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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa49i1.5>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2017 49(1):  
84-102

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# Love and looks: A discourse of romantic love and consumer culture

First submission: 15 November 2016

Acceptance: 3 July 2017

This article explores young South African women's constructions of the relationship between love and physical attractiveness. How these discourses are facilitated by an emerging South African consumer culture and the proliferation of mass media images which has accompanied this cultural change will also be discussed. This research took place among South African women between the ages of 18 and 25. Data was collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews and was analysed using discourse analysis. One of the common ideas structuring the young women's speech in the interviews and focus groups was the importance of physical attractiveness in romantic relationships both as a prerequisite for feelings of sexual desire and for subjective experiences of self-worth.

**Keywords:** Love, physical appearance, attraction, consumer culture, discourse analysis

## 1. Introduction

This article is based on a study I conducted among young adult South African women that focused

on constructions of love and romantic relationships. A social constructionist theoretical framework was used as a basis for this research. I will be focusing here on the discourse *Love and looks*, the cultural contexts which facilitate this discourse and the experiences which are made possible within it. Data was collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews and was analysed using discourse analysis. When discussing their experiences, thoughts and feelings relating to romantic relationships the participants often expressed themselves in terms of this discourse.

## 2. The changing nature of love

Illouz (1997) examined how discourses of love have changed over the years in American and Western culture. Due to the globalised nature of the world these changes are relevant to South Africa, which is exposed to and often adopts aspects of Western culture and its ideas through the mass media. Leclerc-Madlala (2004) refers to South Africa as a 'cultural protégé of the United States', illustrating the connectedness of South Africa and the West.

During the Victorian era love (including romantic love) was intimately intertwined with religious, especially Christian, discourse. Love was seen as a holy pursuit and was believed to be a means to self-knowledge, to be capable of overcoming unwanted, sinful instincts and of uplifting the soul. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when religion became a less central focus of Western life, romantic love is described by some historians as taking the place of Christianity as a new sort of religion (Illouz, 1997). May (2015) makes a similar argument for the role of love in modern, Western life, where he views love as being experienced as a new God. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2015) illustrate the ways in which the modern faith in love and its idolisation has led us to believe that sacrificing other important bonds is necessary in order for the achievement of pure, true love. These authors demonstrate the importance of love in modern cultures and the intensity with which it is desired and pursued.

Another construction that fostered the powerful influence of romantic love in the lives of Americans was the equation of romantic love and marriage to happiness. Representations of love in literature and film in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century reinforced this idea of love resulting in, and being necessary for, personal happiness and of love as a means to self-affirmation. As early as 1910, movies about love, which were growing in popularity, began to incorporate key characteristics of American culture, such as individualism, consumerism and leisure. At the same time they began to depict a new moral code relating to romance. The messages in these movies indicated that women were required to be as physically attractive as possible for their romantic partner and men would need to provide entertainment

for the women (Illouz, 1997). The actors who starred in these films became more famous and their personal lives and romantic attachments were reported in a way that mirrored, to some extent, the lives and loves of the characters they played. Many couples in films also became romantically involved in real life. This led to the stories and ideas depicted in the films to be perceived as more credible and relevant to the viewers' personal lives. These stars were not only idealised as actors but as "love icons" who were evidence of real life romantic success and happiness. These relationships reinforced the link between consumption and love as they took place in the context of a great deal of wealth and luxury (Illouz, 1997). Celebrity relationships are followed and reported on incessantly in modern media too. Diaz (2016) describes the modern practice of combining the names of celebrities in a couple (e.g. *Brangelina*) symbolically merging the two people into one and validating certain relationships as 'real' and worthy of aspiration. Celebrity couples are sometimes featured together in advertisements, for example Victoria and David Beckham for Emporio Armani in 2009 and Sienna Miller and Tom Sturridge for Burberry in 2013. These types of advertisements imply that if consumers are to purchase the products being promoted, they too could have *celebrity love*.

