


February 2024

Antes muerta que sencilla: Language and the Construction of Feminine Beauty in the Spanish-Speaking World

Eva Michelle Wheeler

Providence College, ewheele4@providence.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/ijlasw>

 Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Eva Michelle (2024) "Antes muerta que sencilla: Language and the Construction of Feminine Beauty in the Spanish-Speaking World," *International Journal of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest*: Vol. 42: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/ijlasw/vol42/iss1/7>

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Antes muerta que sencilla: Language and the Construction of Feminine Beauty in the Spanish-Speaking World

Cover Page Footnote

This research was generously funded by the following grants: Faculty Development Grant (Oakwood University), Samaniego Faculty Research Grant (New Mexico State University), College of Arts and Sciences Mini Grant (New Mexico State University). The article manuscript was prepared during a Humanities Unbounded Visiting Faculty Fellowship (Duke University, "This project was supported by funding from Duke University under an award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The findings, opinions, and recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author and are not necessarily those of Duke University or the Mellon Foundation"). In addition to financial support, the author would like to acknowledge the collaboration of the study participants, and various professors from Oakwood University (USA), New Mexico State University (USA), la Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (Mexico), and Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (Dominican Republic). Author: Eva Michelle Wheeler, Providence College (ewhee4@providence.edu).

ANTES MUERTA QUE SENCILLA: **LANGUAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE BEAUTY** **IN SPANISH**

Eva Michelle Wheeler¹
Providence College

ABSTRACT. Much has been written on the topic of feminine beauty, and existing studies suggest that ideas about beauty are a powerful cultural mirror that reveal what we value as a society and how we are valued by society (e.g., Etcoff 1999; Rhodes 2006; Whitefield-Madrano 2016; Wolf 2002). Despite critical advances made in beauty research, few existing studies in this area explicitly examine the lexicon of beauty as a critical site of analysis (e.g., Démuth et al. 2022; Gladkova 2021; Gladkova & Romero-Trillo 2021; Miller & Stevens 2021; Tayebi 2021; Wong & Or 2021). In the context of Spanish, no existing studies on the semantics of beauty terminology explore multiple beauty terms, analyze the hierarchical relationship across terms, or connect beauty terminology with specific physical representations (Romero-Trillo 2021; see also, Gladkova & Romero-Trillo 2014). The present study intervenes to fill the gap. Using a linguistic lens, the article analyzes feminine beauty terms in Spanish-speaking contexts in the U.S., Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Equatorial Guinea. Through photo description tasks and ethnographic interviews, the analysis explores three research questions: (1) How are beauty terms defined in these spaces? (2) What is the hierarchical relationship between beauty terms? (3) How is the word *bella* represented visually in Spanish-speaking settings? The results suggest that beauty indexes a number of characteristics, among them youth, race, and ideology. This study's linguistic frame shows how language can facilitate a comparative, global analysis of beauty semantics and beauty discourses.

¹This research was generously funded by the following grants: Faculty Development Grant (Oakwood University), Samaniego Faculty Research Grant (New Mexico State University), College of Arts and Sciences Mini Grant (New Mexico State University). The article manuscript was prepared during a Humanities Unbounded Visiting Faculty Fellowship (Duke University, "This project was supported by funding from Duke University under an award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The findings, opinions, and recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author and are not necessarily those of Duke University or the Mellon Foundation"). In addition to financial support, the author would like to acknowledge the collaboration of the study participants, and various professors from Oakwood University (USA), New Mexico State University (USA), *la Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez* (Mexico), and *Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra* (Dominican Republic). Author: Eva Michelle Wheeler, Providence College (ewheele4@providence.edu).

INTRODUCTION. In societies around the globe, beauty is upheld as a standard to which all should aspire—a golden ticket that affords to its bearer privilege, power, and social currency. Such is the weight placed on feminine beauty that a popular saying in many Spanish-speaking countries is *Antes muerta que sencilla* ('Better dead than plain'). Although generally understood as a complex, abstract, and subjective notion, beauty can be captured, commodified, and harnessed for personal, professional, and political ends. Moreover, perceptions of beauty have real and practical ramifications in everyday life (e.g., less severe court sentences, more job interviews, higher earnings, etc.). The question of who is beautiful and why has been widely studied (e.g., Englis, et al. 1994; Etcoff 1999; Rhodes 2016; Stanfield 2013); and, as with other complex constructs (e.g., race, gender, etc.), much of the meaning embedded in the notion of beauty is inflected by local cultural, social, and linguistic norms.

The present study proposes to analyze the meaning of feminine beauty terms in the U.S., Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Equatorial Guinea using a linguistic lens. Through photo description tasks and ethnographic interviews, the analysis proposes to unpack and explore the physical and social meaning embedded within the Spanish beauty terms: *atractiva* ('attractive'), *bella* ('beautiful'), *bonita* ('pretty'), *buena* ('hot'), *guapa* ('good-looking'), *hermosa* ('beautiful'), *linda* ('cute'), *sexi* ('sexy'). With respect to these terms, the present study explores three research questions: (1) How are beauty terms defined in these spaces? (2) What is the hierarchical relationship between beauty terms? (3) How is the word *bella* represented visually in Spanish-speaking settings?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

2.1. RESEARCHING BEAUTY. Much has been written on the topic of feminine beauty (e.g., Etcoff 1999; Rhodes 2006; Whitefield-Madrano 2016; Wolf 2002), and studies reveal that the concept of beauty is complex and multifaceted. Beauty is at once myth and reality, biological fact and cultural construct, empowering asset and oppressive yoke, elusive ideal and measurable quality. Beauty is a commodity that may be capitalized in the social sphere (e.g. Wolf 2002). It is intertwined in our own self-image, our relationships, our language, and our professional lives (e.g., Whitefield-Madrano 2016); and beauty is a 'powerful cultural mirror' that reveals what we value as a society and how we are valued by society (Stanfield 2013: 1).

Previous studies have explored how beauty is constructed and perceived (e.g., Englis et al. 1994; Frith et al. 2005; Rhodes 2006), and these studies have been able to analyze what people perceive to be beautiful and what role beauty plays in the social sphere. On the nature of beauty, scholars have argued alternately that beauty is an oppressive social construct (e.g., Wolf 2002), an inevitable

biological fact (e.g., Etcoff 1999), and a complicated contradiction (e.g., Whitefield-Madrano 2016). While earlier studies grounded the concept of beauty in measurable standards such as facial symmetry and body dimensions (e.g., Etcoff 1999), other studies have argued that symmetry alone does not determine beauty (e.g., Langlois et al., 1994; Whitefield-Madrano 2016).

