of making a viewpoint or action such a normal and everyday part of reality that it can't be questioned

UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL APPEARANCE: APPLYING THE REFLEXIVE CYCLE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

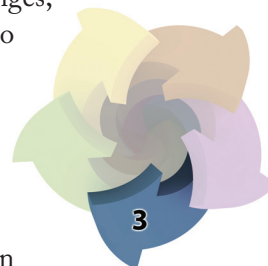
Have you ever thought about how you manage physical appearance in your own life? How much time do you spend thinking about your physical appearance? Recall our discussion of the Reflexive Cycle of Nonverbal Development in Chapter 2. The first step to developing your skills and a better understanding of physical appearance as nonverbal communication is awareness. In the realm of physical appearance, we ask you to inventory yourself using the following questions: What standards do you have regarding your own appearance? What are your needs or preferences regarding the physical appearance of other people? Do you have expectations or rules about looks? Do these judgments vary depending on who the person is or whether the relationship is personal or professional? Are you aware of the impressions others may have about you based on your physical appearance?

Now that you have engaged in an inventory of self in relation to physical appearance, it's time to think about making, if necessary, any appropriate changes to improve how you manage physical appearance as nonverbal communication in everyday life. This is Phase 2 in the Reflexive Cycle. Ask

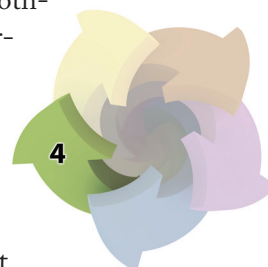


yourself: Are there some changes I need to make in my physical appearance, perhaps with regard to cleanliness, attire, jewelry, hair, or weight? If so, how can I make those changes? Perhaps the only thing that needs to change is your attitude about your physical appearance; perhaps you need to work on being less self-critical and accepting yourself more as you are physically.

Beyond engaging in an inventory of self and making appropriate changes, the next step is to inventory others. Can you think of a person who seems to have no awareness of his or her physical appearance? Images of a sloppy friend who wears wrinkled clothes (the same ones for days in a row) and practices bad hygiene may come to mind. These people may lack high levels of image fixation or self-monitoring skills (the ability to be aware of one's appropriateness in social situations). Probably they couldn't care less about how they look. Now think about being picked up for a first date: The person you're going out with shows up with his or her clothes soiled, and it's apparent that your date hasn't showered. What kind of impression does this make? Some people are oblivious to the fact that their physical appearance communicates something about who they are. They aren't aware enough to perception check with other people for their observations and resulting perceptions about appearance. While we agree that U.S. culture's overemphasis on appearance is a problem, we acknowledge the importance of learning to live effectively in a social context. We need to be aware that the physical appearance we maintain (or not) sends nonverbal signals to other people. Sometimes we get clues, such as "business casual" or "professional attire" on an invitation, to give us a sense about what's expected of our physical appearance. But many times we rely on our judgment and experience, and that of others, to help us make decisions about appearance. Our physical appearance for a pool party should be different than for a formal dinner or professional interview. If someone were uncomfortable with or offended by your physical appearance, would you notice? What nonverbal signals would the person send? How might you respond in such a situation?



After you have done an inventory of self, changed self, and inventoried others' nonverbal behavior, the fourth phase of the Reflexive Cycle involves interacting with others, trying out the changes you've made or are in the process of making, and observing people as you verbally and nonverbally interact with them. Do people have different reactions to you as a result of any changes you made? For example, some people who've lost a lot of weight can't handle the different way people respond to them; sometimes this effect is so pronounced and uncomfortable that it drives them to regain the weight. As another example, some men decide to shave their beards and mustaches, just for a change; when they interact with people after changing this aspect of their appearance, most people notice that something is different (e.g., "You look younger"; "Have you lost weight?"), but they can't put their finger on what has changed. It can be interesting to note people's reactions to both subtle and obvious changes in your physical appearance and how that makes you feel, as well as to gauge your own reactions to changes in others' appearance.