Celebrity relationships and their prominence in modern media also emphasise the link between beauty and romance, as actors are used in advertisements promoting beauty products that claim to be able to help women to achieve the new ideal set for those who wish to have romantic relationships like those illustrated in the films and in the lives of the actors. "Because they combined beauty, youth, glamour, wealth, conspicuous consumption, and relentless excitement, these stars embodied the ideal of the perfect couple as constructed by the culture of consumption" (Illouz 1997, p. 33). This illustrates how the media influences the way we think about love and romantic relationships and the construction of modern love as intimately intertwined with beauty and attraction.

### 3. Objectification

The media's emphasis on physical attractiveness as being a reliable avenue to the achievement of romantic love has legitimated the prioritisation of the pursuit of beauty. However, focusing solely on people's physical appearance may lead to the objectification of both men and women within relationships. When individuals are presented in objectifying ways their complexity is undermined and they are constructed as having only the specific function of an object, which is usually focused on satisfying the needs or desires of someone else and not the internal needs or desires that people have. This can be experienced as dehumanising and may shift the conceptions and understandings that individuals have of others.

Advertising is often accused of objectifying the individuals they feature (especially women) and a number of advertisements feature overt objectification, where women are presented as actual objects. Examples of this include a woman's legs being represented as table legs in an advertisement for a Francesco Biasia bag and in an advert for Michelob beer where a woman's body is represented as a beer bottle. Successful advertisements convince the viewer that fulfilling the needs of others (for women to be thin and beautiful) will in fact fulfil their own needs, as satisfying a man's sexual desires is promoted as necessary in order for him to love her. Berger (1972) argues that objectification, especially of women, is reinforced by mass media images. Men and women tend to be depicted differently, with men usually the spectator and women usually the object on which the male gaze is focused. The woman's purpose is to be pleasing to the male spectator and she is judged based on her appearance and not on her actions, as men are. Her subjective experiences are therefore different to men's – she continually watches herself being looked at, and has learnt from childhood to treat herself as an object that needs to be evaluated in terms of her worth in the eyes of others. Men are the spectators who watch women, they are active and women are the subject. Women are often sexually objectified in visual media by the depiction of models wearing revealing or seductive outfits and positioned in sexually alluring ways. Studies have shown that women are sexually objectified much more frequently than men in advertisements (Saigda & S., 2011; Grogan, 2016). Advertisements generate the idea that any woman can be beautiful as long as she buys the correct products. This commodifies 'the beautiful woman' and makes her something that can be sold. It also means that women can only experience themselves as beautiful as a result of consuming certain products ranging from cosmetics, food and vitamins to technology and surgery (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017). Women are both the product being desired and the target market. "Consumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects, and the object desired ever-changing, disposable, and dictated by the market" (Wolf, 2002, p. 144). Although, as mentioned above, the objectification of women is more common, men are increasingly being objectified in the media as a way to sell a range of products including fitness supplements, clothing, fragrances and accessories.

The importance of physical attractiveness and the objectification of women, in particular, in romantic relationships is addressed in the context of South African consumer culture by Bruce (2007) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (2008). These studies explored the participants' need for recognition and respect from their peers and the means through which these were attained. One of the ways in which young men gained the approval they desired was through sexual relationships with attractive young women. The relationships served as a

means to social recognition and the young women were essentially status symbols. A study done by Leclerc-Madlala (2004), addressing transactional sex among young South African women in an urban township, also mentions how physical attractiveness plays an important role in the formation of romantic bonds. The young women established relationships with older men in order to gain access to economic means that would enable them to purchase representations of an affluent lifestyle, for example expensive clothing, jewellery or cellular phones. The older men engaged in these relationships as they provided them with prestige in their community. Men were dependent on possessing attractive women in order to achieve social status and therefore to be re-assured of their self-worth. These studies illustrate how physical attractiveness is understood to be essential in order to attain access to romantic relationships and how the emphasis on women being beautiful and the construction of female romantic partners as a means to an end means that women are objectified both in media representations and by systemic patriarchy.