Although the concept of beauty may elude objective measurement, societies understand and harness it for personal, political, and economic ends. Beauty standards may be observed in beauty magazines, product advertising, beauty contests, television and movies, and, more recently, on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat (e.g., Whitefield-Madrano 2016). When women measure themselves against these widely circulated ideals of feminine beauty, the Western ideal of the young, thin beauty can precipitate eating disorders, plastic surgery, aversion to aging, and poor self-image (e.g., Edmonds 2010; Wolf 2002).² Moreover, in some settings, beauty can be dangerous, bringing with it unwanted attention (e.g., Edmonds 2010). However, beauty can also be a great equalizer, extending opportunity to those who have been ‘excluded from other systems of privilege based in wealth, pedigree, or education’ (Edmonds 2010: 20); and beauty can shape national image and buoy patriotism during times of crisis (Stanfield 2013). Widely studied, and broadly invoked, it is undeniable that the concept of beauty plays a central role in global society.

2.2. APPROACHING BEAUTY THROUGH A LINGUISTIC LENS.

Despite the critical advances made in beauty research, few existing studies in this area specifically examine the lexicon of beauty as a critical site of analysis. Nevertheless, language is a crucial medium through which notions of beauty are socialized and expressed. The language we use to describe beauty is deliberate, and the specific terms of the beauty lexicon communicate meaning and nuance (Whitefield-Madrano 2016: 36). The eight focal terms for the present study are commonly used to describe beauty in Spanish, and the terms are defined in the following way in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* published by the Royal Spanish Academy:

² ‘While the Western world adheres to a beauty ideal that says women can never be too thin, the semi-nomadic Moors of the Sahara Desert have for centuries cherished a feminine ideal of extreme fatness’ (Popenoe 2004). See also the *Los Angeles Times* article on the Efik people of southeastern Nigeria who ‘hail a woman’s rotundity as a sign of good health, prosperity, and allure (Simmons 1998).

- atractiva*:** Dicho de una persona: Que por su físico despierta interés y agrado en las demás.
 ‘Said of a person: Who by their physique awakens interest and pleasure in others’
- bella*:** Que por la perfección de sus formas, complace a la vista o al oído y, por ext., al espíritu.
 ‘That which, due to the perfection of its forms, pleases the eye or the ear and, by extension, the spirit’
- bonita*:** Linda, agraciada, de cierta proporción y belleza.
 ‘Cute, good-looking, of a certain proportion and beauty’
- buena*:** De valor positivo, acorde con las cualidades que cabe atribuirle por su naturaleza o destino.
 ‘Of positive value, in accordance with the qualities that can be attributed to [a person, thing, or idea] by its nature or purpose’
- guapa*:** Bien parecida
 ‘Good-looking’
- hermosa*:** Dotada de hermosura.
 ‘Endowed with beauty’
- linda*:** Hermosa, bella, grata a la vista.
 ‘Beautiful, pleasing to the eye’
- sexi*:** Que tiene atractivo físico y sexual.
 ‘Who is physically and sexually attractive’

Although related, each of the focal terms carries its own meaning and nuance. The definition of the term *bella*, for example, invokes the idea of perfection and prompts consideration of the physical as well as the spiritual. On the other hand, the definition of the term *atractiva* has a purely physical basis. Despite the unique definitions of each word, there is substantial overlap across terms, particularly when considering the synonyms listed below each definition in the dictionary. Table 1 lists the synonymous relationship between terms. On one extreme, there is the term *buena*, which does not find a synonym in any of the other focal terms. It should be noted, however, that the dictionary definition of *buena* does not account for variations in meaning provoked by the usage of the term with the verbs *ser* (*buena* – ‘good’) or *estar* (*buena* – ‘hot/attractive’). On the other extreme are terms like *guapa*, *bella*, *hermosa*, and *linda*, for which the dictionary lists 4-5 other focal terms as synonyms. As the present study unpacks the meaning of these beauty terms, and the relationship across terms, it does so with the understanding that the boundaries between terms may overlap.

	<i>atractiva</i>	<i>bella</i>	<i>bonita</i>	<i>buena</i>	<i>guapa</i>	<i>hermosa</i>	<i>linda</i>	<i>sexi</i>
<i>atractiva</i>		x			x	x		
<i>Bella</i>			x		x	x	x	
<i>Bonita</i>							x	
<i>Buena</i>								
<i>Guapa</i>	x	x	x			x	x	
<i>hermosa</i>		x	x		x		x	
<i>Linda</i>		x	x		x	x		
<i>Sexi</i>	x							

TABLE 1. SYNONYMS AS LISTED IN THE *DICCIONARIO DE LA LENGUA ESPAÑOLA*

The language of beauty is a window into what society values. Beyond the meaning of each individual term, an exploration of beauty terminology reveals the hierarchical relationship that exists across beauty terms; and, in English, the word *beautiful* occupies the top position in that hierarchy—‘the queen bee of all the words we use to describe looks’ (Whitefield-Madrano 2016: 37). As the present study explores the hierarchical relationship among beauty terms in Spanish, it does so not solely for the purpose of semantic inquiry, but rather, as a window into what society values. As indicated by the definitions discussed above, some beauty terms might solely reference external, physical beauty, while others may account for more holistic notions of beauty. The study explores how different beauty terms are valued by Spanish speakers and what this might indicate about how women are seen and valued in these contexts. In the present study, a semantic frame facilitates an analysis of the meaning contained in individual terms as well as the relationship between terms; and this new lens affords additional analytical possibilities.

The semantic study of beauty terminology is an emerging area of inquiry, with the majority of research on the topic being published within the last decade. Existing studies explore the meaning of beauty terms in languages such as Turkish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian, English, Persian, and Spanish (Démuth, Démuthova & Keçeli 2022; Gladkova 2021; Gladkova & Romero-Trillo 2021; Miller & Stevens 2021; Tayebi 2021; Wong & Or 2021). Many of the existing studies on language and beauty were published in a 2021 special issue of the *International Journal of Language and Culture* edited by Anna Gladkova and Jesús Romero-Trillo and titled, “The Conceptualization of ‘Beautiful’ and ‘Ugly’ across Languages and Cultures.” As these studies explore the meanings associated with beauty and ugliness in their respective languages, they use diverse methodologies, participant pools, and frames of reference. In the context of Spanish, the few existing studies on beauty terminology position the term *bonito/a* as the Spanish equivalent for ‘beautiful,’ a surprising choice given that the word *bonito/a* is generally translated to ‘pretty’ in English, rather than ‘beautiful’ (Romero-Trillo 2021; see also, Gladkova & Romero-Trillo 2014). No existing studies on beauty terminology in Spanish explore terms other than *bonito/a*, a fact which presents a significant opportunity for knowledge production in the field. Moreover, because

existing studies do not consider multiple beauty terms in Spanish, they by extension do not explore the hierarchical relationship across terms or what this might indicate about what is valued in society. The present study—through its focus on multiple Spanish beauty terms, exploration of hierarchical relationships, invocation of multiple geographic and social spaces, and photo description tasks that explore the physical representation of Spanish beauty terminology—intervenes to fill in the gaps in existing research.