In the last part of the cycle, we challenge you to review and assess the whole process, making note of positive and negative aspects, and then to begin the cycle again. Remember, the development of communication skills is a never-ending process as we work to develop our nonverbal abilities on a whole range of topics, not just physical appearance.



SUMMARY

In this chapter, we established physical appearance as a nonverbal communication code and emphasized the need to be aware of our physical appearance, as well as how we respond to the physical appearance of other people. For two reasons, we need to give special attention to physical appearance as a nonverbal communication code: (1) The decisions we make to maintain or alter our physical appearance reveal a great deal about who we are, and (2) the physical appearance of other people impacts our perceptions of them, how we communicate with them, how approachable they are, how attractive or unattractive they are, and so on.

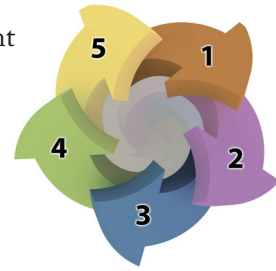
Next, we defined physical attractiveness—a culturally derived perception of beauty, formed by such bodily features as height, weight, size, shape, and so on—and explored the effects of physical attractiveness in contexts such as interviews and hiring decisions, educational settings, and dating and marriage. We also introduced the matching hypothesis, which explains our tendency to seek romantic partners whom we perceive to be equal to us in physical attractiveness.

We then discussed somatyping, meaning the classification of people according to body type. Further, we covered three different body types—ectomorphs, mesomorphs, endomorphs—and the personality characteristics and types (cerebrotonic, somatonic, and viscerotonic) associated with each. The next few sections on physical appearance examined weight, height as related to status, and the disabled body for their ability to communicate something about us nonverbally. We then explored other features of the body (skin color, body smell, and hair) for the important role they play in physical appearance, and we defined *olfaction* as the role of smell in human interaction. Next, we studied clothing, and its various functions, as a form of nonverbal communication. We then defined *homophily* as a perceived similarity in appearance, background, and attitudes that enhances our interpersonal relationships, and we discussed how clothing can serve to connect us to others. The last topic in this section was an examination of artifacts (jewelry, eyeglasses, cologne, makeup) and what they nonverbally communicate about us to other people.

The final section explored the complex topic of body modification, including discussions of piercings, tattoos, cosmetic procedures, and televisual makeover shows prevalent in media that create in us or reinforce a need to alter our bodies. We presented the problem of normalization—making something in society so everyday and commonplace that it goes without question—in relation to people’s motivations for modifying their bodies. Finally, we closed the chapter by



applying the Reflexive Cycle of Nonverbal Communication Development to our understanding of physical appearance. We encouraged reflection as a way of exposing the normalization rampant in our culture and calling into question the constant striving to enhance our appearance.



DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Explain how physical appearance is a form of nonverbal communication. What does your overall physical appearance communicate about you to others?
2. What is the difference between physical attraction and attractiveness? Do you believe that you can find people physically attractive but not be attracted to them?
3. Review Sheldon's three body types and relate them to figures in popular media. Do you think the comparison of body types to personality traits is appropriate or helpful?
4. Think of how many self-improvement products exist in the United States related to physical appearance, especially to weight loss or gain. Make a list of these products and discuss the ones that might actually help someone, versus those that are bogus. Do you feel compelled or pressured to use these products?
5. What do you think about the discussion of the disabled body presented in this chapter? Have you ever thought about this aspect of nonverbal communication? How might your nonverbal cues change with persons who have disabilities, now that you know more about this topic?
6. Looking at the various functions of clothing provided in this chapter, consider your own strategies or preferences for the way you dress in various social situations. Are you more likely to dress for comfort and protection, rather than to express your personality? How is your clothing a form of nonverbal communication about you?
7. We talked a good deal in this chapter about body modification, in specific, piercings, tattoos, cosmetic procedures, and the problem of normalization. Have your views on body modification changed as you've gotten older and been exposed to different kinds of situations? What nonverbal cues do you receive about people who have piercings and/or tattoos?



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