Fewer studies have been done in South Africa on the desirability of physically attractive male partners for women; however, a study done in Wisconsin by Jaegen (2011) concluded that attractive men are more likely to get married younger and to be married in older age brackets compared to men who were evaluated as less attractive.

The literature presented above connects the prevalent desire for romantic love with the pressure to consume in order to appear more physically attractive. The interlinking of romantic love and physical beauty in the context of consumer culture is problematic in a number of ways as a cycle of objectification and consumption is facilitated in which individuals are objectified as a means to achieve an external end and individuals become constructed as consumers of products intended to enhance their appearance, which could then be perceived as improving one's sense of status or self-worth and of romantic relationships themselves. This study aims to explore how these contextual pressures to be both object and consumer interact with constructions of romantic love and how young women perform their identities within the context of romantic relationships.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Sample

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. This method of sampling involves identifying participants with the desired characteristics – which, in this case, were young women between the ages of 18 and 25, from a middle

class background, who have had some experiences with intimate, romantic, heterosexual relationships. This research was concerned with the discursive constructions of romantic relationships among middle class South Africans as this has not been previously addressed.

Nine women were asked to participate in two focus groups with four participants in the first group and five in the second. Five participants were interviewed individually. The participants identified themselves as being from the following historically defined social groups: Indian: 2, Coloured: 2, White: 5 and African: 1. One participant identified as Hindu, one as Muslim, one as agnostic and seven as Christian. All of the participants identified themselves as heterosexual. Therefore, when discussing the romantic interests of the participants the pronoun him or he may be used. The participants who were interviewed individually were chosen based on their willingness or desire to participate as individuals and on issues they brought up in the group discussion. If I believed that certain points could be expanded on more in a more private setting, for example if a participant did not get sufficient time in the focus group to discuss a romantic relationship that seemed important to her the participant was asked to participate in the individual interview. Other examples where young women were interviewed individually included a participant who requested an individual interview and a participant who mentioned her ambivalence around traditional gender roles but did not discuss any specific experiences of these conflicting feelings.

## 4.2 Data Collection

Data was collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Parker (2005) refers to interview research as providing, "an opportunity to question the separation between individuals and contexts, to ground accounts of experience in social relations" (p. 53). Semi-structured interviews were selected as they would allow participants to freely express their thoughts and feelings while at the same time allowing me to direct the interview in a way that would enable me to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to probe more deeply into issues that came up unexpectedly that I thought would be relevant to the research questions and they allowed participants to elaborate further on the questions which were in my interview schedule, as from their responses I could ask follow-up questions (Berg, 2001).

## 4.3 Data Analysis

The data set was analysed using Carla Willigs's (2008) approach to Foucauldian discourse analysis. Although a wide range of variations are subsumed under the

broad umbrella of discourse analysis, the underlying assumption is the social constructionist view that the way we speak and use language does not reflect an objective reality but that it actively creates and changes our identities, our social relations and our experiences of our world (Burr, 1995; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Using a discourse analytic approach means that the interview transcripts to be analysed are seen as a “manifestation of available discursive resources that the interviewee is drawing upon to construct a particular version of events” (Willig, 2008, p. 10). Parker (1994) defines discourses as “sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions” (245). Willig (2008) describes two variations of discourse analysis commonly used in psychological research, namely discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis. In order to explore the construction of romantic relationships, the subject positions made available as a result of these constructions and the potential implications for individual experiences and subjectivity, the Foucauldian method of discourse analysis, which Willig (2008) explains, was selected.