At the center of this investigation of beauty terms is the primary question of what the terms mean: the physical and social information embedded in each category, how categories are delimited, and whether category prototypes exist. These questions are within the domain of semantics (e.g. Goddard 2011; Löbner 2002). In particular, the present study draws on lexical semantics to explore the meaning of Spanish beauty terminology (e.g., Murphy 2010). Moreover, for the analysis of how the word *bella* is visually represented in Spanish-speaking settings, the conversation on the emerging beauty standards invokes consideration of prototype theory. Rosch (1973) argues that categories tend to be organized around “typical” members, who are those who have characteristics that participants most frequently associate with the category (See also, Labov 1973). These typical members of the category are understood as prototypes (Goddard 2011; Löbner 2002; Murphy 2010). For the purposes of the present study (which is based on a photo description survey), the images that participants most frequently identify using the term *bella* contribute to the understanding of where the prototypes for *bella* are located (Murphy 2010). Ultimately, this article joins a long tradition of semantic scholarship that explores the relationship between language and the physical world, and its unique contributions specifically advance the conversation on what the language of beauty tells us about the societies that create it.

3. METHODS. The present study is the pilot stage of a major research project that will examine beauty terminology and beauty discourses in diverse Spanish-speaking societies. For this phase of the study, I selected research sites in Mexico, New Mexico (U.S.), the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Equatorial Guinea. At first glance, these sites appear to be quite distinct: states that flank the U.S.-Mexico border, neighboring Caribbean nations, and a small country in Central Africa. However, despite these regional and cultural differences, the selected research sites share a common bond—the Spanish language and a shared history as former Spanish colonies. Language is the common thread that connects these diverse societies, and it is also the powerful analytical tool that can reveal how these very different cultural spaces construct and understand notions of feminine beauty.

3.1 RESEARCH SITES. This study examines data from five research sites: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico; Las Cruces, New Mexico (U.S.); Santiago de los

Caballeros, Dominican Republic; Havana, Cuba; and Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. As a linguist, living and working along the U.S.-Mexico border at the time this project was conceived, I initially looked to these two spaces as sites for my analysis. In Ciudad Juárez and Las Cruces, the research sites were university campuses where classes were in session. Because of initial hypotheses regarding the relationship between race and perceptions of beauty, and previous research experience in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, I brought in the sites in the Dominican Republic and Cuba to build out the analysis. In the Dominican Republic, the research sites were university campuses; and in Cuba, where classes were not in session at the time, the research sites were community-based: homes, churches, businesses, etc. The study thus began as a hemispheric conversation on the semantics of beauty that proposed to examine notions of feminine beauty in Spanish-speaking spaces in the Western Hemisphere. However, initial results from the research sites in Mexico, the U.S., Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (which will be discussed later in this article) prompted the question of whether beauty ideologies are geographically-bound or whether they can extend as far as the language itself. Thus, the study expanded to a consideration of beauty terminology in global perspective. To assist in this endeavor, I added the research site in Malabo—the capital city of Equatorial Guinea. As the sole Spanish-speaking country in Africa, Equatorial Guinea offers a unique space that shares a linguistic component with the previously analyzed sites but also brings in distinct cultural realities. The addition of this site allows me to contextualize the results from the other research sites more fully. The research sites in Malabo, similar to those in Havana, were community-based: homes, churches, businesses, etc.

3.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS. Across research sites, I recruited 299 adult participants for the study using snowball and convenience sampling techniques. In Santiago de los Caballeros, Las Cruces, and Ciudad Juárez, participants were drawn from local universities. In Las Cruces, I advertised the study using a flyer, email, and class announcements. Students who participated in the survey were compensated with light refreshments. In Santiago de los Caballeros and Ciudad Juárez, I contacted professors at local universities and coordinated the logistics for a research visit. Participants at each site were drawn from the students enrolled in the classes selected by my local contacts, and participants completed the survey during class time. These participants were also provided with light refreshments. In Havana and Malabo, as my fieldwork did not overlap with the university course schedule (late-December/early-January) participants were recruited through churches, local businesses, and community organizations. In each case, I first established local contacts, who then introduced me to potential survey participants—neighbors, friends, family, co-workers, classmates, and community

members. Due to the difficulty of procuring assorted snacks in Havana, participants were compensated with a small stipend. In Malabo, where possible, participants were compensated with light refreshments. As a result, the final study sample includes a range of ages (18-59), both sexes, various races, and different levels of education (See Table 2). It should be noted that university-educated participants are overrepresented in the sample (~80% including those who have completed undergraduate and/or graduate work), a result that is likely attributable to the use of university campuses as sites for participant recruitment.

In Table 2, the demographic data are separated by research site. Although participant demographics are generally consistent across sites, it should be noted that the racial self-identification of participants in Malabo is markedly distinct from the other groups. Whereas only 3.47% of participants self-identify as *negro* (lit. 'Black') in the four initial research sites, more than 90% of participants in Malabo identify as Black, African, or Bantu. The potential interaction between participants' racial self-identification and the study data will be further discussed in the Results section of this article.

Participant Demographic Data						
	Dominican Republic	Cuba	Mexico	New Mexico, USA	Equatorial Guinea	Total
No. of Participants	n=58 (RD)	n=51	n=62	Spanish: n=42 English: n=38	n=48	n=299
Age						
18-19	40 (68.97%)	3 (5.88%)	8 (12.9%)	14 (17.5%)	7 (14.58%)	72 (24.08%)
20-29	13 (22.41%)	36 (70.59%)	51 (82.26%)	62 (77.5%)	29 (60.42%)	191 (63.88%)
30-39	1 (1.72%)	7 (13.73%)	2 (3.23%)	3 (3.75%)	5 (10.42%)	18 (6.02%)
40-49	2 (3.45%)	4 (7.84%)	0	0	4 (8.33%)	10 (3.34%)
50-59	2 (3.45%)	0	1 (1.61%)	1 (1.25%)	2 (4.17%)	6 (2.00%)
NR:	0	1 (1.96%)			1 (2.08%)	2 (0.67%)
Sex						
Man:	20 (34.48%)	32 (62.75%)	24 (38.71%)	35 (43.75%)	23 (47.92%)	134 (44.82%)
Woman:	38 (65.52%)	18 (35.29%)	38 (61.29%)	44 (55.00%)	25 (52.08%)	163 (54.52%)
No Response:	0	1 (1.96%)	0	1 (1.25%)	0	2 (0.67%)
Race						
<i>Blanco/Caucasico</i> /White:	9 (15.52%)	24 (47.06%)	6 (9.68%)	14 (17.5%)	0	53 (17.73%)
<i>Hispano/Hispanic</i> /Latino:	5 (8.62%)	0	5 (8.06%)	29 (36.25%)	0	39 (13.04%)
<i>Mestizo</i> :	3 (5.17%)	13 (25.49%)	1 (1.61%)	0	0	17 (5.69%)
<i>Mulato</i> :	8 (13.8%)	2 (3.92%)	0	0	0	10 (3.34%)
<i>Negro</i> :	1 (1.72%)	8 (15.69%)	0	0	38 (79.17%)	47 (15.72%)
<i>Human</i> :	1 (1.72%)	0	3 (4.84%)	1 (1.25%)		5 (1.67%)
Nationality as Race:	<i>Dominicano</i> : 19 (32.76%)	<i>Cubano</i> : 1 (1.96%)	<i>Mexicano</i> : 10 (16.13%)	<i>Mexican</i> / <i>Mexican</i>		48 (16.05%)