Carla Willig's (2008) approach to discourse analysis, consisting of the following six stages, was used to guide the analysis of the data. Stage 1: Discursive constructions involve identifying all the instances where the discursive object is referred to implicitly as well as explicitly (Willig, 2008). In the case of this research project my discursive object was 'romantic relationships' so I went through all the transcriptions looking for the different ways in which romantic relationships were constructed. Stage 2: Discourses involve considering the differences between different constructions of the discursive object and then locating these constructions within wider discourses (Willig, 2008). For example romantic relationships were constructed as both hard work and as a risk. In the case of the discourse being discussed in this paper romantic relationships were constructed as dependent on physical attractiveness. This relates to evolutionary psychology discourses about humans selecting ideal mates based on reproductive capabilities, to consumer culture discourses that construct the belief that certain products improve the self and to romantic discourses, often present in romance movies and other media, that construct love as based on an intense physical attraction. Stage 3: Action orientation involves considering the context in which certain discourses were used and what the speaker may have gained by using this discourse at that time in that situation (Willig, 2008). Stage 4: Positioning is concerned with the identification of the potential subject positions made available to individuals within different discourses. A subject position is 'a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire' (Davies & Harré, 1999 as cited in Willig 2008 p.116). This relates to the idea that subjectivity is constructed through discourse so subject positions

are not parts to perform but selves to be. These subject positions are variable and can change multiple times depending on the context (Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Stage 5: Practice involves considering the ways different discourses provide available behaviours to engage in and things to say while closes off others. Stage 6: Subjectivity explores the kinds of thoughts, feelings and experiences that can be had as a result of taking up a certain subject position within a discourse.

## 5. Discussion

After analysing the data I identified six discourses structuring the participants' speech. In this article I will be focusing only on the discourse *Love and looks* as this will allow me to discuss it in more depth given the limited word count. A number of the participants mentioned how physical attractiveness was important in a romantic partner. This discourse is well facilitated by the media, for example celebrity news, advertisements, movies and television shows. When romantic relationships are depicted in these forms of media they are most commonly between very attractive people and it is their physical appearance which makes them sexually desirable and worthy of love. This discourse has a number of implications relating to the way we think about relationships, potential and current romantic partners and ourselves.

When asked about what the ideal romantic partner was like the participants used phrases such as:

Claire: *Cute.*

Lizzy: *Must be cute.*

Grace: *...not big not too skinny just right and not too light not to dark.*

Claire: *I like very tall. I like black hair, hazel eyes and like masculine features you know? Like I like that chiselled look (agreement and laughing).*

It is important to note that the participants were not asked what the ideal romantic partner would *look* like but the responses given highlighted his appearance as significant. The last two quotes describe the ideal appearance for a potential romantic partner and this description mirrors the one we see represented in media images of men. When talking about what first attracted her to her boyfriend, Lizzy discussed her partner's appearance.

Lizzy: *He had everything that I am attracted to, I mean the whole wild hair and he has lovely eyes and he doesn't wear those gangster clothes you know or those hectic shoes and grasshoppers and stuff that I don't like so that also*



*attracted me to him when I said he dresses differently to other guys um ya and of course he's built so that was nice...*

Lizzy's quote mentions that her partner was 'built' meaning that he had a muscular physique. Again this is the ideal male body type which is put forth by the media. This focus on physical attractiveness is reinforced constantly through media images such as advertisements using attractive models and attractive actors and actresses in movies and in television shows. The message these forms of media give viewers is that in order to be lovable, you need to look a specific way. For women this usually involves being, "tall, white, and thin, with a tubular body, and blonde hair," (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Lin & Kulik, 2002; Polivy & Herman, 2004; Sands & Wardle, 2003; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003 as cited in Serdar, 2005), and for men it means being muscular, tanned and, increasingly in recent times, well-groomed. These images are unrealistic and unrepresentative of how most people really look. This discourse may make individuals feel insecure about their appearance and their ability to attract a romantic partner. It may also lead them to question their worth as a person. This discourse may result in the development of unrealistic expectations about how romantic partners should naturally look and disappointment or dissatisfaction in relationships when these expectations are not met.

From within this discourse a person's value is dependent to some extent on their physical appearance and people come to be thought of as primarily physical beings. This was mentioned by one of the participants when explaining the importance of a person's physical appearance in romantic relationships.

*Faye: I think we very physical people, like beings. I think we are. Obviously you don't know, you don't meet somebody for the first time and get straight into their brain and their heart you see what they look like.*

Faye's comment draws on psychological discourses on the nature of human beings. By describing people in this way it is possible for her to remove herself from the position of someone who personally believes that attractiveness is important and valuable despite the option to view it differently and then she can adopt the position of someone who cannot do anything about the nature of humanity and so just has to accept it and do what she can to work within those boundaries. This statement also constructs the nature of romantic relationships as dependent on physical attractiveness, as innately this way and therefore beyond resistance. By making this statement Faye is able to defend against a perception from others or from herself that she is vain or superficial for valuing the physical appearance of potential partners as it is merely a part of being human and in this way can avoid potential feelings of guilt. This statement also serves to construct all the women

in the focus group as the same and so grants everyone, including her, the chance to speak openly about a preference for physically attractive partners.

Other participants mentioned that physical attractiveness is not only desirable in potential partners, it is also important to be physically attractive yourself in order to attract a boyfriend and to please current romantic partners.

Rita: *You have to like be neat and have your hair neat and stuff like that and in the beginning ya you know I would dress up and go out on a date...*

Justine: *...I'd love to be beautiful and I'd love for guys to fall all over me (laughing)...*

The following two quotes illustrate that not only do women have a preference for being physically attractive but that this is also a preference shared by potential partners and is often positively reinforced when the potential partners respond to the participants' appearance by complimenting them. This shows that constructions of romantic relationships and what is considered appealing in a potential partner are fabricated 'through the daily interactions between people' (Burr 2015 p. 4).

Joanna: *...he wanted to see my picture first before on mxit ... and he said to me like and he was like "hey hey gorgeous" so he first initially saw my looks 'cause it was a picture of my face not of my body I'm very conscious about my body so it was just my face...*

When asked what she thought it was about her that her boyfriend first liked Lizzy responded:

Lizzy: *Oh that I was hot...'cause I was wearing this short top this one day and I had my belly pierced so he was like oh ya she's hot so that was the first thing.*

In these quotes participants use words like 'hot', 'gorgeous', 'beautiful', 'neat' and 'dressed up' when talking about what their partners liked about them and what men in general are attracted to. Rita focuses less on the appearance of one's physical features and body and more on the effort put in to make one more attractive. She mentions that your hair should be 'neat' and that initially she would get 'dressed up' for her partner. This suggests that it is more important to make an effort to be presentable to your partner than to be naturally beautiful. This idea serves to resist any feelings of inadequacy relating to not having an ideal body shape or facial features, as depicted in the media, as it is more important to be well groomed. This also relates to discourses about appearance being unimportant as long as you are 'taking care of yourself'. The idea that personal grooming is more important than 'naturally' being physically attractive serves beauty and cosmetics industries as personal grooming and 'taking care of the

self' is an idea used to sell a variety of consumer products (Moeran, 2010; Morris & Nichols 2013). For example: make-up, personal care and hygiene products and new, clean clothing advertisements also function to present the ideal of beauty as a moral concern – beauty is dependent on, and an expression of, sufficient self-care (Moeran, 2010). The emphasis on making an effort to improve one's appearance can also be related to broader neoliberal ideals of taking personal responsibility for one's life and internalising the burden of finding solutions and overcoming any problems or disadvantages one might face (Rose, 1996; Gill & Scharff 2011; Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017 ).