<i>Other:</i>	<i>Indio:</i> 4 (6.9%) <i>Moreno:</i> 1 (1.72%) <i>Trigueño:</i> 1 (1.72%)	<i>Trigueño:</i> 2 (3.92%)		<i>American:</i> 18 (22.5%) <i>Misc.</i> <i>Responses:</i> 4 (5%)	<i>Africana/o:</i> 4 (8.33%) <i>Bantú:</i> 3 (6.25%) <i>Morena:</i> 1 (2.08%)	20 (6.69%)
NR:	6 (10.35%)	1 (1.96%)	37 (59.68%)	14 (17.5%)	2 (4.17%)	60 (20.07%)
Level of Education						
Middle School:	0	1 (1.96%)	0	0	5 (10.42%)	6 (2.01%)
High School:	0	37 (72.55%)	0	0	7 (14.58%)	44 (14.72%)
University:	55 (94.83%)	9 (17.65%)	58 (93.55%)	71 (88.75%)	24 (50%)	217 (72.58%)
Postgrad/ Professional:	0	3 (5.88%)	3 (4.84%)	9 (11.25%)	9 (18.75%)	24 (8.03%)
Other:	0	0	0	0	1 (2.08%)	1 (0.33%)
NR:	3 (5.17%)	1 (1.96%)	1 (1.61%)	0	2 (4.17%)	7 (2.34%)

TABLE 2. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

3.3 DATA COLLECTION. At each research site, I asked participants to complete three tasks: an anonymous biographical datasheet (used to collect the participant demographic data presented in the previous section), a brief written survey, and an audio-recorded interview.³ All participants completed the biographical datasheet and the written survey, and 15 participants also completed the interview. All participants were presented with the opportunity to take part in the interview; the 15 participants who completed the interview represent a convenience sample of those who agreed to participate when presented with the opportunity. The written survey was printed on paper. Each participant was given their own survey document, and participants wrote their responses directly onto the survey document. Instructions at the beginning of the survey informed participants that they would be asked about beauty terminology and that their answers should be based on their personal opinion. The instructions further informed participants that there were no right or wrong answers, as long as the answers were sincere. I was present for and personally administered all surveys in the study. In cases where multiple participants were completing the survey simultaneously—in a classroom setting, for example—I circulated among the participants, listening and answering questions. The survey environment was

³ All research materials were reviewed and approved by my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to their use in the study. For research sites on other university campuses, the study was approved by a local contact. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their participation in the study via a written consent form (in English or Spanish, according to their preference). Written consent was obtained separately for the survey and interview tasks.

generally dynamic. While taking the survey, participants spoke to me about the survey itself, local beauty norms, and popular culture. During the administration of the survey, I used a notebook to write field notes on the types of questions participants asked as well as relevant comments they made.

The written survey had three main components. The first section asked participants to hierarchically order eight beauty terms from most to least desirable description: *atractiva*, *bella*, *bonita*, *buena*, *guapa*, *hermosa*, *linda*, and *sexi* (*‘Ordene los siguientes términos desde la descripción más deseable a la menos deseable. El #1 debe ser la descripción que le parezca más deseable, y el #8 debe ser la que le parezca menos deseable’*). The second section asked participants to describe photos of a diverse selection of 48 women using gradations of the term *bella* (*muy bella* ‘very beautiful’, *más bella que no bella* ‘more beautiful than not beautiful’, *ni bella ni no bella* ‘neither beautiful nor not beautiful’, *más no bella que bella* ‘more not beautiful than beautiful’, *muy no bella* ‘very not beautiful’).⁴ In crafting the evaluation scale, I intentionally avoided using the word *fea* (lit. ‘ugly’) in any of the descriptions, because the object of this portion of the study is to analyze specific associations with the word *bella*. In previous work, I have used photo description tasks to concretely explore the meaning embedded in other complex social constructs, and I have found this to be a useful way to understand embodied meaning (e.g., Wheeler 2015a, Wheeler 2015b, Wheeler 2017). A description of the race, age, hair color and texture, and eye color of the women in the 48 photos appears in Table 3. The table also contains a description of whether or not the women in the images are smiling or wearing makeup, two factors that have been suggested to have an effect on evaluations of beauty.

	Black	White	Asian	Mixed/Other	TOTAL	
Race	17	17	7	7	48	
	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s
Age	23	7	8	7	2	1
	Black	Blonde	Brown	Gray	Red	None

⁴ The images for the survey were selected from a collection of more than 4,000 portraits that included people of different ages, races, and genders. When I asked the photographer for permission to use the photos in the study, they asked to speak with me about what I planned to do with the photos. Specifically, the photographer asked, “How are you going to change the world?” I explained that, in having this conversation on language and beauty, I ultimately wanted to have a conversation about what we value in our society. I told them that I wanted to explore these ideas so that we could have honest conversations about the embedded ideologies and logics that drive our beliefs about beauty. Based on our conversation, the photographer gave me permission to use the photos in this study. However, they did not grant permission to publish the photos, and thus the original survey photos do not appear in the text. To give readers a sense of the skin tone of the woman in the analyzed photos, I have substituted representative pantones.

Hair Color	17	6	19	4	1	1	48
	Straight	Wavy	Curly	Coarse	Braids/Locs	None	
Hair Texture	21	5	9	7	5	1	48
	Brown	Green	Gray	Hazel			
Eye Color	35	3	8	2			48
	Smiling	Not Smiling					
Smile	14	34					48
	Makeup	No Makeup					
Makeup	23	25					48

TABLE 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN IN PHOTOS FOR PHOTO DESCRIPTION TASK

The third section of the survey asked participants to describe themselves using the same beauty terminology that they ranked in the first section or another adequate term (*‘Piense en la terminología de belleza que hemos empleado en este estudio. ¿Cuál de los siguientes términos (u otro término que le venga a la mente) usaría usted para describirse a sí misma/o?’*). The self-description data are not analyzed in the present article but will be explored in other texts.

The audio-recorded interview was a one-on-one conversation where I asked questions and took notes on the respondents’ answers. During the interview, I asked participants to talk about beauty more broadly and compare their personal views with those in their society. I also asked participants to explain what specific beauty terms meant, talk about the hierarchy of beauty terms, and discuss the factors that went into their description of the 48 photos. Interview data are explored in more depth in other articles.

These data were supplemented with ethnographic field notes and participant observation.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS. The present study is based on a mixed methodology that combines, on the one hand, quantitative analysis of survey responses and, on the other hand, qualitative analysis and ethnographic observation. For the quantitative analysis of hierarchical term rankings on the written survey, I used descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency counts, mean term rankings) to explore how participants positioned each term in relation to the others. For the analysis of the photo description task, I used a combination of descriptive and analytical statistics to explore the data. In the first phase of the analysis, I collected and engaged frequency data (frequency counts and percentages) for each image using the survey’s five-point scale: *Muy bella*, *Más bella que no bella*, *Ni bella ni no bella*, *Más no bella que bella*, *Muy no bella* (*‘Very Beautiful,’ ‘More Beautiful than*

Not Beautiful,’ ‘Neither Beautiful nor Not Beautiful,’ ‘More Not Beautiful than Beautiful,’ and ‘Very Not Beautiful’). I explored these data at the level of individual research sites and overall, and the Results section of this article reports my findings at both levels. For the analytical statistical analysis of the photo description task data, I used the SPSS statistics software to conduct Pearson correlation and two-tailed significance testing. To prepare the data for this analysis, I first identified the following variables based on each of the 48 photos in the task: participant description, race, age, hair color, hair texture, eye color, whether the woman was smiling, and whether the woman was wearing makeup. For each variable, I assigned the possible responses a code and entered these codes into SPSS for the Pearson correlation testing. The results explore the correlation between the identified variables and indicate which variables correlate with the participant description of the image at a level of statistical significance. As I analyzed the data from the statistical analysis, I drew on my field notes and ethnographic observation in each setting to interpret the results.

4. RESULTS. In Spanish, there are a variety of terms that can be used to describe feminine beauty, and each term brings layers of nuance. For the eight focal terms in this study— *atractiva*, *bella*, *bonita*, *buena*, *guapa*, *hermosa*, *linda*, *sexi*, participants drew an initial distinction between words that could be used to describe exclusively physical characteristics, words that encompassed a combination of physical beauty and beauty of character, and words that could describe an element of *je ne sais quoi*. For participants across research sites, *atractiva*, *bonita*, *linda*, and *guapa* are terms that primarily describe physical characteristics. *Hermosa* and *bella* are terms that describe a combination of external and internal beauty; and *sexi* could describe physical appearance, personality, confidence, or a variety of other factors. Although the consensus for each of the previous terms was relatively straightforward, *buena* was understood differently based on whether participants perceived that it followed *ser* or *estar*. In the phrase ‘*ser buena*’, *buena* describes a good character and has nothing to do with physical appearance. Conversely, in the phrase ‘*estar buena*’, *buena* refers exclusively to physical appearance and does not carry information about character.

4.1 HIERARCHICAL TERM RANKING. As a part of the written survey, participants were asked to hierarchically rank the eight focal terms from most to least desirable description. For some participants, this task was difficult in the decontextualized research environment. Although they understood what each term meant individually, many participants indicated that it was initially difficult to rank the difference between *bonita* and *linda* or between *bella* and *hermosa*. If participants asked for clarification, I offered them a hypothetical situation. To male

participants, I said, ‘Imagine that you were going to give a compliment to a woman that you were interested in, which term would be the highest compliment? Which follows? etc.’ For women, I said, ‘Imagine that you were to receive a compliment, which term would be the highest compliment? Which follows?’ With this framing, participants were able to make the necessary distinctions. That said, it is worth noting that this framing—of giving or receiving a compliment from a member of the opposite sex in whom you are interested—could potentially shift the conversation from one about “beauty” to one about “attraction.” Recognizing that possibility, I approach the data with an eye toward whether what participants are ranking is in fact beauty or attractiveness.

Across research sites, 299 participants completed this task and assigned each term a ranking between 1 and 8. To determine the hierarchy across terms, I took the mean of the 299 rankings for each term and assigned each term a number based on this mean. The term with the lowest mean is listed as number 1, and the term with the highest mean is listed as number 8 (See Table 4). Across research sites, participants list *hermosa* as the highest term in the beauty hierarchy with the greatest frequency (50.16% of responses). At the other extreme, participants list *sexi* as the lowest term in the beauty hierarchy with the greatest frequency (33.11% of responses), followed by *buena* (32.79% of responses). *Linda*, *bonita*, and *bella* are all in the top level of compliments (ranked between 2 and 4); and *buena*, *guapa*, and *atractiva* are lower-ranked compliments (ranked between 5 and 7). These results suggest that participants favor terms that include a more holistic notion of beauty (e.g., *hermosa*) and disfavor terms that evoke purely physical or other hard-to-place characteristics (e.g., *sexi*, *buena*).

	Dominican Republic	Cuba	Mexico	New Mexico, USA	Equatorial Guinea	Overall
1.	Hermosa	Hermosa	Hermosa	Hermosa	Hermosa	Hermosa
2.	Bella	Atractiva	Bella	Bella	Linda	Bella
3.	Linda	Bella	Bonita	Linda	Bonita	Linda
4.	Bonita	Linda	Linda	Bonita	Bella	Bonita
5.	Atractiva	Bonita	Guapa	Guapa	Buena	Atractiva
6.	Guapa	Buena	Atractiva	Atractiva	Guapa	Guapa
7.	Buena	Guapa	Buena	Buena	Atractiva	Buena
8.	Sexi	Sexi	Sexi	Sexi	Sexi	Sexi

TABLE 4. HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIP ACROSS BEAUTY TERMS

The results additionally speak to the potential ambiguity attendant to the hypothetical framing of the task in the context of giving and receiving compliments from a member of the opposite sex. Based on the results, which prioritize terms that index beauty over those that index attraction, it appears that participants did not conflate beauty and attractiveness in their rankings.

4.2 PHOTO DESCRIPTION. Results from the first research task suggest that participants prioritize a notion of beauty that is “more than skin deep.” The terms *hermosa* and *bella*, consistently ranked among the highest in the hierarchy of beauty terms, purportedly describe a combination of internal and external beauty. To explore these expressed preferences empirically, I asked participants to complete a photo description task using the word *bella*. As a part of this task, participants looked at images of 48 different women and indicated how beautiful each woman would be considered in the participant’s local cultural context. Participants marked their evaluations on a 5-point scale: ‘Very Beautiful,’ ‘More Beautiful than Not Beautiful,’ ‘Neither Beautiful nor Not Beautiful,’ ‘More Not Beautiful than Beautiful,’ and ‘Very Not Beautiful’. The aim of the task was to understand the physical meaning of the term *bella*, its breadth, its prototypes, and its outer limits.

4.2.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS. The three images represented by the pantones in Figure 1 were consistently evaluated as the most beautiful women by participants at each research site. All three women are young, with white or light skin, and more Eurocentric facial features, consistent with “the Western ideal of the young, thin beauty” (e.g., Edmonds 2010, Wolf 2002).