The use of the discourse *Love and Looks* may cause people to feel insecure about their appearance, as is shown in the quote by Joanna. She mentions that she is 'conscious about [her] body,' and so she initially tried to conceal this aspect of herself from the man she was interested in romantically. Justine also mentions that she would 'love to be beautiful', which implies that she feels that she is currently not beautiful. This illustrates that the employment of this discourse can be implicated in peoples' feelings of dissatisfaction or inadequacy with regards to their physical appearance and their perception of their own attractiveness to others. This discourse allows people to think about themselves and others in physical and aesthetic terms. This can be objectifying to people where they become reduced to only a body or face. This practice undervalues the complexity of people and disregards their other qualities. Traditionally this has been something which affects women. Women are evaluated based on their appearance and this is considered the most significant aspect of their being. This has implications in terms of how women experience themselves. They often think about themselves as objects to be looked at and judged on their beauty and often see themselves how they imagine others will see them (Lury, 2011). One of the participants touched on this idea of being observed and behaving in certain ways for possible spectators. This was said in a discussion which occurred in response to a question about what young men and women do to impress potential partners.

Faye: *If we weren't worried about if somebody was looking or not we wouldn't do our make-up perfectly every morning or blow-dry our hair or clearly I didn't do that today (laughs) but I don't know ya it's the little things like not going in like tracksuit pants and a hoody or something. To be like 'oh I wonder if he's going to be looking, is he going to be looking at me' you try, you make an effort.*

This response shows again how physical appearance is thought to be something which is important when attracting potential romantic partners. It is also an example of how women can experience themselves as physical bodies to be observed and evaluated by men and the resulting behaviours associated with

this experience. These behaviours involve appearance improving actions such as dressing well and altering the appearance of face and hair.

In recent times men have increasingly become the victims of this kind of objectification as the media has begun to show images of men as sexual objects with bodies which are unattainable for most men (Elliot & Elliot, 2005; Grogan, 2016). The concerns men have in relation to ideal body image are not exactly the same as those of women; for example, Hatoum and Belle (2004) as well as Diedrichs (2012 as cited in Grogan, 2016) postulate that men's anxieties revolve less around a desire to be thin and are linked to anxieties around being underweight or under-muscular. This may be related to power dynamics between the genders, as noted in Wex's (1970, as cited in Wetherell and Edley, 2014) series of photographs illustrating the tendency for men to be allowed to take up more space in the world as opposed to women who seek to make themselves smaller. Although men and women might differ in the particular ways they are dissatisfied with their bodies, media images of ideal bodies seem to lead to an increased sense of body dissatisfaction (Michaels, Parent and Moradi, 2013) and a lowered self-esteem in both genders (Cafri et al., 2006 and Grieve, 2007 as cited in Martin & Govender 2011; Hawkins, Richards, Granley & Stein 2004). This discourse may also contribute towards people feeling insecure and anxious about how they look and their self-worth may be negatively influenced as they may feel that not only are they falling short of societal expectations for the ideal appearance but also that this means that they are less likely to find love. In order to improve their physical appearance, and in so doing increase the possibility that they will become lovable to others, individuals may do things like exercising, going on diets or buying body products or make-up to bring the way they look closer to the ideal image the media portrays. One participant noted how men seem to be increasingly concerned with their appearance.

*Trisha: Also I've noticed a lot of guys have been gymming a lot –*

*Faye: Oh ya totally!*

*Trisha: ...I don't know I know 'cause a lot of guys also have insecurities. I know a friend of mine who feels he's not buff enough and he's going to gym.*

Physical intimacy was also thought about in relation to physical attractiveness, for example in order for a partner to be considered sexually desirable, they would need to be physically attractive.

*Faye: But you have to, I think, in a romantic relationship or in- ya a romantic relationship you have to be physically attracted to someone. You can't look at them and be like oooh (laughing). You have to like want to kiss them even if that's it you still got to want to do it you know you can't not, you know?*

Another participant mentioned how her boyfriend's physical appearance had become a problem for her in their relationship because of how she felt her and her boyfriend looked to other people.

*Grace: I was like please like give me a break like take it slow and then for some reason I started getting bothered by his weight. He wasn't big he was just chubby and I'm tiny and I started being conscious of I'm walking with him in town and I'm so tiny and he looks like my big brother. And I look at him like this (looks up) and for some reason I don't know why it just with the distance and everything I was like I'm better being single.*

This participant admitted that although she had thought that physical attractiveness was unimportant, in her most recent romantic relationship she had found that it was in fact quite important to her. She says this when describing how her boyfriend's physical appearance had become a problem for her. This conflict shows how different discourses often contradict each other, in this case the physical attractiveness discourses are contradicting discourses that frame romantic relationships as primarily about emotions and also discourses about the ideal self that only allow people to think about themselves as kind and good when they are more concerned with someone's personality than their looks.

*Grace: Ya its strange; 'cause like I was always telling my sister he doesn't have to be a perfect-looking guy just as long as you love him but when it came to me after three years there was a guy who was sweet and loving and but it's like there's just something missing ya.*

This quote illustrates again how romantic relationships have been constructed in a way where physical attraction is necessary and it is important to find your partner physically attractive. Physical attractiveness leads to the desire for physical intimacy and "something is missing" without that. In this way we see how social forces such as media images not only influence the way people think about themselves and others but also plays a role in structuring their emotional responses. In this case ideals of beauty and the suggestion in movies, television shows and advertisements that being physically attractive is a prerequisite for being sexually desirable have led to people being unable to feel physical desire for someone they may like very much but who is not necessarily physically attractive in the sense that mimic, to a certain extent, media images of beauty.

These quotes also show how physical intimacy is understood as a defining feature of romantic relationships. This discourse situates people in a position where they need to be attractive if they are to receive love and physical affection. If they do not comply with the standards of beauty which have been culturally and historically constructed, they may feel insecure about their value in the

world. They may feel that other people are unlikely to find them lovable or that they are unworthy of love. Naomi Wolf (2002), in her book *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*, explains how if women feel insecure about their physical attractiveness they are likely to avoid physical intimacy. This shows how once this discourse is internalised it may prevent people from enjoying physical intimacy even if they are in loving romantic relationships and how it is likely to make people feel generally anxious about how they look and how others evaluate them. This is also problematic, as Wolf (2002) suggests that many women's idea of being successful depends on them being able to sustain sexually loving relationships. If they have been made to feel that they are too unattractive to feel comfortable engaging in sexual relationships, they are also unlikely to feel that they are successful. She also argues that both men and women need to feel beautiful – desired, welcome, treasured – to be open to sexual communication. If they are deprived of that they will protect themselves by objectifying themselves or the other (Wolf, 2002).

Two of the participants mentioned how although being physically attractive might seem important it was not really what men wanted.

Rita: *...but I think that I read this article where they did this survey about what men really want in a woman, right, and a lot of them said they didn't want women who were super attractive yes 'cause that's not the woman they wanted to end up with... Um they would rather have someone who's not as attractive as their partner and future wife 'cause a lot of them said that they would feel intimidated that other men would want to go out with um their partner if they were like too like model attractive.*

Faye: *I think there's a difference between the girls guys go out to meet at clubs and the ones they actually want to have a relationship with and I think girls can fall quite easily into the trap of thinking it's all about how you look and your body and I don't know other stuff you do behind closed doors but um guys don't necessarily want to date that girl, she's fun for one night...*

These quotes put forth the idea that it is not that important to be extremely physically attractive because men interested in serious relationships are not concerned about that and that only men who are looking for “one night stands” are concerned about a woman having an ideal physical appearance. These quotes suggest that the level of attractiveness is important to men: a serious partner should be attractive but not *too* attractive. In the first quote it is implied that if a woman is too attractive, like the models in magazines, men would not find her to be ideal as other men would also find her attractive and want to date her, which could lead to her leaving him. The second quote suggests that if a woman is too attractive she is more suited to ‘one night stands’ than to long term, committed

relationships. This implies that women who are very attractive are 'loose' but do not have the personality or the qualities which men desire for a 'real' relationship. This allows the women to resist the discourse *Love and looks* enough to ease possible feelings of anxiety or insecurity about not living up to media ideals of beauty. A woman is also able to take up the subject position of one who is more sexually restrained and less promiscuous than women who are more attractive than she is, which seems to be viewed as a positive trait in a long-term partner. It also allows the participants to position themselves as the kind of woman who *is* a suitable long-term relationship prospect *because* she does not fit in with media ideals of the 'perfect body'. In these quotes we see a distinction made between personality and outward appearance, the self and the body. The body is constructed as less important than the *real self*. This serves to provide these women with the subject position of the sincere person with a great personality, who cares more about who people *really are* than their looks, as opposed to the vapid, vain person who is too concerned with improving their appearance.