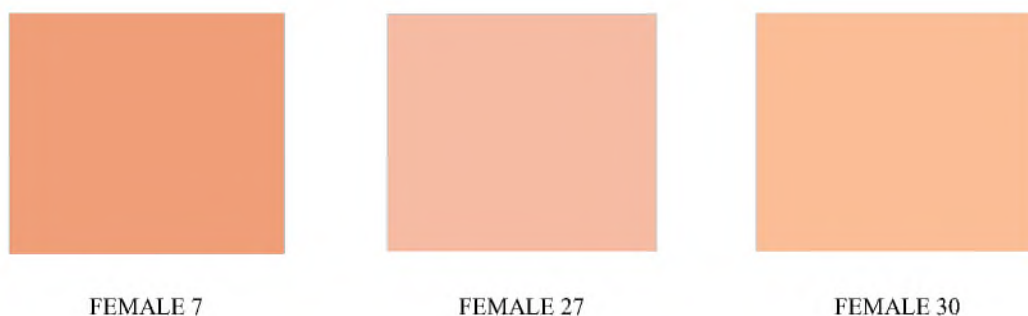


FIGURE 1. PANTONES REPRESENTING THE IMAGES IDENTIFIED AS ‘MUY BELLA’ AND ‘MAS BELLA QUE NO BELLA’

The results for all three women skew toward ‘Very Beautiful’ and ‘More Beautiful than Not Beautiful’. FEMALE_7 is described as *muy bella* (43.65%) or

más bella que no bella (41.04%) in 84.69 percent of cases. FEMALE_27 is described as *muy bella* (34.53%) or *más bella que no bella* (43.32%) in 77.85 percent of cases; and FEMALE_30 is described as *muy bella* (35.83%) or *más bella que no bella* (43.65%) in 79.48 percent of cases.

	Muy Bella	Más Bella	Ni Bella Ni No Bella	Más No Bella	Muy No Bella	NR
FEMALE 7	134	126	35	6	4	2
FEMALE 27	106	133	45	15	5	3
FEMALE 30	110	134	46	11	3	3

TABLE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF BEAUTY RATINGS FOR IMAGES 7, 27 AND 30

When the average ratings from Malabo are compared with the average ratings from the other research sites, the evaluation from Malabo is lower than the overall average, and generally also lower than the evaluations from Ciudad Juárez, Las Cruces, Santiago, and Havana (with one exception). For FEMALE_27 and FEMALE_30, the two images of women of European descent, the average ratings from Malabo are noticeably lower than the evaluations from all other sites, dropping below 4.0. This fact notwithstanding, these two images are still evaluated as within the top five most beautiful women in the results from Malabo.

	C. Juárez	Las Cruces	Santiago	Havana	Malabo	Overall
FEMALE 7	4.46	4.48	4.17	3.84	4.04	4.25
FEMALE 27	4.34	4.02	4.10	4.04	3.62	4.02
FEMALE 30	4.17	4.19	4.17	4.1	3.78	4.10

TABLE 6. AVERAGE BEAUTY RATING BY RESEARCH SITE FOR IMAGES 7, 27 AND 30

The three images represented by the pantones in Figure 2 were consistently evaluated as ‘neither beautiful nor not beautiful’. Overall, images described in this way are diverse, in terms of race, age, skin color, features, hair, etc. This is the category that participants applied to the idea of the “average woman.”

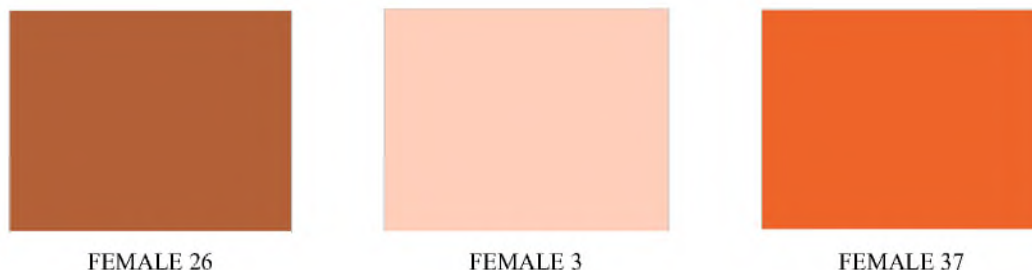


FIGURE 2. PANTONES REPRESENTING THE IMAGES IDENTIFIED AS 'NI BELLA NI NO BELLA'

The results for all three women trend toward ‘Neither Beautiful nor Not Beautiful’. FEMALE_26 is a racially Black woman, approximately 40 years old, with long, straightened black hair. She is wearing makeup and has a serious facial expression. Participants described her as *ni bella ni no bella* in 30.94 percent of cases. FEMALE_3 is a young white woman, approximately 20 years old, with brown eyes and straight brown hair. She has a serious facial expression and is not wearing makeup. Participants described her as *ni bella ni no bella* in 44.30 percent of cases. FEMALE_37 is a young Black woman with short, black, coarse hair. She is not wearing makeup and she has a subtle smile on her face. Participants described her as *ni bella ni no bella* in 27.36 percent of cases.

	Muy Bella	Más Bella	Ni Bella Ni No Bella	Más No Bella	Muy No Bella	NR
FEMALE_26	35	79	95	54	42	2
FEMALE_3	8	59	136	75	27	2
FEMALE_37	40	87	84	55	38	3

TABLE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF EVALUATIONS OF BEAUTY FOR IMAGES 26, 3 AND 37

When the average ratings from Malabo are compared to the average ratings from the other sites, there are some interesting results. For FEMALE 26 and FEMALE 37, the two images of women of African descent (who have different skin colors, hair textures, ages, and features), the average ratings from Malabo are higher than the overall average, although still located below those from Ciudad Juárez and above those from Santiago and Havana. For FEMALE_3, the image of the woman who appears to be of European descent, the ratings from Malabo are below the overall average and lower than the ratings from any other research site. These initial results suggest a pattern of participants from Ciudad Juárez, Las Cruces, Santiago, and Havana evaluating the beauty of white women slightly more favorably than participants from Malabo.

	C. Juárez	Las Cruces	Santiago	Havana	Malabo	Overall
FEMALE_26	3.36	3.18	2.78	2.35	3.34	3.03
FEMALE_3	3.14	2.93	2.89	2.55	2.39	2.80
FEMALE_37	3.73	3.32	2.89	2.08	3.26	3.10

TABLE 8. AVERAGE BEAUTY RATING BY RESEARCH SITE FOR IMAGES 26, 3 AND 37

The three images represented by the pantones in Figure 3 were consistently evaluated as the least beautiful women by participants at each research site. All

three women appear to be older, in their 40s or above, with a coarse hair texture, and—without exception—racially Black (although with a range of skin colors). These results speak to the governing logic of a Western notion of beauty that privileges youth. The results also suggest a consideration that did not come up when participants spoke to me directly about how they understood beauty, and that consideration is of the racialized dimensions of beauty.