One participant also disagreed with the idea that a man needs to be physically attractive in order for there to be a desire for physical intimacy. In an individual interview she mentioned how she did not think of her romantic partner as physically attractive, however she still wanted to be physically intimate with him. When asked if she thought it was important to find someone physically attractive in order to want to be physically intimate with them she explained why she did not think this was the case.

Rita: *I think that you can have a strong emotional connection to someone um and ya and it doesn't matter what they look like um you can have that emotional attraction to the person that they are and not the way they look.*

Again we see a distinction made between an inner world and an outer world. The inner world, someone's personality, is constructed as more real than their outward appearance. This view has implications for the understanding and experience of what it means to be a self. Here self-hood is constructed as knowable, real and consistent (Mansfield, 2000). This view may also allow individuals a sense of security in their romantic relationships. By viewing someone's personality as stable and consistent (as opposed to their appearance, which could change or be purposefully altered) it may reassure individuals that their relationship is more likely to last for a long time as their attraction is based on something deep inside them that will not change.

However, later on the same participant, when talking about how physical attractiveness was not as important as some people and the media made it out to be, admitted that it was important to a degree.

Rita: *I mean you want to see that person and feel something um but it doesn't necessarily have to be the case you don't have to look like a lifeguard to feel attracted to that person.*

In this case it is suggested that although it is not necessary to look as attractive as the people in movies, advertisements or on TV, it is still preferable for people to find each other physically attractive if they are to be in a romantic relationship. This vacillation between denying the importance of physical attractiveness and then acknowledging it may illustrate the contradictory nature of the many discourses structuring the way people make sense of themselves and others. Consumer culture is not the only influence on people's lives and a number of other influences structure the way we think and feel. In this case, discourses about what it means to be a good, moral person, one who is not shallow or superficial and who is interested in who the other person *really is* as opposed to their appearance, may be in conflict with discourses presented in advertising and the media and how they have constructed intimacy and attraction as dependent on appearance.

The use of the *Love and Looks* discourse is beneficial to a number of organisations especially the beauty industry and companies selling self-improvement products such as those which focus on losing weight, achieving a better complexion, or improving the appearance of the body through clothing or gyms or the face through make-up. All of these products are popular because people are encouraged to feel that they need them in order to attain a certain level of acceptance from one's self and from others and without them this will be less likely (Wolf, 2002). Advertising and the media often reinforce the message that physical attractiveness is necessary for receiving love and acceptance from others and for being deemed a suitable potential romantic partner. This is illustrated in billboards advertising a gym membership with the slogan *Fit in or fat off*, make-up advertisements with slogans like *Wanted* and the Wonderbra advertisement with the tagline, *Look me in the eyes and tell me that you love me*. These types of messages and images of impossibly attractive people in sexually intimate positions or romantic movies and television roles are likely to influence the way people think about relationships and the criteria they believe they need to meet in order to be worthy of love.

## 6. Conclusion

When talking to participants about relationships and love, the discourse *Love and looks* was significant in shaping the way the young women discussed their feelings and experiences. This discourse has implications for how we think and feel about ourselves and others as well as the decisions we make about entering into romantic relationships and how we experience these relationships. This



discourse serves the interests of companies selling products that are claimed to improve the appearance of the body. Advertising for these products often equates a specific body type with being worthy of love both from romantic partners and from ourselves. Exploring alternate ways of thinking and talking about attraction and desire may allow for the development of more positive self-concepts and more mutually satisfying romantic and sexual relationships.

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