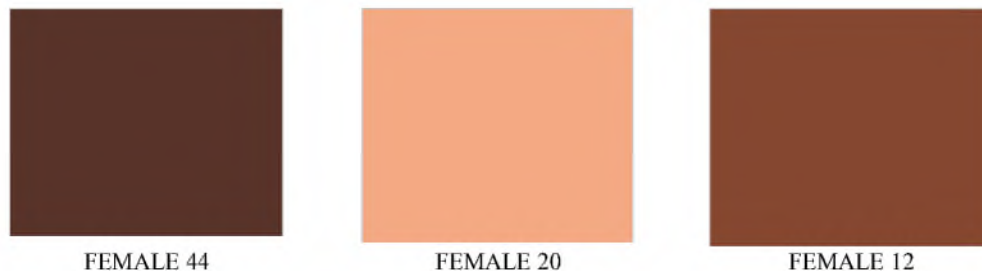


FIGURE 3. PANTONES REPRESENTING THE IMAGES IDENTIFIED AS 'MUY NO BELLA' AND 'MÁS NO BELLA QUE BELLA'

The results for all three women skew toward 'More Not Beautiful than Beautiful' and 'Very Not Beautiful'. FEMALE_44 is a brown-skinned Black woman, approximately 30 years old, with coarse black hair worn in long braids. She is not wearing makeup, and she has a serious facial expression. Participants described her as *muy no bella* (35.50%) or *más no bella que bella* (19.54%) in 55.04 percent of cases. FEMALE_20 is a light-skinned Black woman, approximately 60 years old, with curly brown hair. She is wearing makeup, has a noticeable mustache, and has a serious facial expression. Participants described her as *muy no bella* (56.03%) or *más no bella que bella* (22.80%) in 78.83 percent of cases. FEMALE_12 is a Black woman, approximately 40 years old, with coarse black hair worn in short braids. Participants described her as *muy no bella* (39.09%) or *más no bella que bella* (28.34%) in 67.43 percent of cases.

	Muy Bella	Más Bella	Ni Bella Ni No Bella	Más No Bella	Muy No Bella	NR
FEMALE 44	14	30	90	60	109	4
FEMALE 20	5	15	43	70	172	2
FEMALE 12	10	21	67	87	120	2

TABLE 9. DISTRIBUTION OF EVALUATIONS OF BEAUTY FOR IMAGES 44, 20 AND 12

When the average ratings from Malabo are compared with the average ratings from the previous sites, these three images continue to receive among the lowest evaluations: FEMALE_20 is ranked 48th of 48 images; FEMALE_12 is

ranked 46th; and FEMALE_44 is ranked 33rd. Although the average Malabo ratings for FEMALES 44 and 12 are higher than the overall average, they remain lower than Ciudad Juárez and Las Cruces, but higher than Santiago and Havana. For FEMALE_20, the average ratings from Malabo are lower than the overall average and approximate the results from Santiago and Havana.

	C. Juárez	Las Cruces	Santiago	Havana	Malabo	Overall
FEMALE_44	2.87	2.45	1.84	1.45	2.5	2.26
FEMALE_20	2.16	2.02	1.41	1.27	1.49	1.73
FEMALE_12	2.51	2.38	1.64	1.35	2.13	2.07

TABLE 10. AVERAGE BEAUTY RATING BY RESEARCH SITE FOR IMAGES 44, 20 AND 12

4.2.2 ANALYTICAL STATISTICAL ANALYSIS. To further explore these initial findings, I conducted a multivariate statistical analysis using SPSS. Specifically, I used Pearson correlation and two-tailed significance testing. With the participant description of each photo (*muy bella*, *ni bella ni no bella*, etc.) as the dependent variable, I tested the correlation with the age, race, hair color, hair texture, eye color, use of makeup, and facial expression of the women in each of the 48 photos. The results of this analysis appear in Table 11. When tested for correlation with PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION, the variable HAIR COLOR (e.g., black, blonde, brown, gray, red, none) did not reach the level of statistical significance ($p=.387$), suggesting that the color of a woman's hair was not a prioritized consideration for participants as they evaluated her beauty. In this same analysis, the correlation between PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION and HAIR TEXTURE (e.g., straight, wavy, curly, coarse, braids/locs, none) was also statistically insignificant ($p=.532$). Similarly, the variable EYE COLOR (e.g., brown, green, gray, hazel) did not rise to the level of statistical significance in its correlation with PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION ($p=.582$). For the variable SMILE (e.g., smiling, not smiling), there is no statistically significant correlation with PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION ($p=.892$). Likewise, for the variable MAKEUP, the correlation with PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION did not rise to the level of statistical significance ($p=.216$). These results suggest that participants' evaluation of each woman's beauty was not driven primarily by hair color or texture, eye color, use of makeup, or facial expression. Although many variables do not significantly correlate to PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION, the data reveal two notable correlations. First, across all research sites, there is a statistically significant correlation between AGE and PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION ($p=.001$), suggesting that a woman's age was a key factor as participants evaluated how beautiful she would be considered in their local context. Second, across all research sites, there is a statistically significant correlation between RACE and

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION ($p=.010$), suggesting that a woman's race was also a factor that participants considered when evaluating her beauty.

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION			
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
RACE	.367*	.010	48
AGE	-.457**	.001	48
HAIR COLOR	.128	.387	48
HAIR TEXTURE	-.092	.532	48
EYE COLOR	.082	.582	48
SMILE	.020	.892	48
MAKEUP	.182	.216	48
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)			

TABLE 11. MULTIVARIATE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS RESULTS (SPSS)

The results of the correlation analysis are consistent with the patterns that emerged in the descriptive analysis. That there is a significant correlation between participants' evaluations of beauty and a woman's age is consistent with the previous results. Across research sites, the women whose images are evaluated as most beautiful are all in their 20s, and the women whose images are evaluated as least beautiful are all in their 40s or above. Likewise, the significant correlation between participants' evaluations of beauty and a woman's race are consistent with the results examined in the descriptive analysis. Although, in those results, the image of the "average" woman did not have a single race, age, etc., the women evaluated as most beautiful were racially white (or mixed with lighter skin), and those evaluated as least beautiful were racially Black. When I asked participants directly about the factors that they considered when evaluating feminine beauty, some mentioned age, but none mentioned race. The fact that AGE and RACE are the factors most significantly correlated with evaluations of a woman's beauty in the present study suggests that participants' notions of beauty may not be as holistic as suggested by their direct answers and the results of the hierarchical term ranking task.

5. DISCUSSION. The results presented in the preceding section reveal key information about the way that feminine beauty is constructed and understood in the diverse Spanish-speaking settings of Mexico, New Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Equatorial Guinea. Additionally, the results show how

language can be a powerful lens for analyzing the abstract concept of beauty in distinct cultural contexts. The rich data that I was able to collect in these five research sites reveal several interesting patterns.

First, the results help to answer the first research question: How are beauty terms defined in these spaces? As participants discuss the meaning of beauty terms, they reveal the physical and social information packed into a given term and demonstrate that beauty is not always ‘skin deep.’ The terms *hermosa* and *bella*, for example, describe a beauty that is internal as well as external. Conversely, the terms *atractiva*, *bonita*, *linda*, and *guapa* describe beauty that is physically observable; and the terms *sexi* and *buena*, describe an attractiveness that can index physical characteristics, personality traits, or some other indescribable quality. These results reveal that the beauty being described in a given situation may be holistic (internal and external), superficial (purely external), or grounded in other factors; and the nature of this beauty is encoded in the language used to describe it. Understanding what different beauty terms reference can inform an interpretation of the hierarchical relationship across terms.

The results also help to answer the second research question: What is the hierarchical relationship between beauty terms? Across research sites, the results reveal that participants consider *hermosa* to be the term that is viewed most favorably, a term that evokes both external and internal beauty. The terms *sexi* and *buena* are consistently ranked as the least favorable beauty terms. Of the remaining terms, *linda*, *bonita*, and *bella* are ranked in the top level of compliments; and *buena*, *guapa*, and *atractiva* are ranked in the lower level of compliments. With this in mind, when participants are asked to make decisions about the relational hierarchy among the terms, they privilege the terms that evoke both physical and internal beauty (rather than those that evoke physical beauty alone). This suggests that participants privilege a more holistic notion of beauty.

The results also help to answer the third research question: How is the word *bella* represented visually in Spanish-speaking settings? To further explore the construction of feminine beauty through language use in these distinct cultural spaces, participants completed a photo description task to indicate the breadth, prototypes, and outer limits of the term *bella*. These photo descriptions complicate expressed preference by participants for a holistic notion of beauty and reveal other considerations at work in discourses on beauty. During interviews, some participants stated that beauty is greatest during a woman’s youth, and the photo description results support this assertion. Other participants suggested that beauty is influenced by the features of the face (e.g. nose, lips, mouth). Participants who prioritize these characteristics generally evaluate features that are more European as more beautiful. A few participants directly commented on a preference for skin color. In these cases, there was a preference against darker skin; and the photo description results support this assertion.

As I analyzed the preliminary results from Ciudad Juárez, Las Cruces, Santiago, and Havana—the correlation between youth and beauty, the preference for European features, and the preference against darker skin, I was struck by the similarities that arose across these diverse cultural spaces: border cities in the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico and two island nations in the Caribbean. This prompted me to consider whether these shared definitions of beauty were the result of shared Western ideologies, or whether they were indicative of broader, more universal, ideologies of beauty. To further explore this question, I added an additional layer to the study by collecting data in Equatorial Guinea—the sole Spanish-speaking country in Africa. As I positioned Equatorial Guinea as the decisive indicator of the reach of Western beauty ideologies, I subconsciously engaged the African imaginary that pervades Afro-descended communities in postcolonial spaces. In this imaginary, Africa is pure, and ‘untainted’ by Western ideologies. Africa values what the West disparages. Africa is a counterpoint to the Western preoccupation with youth and European beauty standards; and it represents an escape from the oppression experienced by those who do not conform to those beauty standards. This is the African imaginary. In reality, however, the ideologies of beauty in Equatorial Guinea are not that different from the ideologies at work in Mexico, the U.S., Cuba, and the Dominican Republic.

Although they are generally higher than the overall average, the evaluations from Malabo follow the trends of the results from the preliminary sites, with respect to who is considered most and least beautiful. Young women, with lighter skin and more European features are evaluated as among the most beautiful; and older, racially Black women with coarse hair are considered to be the least beautiful. It is notable that, even in a location where the participants also have darker skin and coarse hair, the images of women that share these same characteristics are evaluated as the least beautiful. My initial inference from these results was that the beauty ideology observed in the Western research sites appeared to extend to the non-Western setting of Equatorial Guinea, suggesting that this ideology that privileges youth and Eurocentric features is not exclusive to the West. Upon further reflection, such a result is not surprising. Although situated on different continents, and occupying different social, political, and economic positions, all five research sites are postcolonial spaces that bear the persistent imprint of Spain’s colonial ideologies. Future studies may explore what it means to decolonize beauty—in its language and its ideology.

6. LIMITATIONS. As with the majority of studies, the results presented in this article should be viewed in light of some limitations. The first is the selection of research sites. The study aims to examine the construction of feminine beauty in Spanish-speaking settings, but the results are limited to five countries. Future studies on this topic might expand the analysis and engage the research questions

in other Spanish-speaking countries or contexts. These studies might also explore how ideas about language and beauty vary within a single country. A second limitation concerns sample size and selection. As noted in the methodology section, there is an overrepresentation of college-aged participants in the sample, due to the use of university campuses as sites for participant recruitment. In light of the fact that the present study suggests a statistically significant correlation between a woman's age and participants' evaluations of her beauty, future studies might conduct similar photo description tasks with participants from a broader range of age groups to see if the correlation holds. Along the same lines, given that the results suggest a statistically significant correlation between a woman's race and participant evaluations of her beauty, future studies might control for the racial composition of the participants as well as the women in the images. Finally, as the study specifically explores the notion of feminine beauty in Spanish, future studies might incorporate photos of men, non-binary individuals, etc. to explore which operational logics of beauty are consistent regardless of gender, and which are particular to notions of feminine beauty.

7. CONCLUSION. Beauty indexes a number of characteristics, among them youth, race, and ideology. Beauty terminology reveals how feminine beauty is alternately constructed as holistic, superficial, or grounded in other factors. This study's linguistic frame shows how language can facilitate a comparative, global analysis of beauty semantics and beauty discourses that is capable of crossing cultural and geographical borders. In these diverse cultural spaces, people hold a shared understanding of what beauty terms mean. Moreover, they are able to go beyond defining the terms to placing the terms in a ranked hierarchy. In the abstract, there is an expressed preference for a more holistic ideology of beauty, one that considers internal as well as external factors. However, in the context of specific images, evaluations of beauty are significantly correlated to externally-observable characteristics such as age and race. Beauty has a name: youth, fair skin, and European features. That this standard is consistent across all research sites points to a shared colonial history and suggests a point of departure for decolonizing beauty ideologies.

REFERENCES

- DÉMUTH, ANDREJ; SLÁVKA DÉMUTHOVA; AND YASIN KEÇELİ. 2022. A Semantic Analysis of the Concept of Beauty (Güzellik) in Turkish Language: Mapping the Semantic Domains. *Frontiers in Communication* 7.1-11.
- DICCIONARIO DE LA LENGUA ESPAÑOLA ['Dictionary of the Spanish language'], 23 ed. 2014. Madrid: Espasa.
- EDMONDS, ALEXANDER. 2010. *Pretty modern: Beauty, sex, and plastic surgery in Brazil*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- ENGLIS, BASIL. G.; MICHAEL R. SOLOMON; AND RICHARD D. ASHMORE. 1994. Beauty before the eyes of beholders: The cultural encoding of beauty types in magazine advertising and music television. *Journal of Advertising* 23.49-64.
- ETCOFF, NANCY. 1999. *Survival of the prettiest: The science of beauty*. New York: Random House.
- FRITH, KATHERINE; PING SHAW; AND HONG CHENG. 2005. The construction of beauty: A cross-cultural analysis of women's magazine advertising. *Journal of Communication* 55.56-70.
- GLADKOVA, ANNA. "What is beauty?": Cultural semantics of the Russian folk aesthetics. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.84-105.
- GLADKOVA, ANNA AND JESÚS ROMERO-TRILLO. 2014. Ain't it beautiful? The conceptualization of beauty from an ethnopragmatic perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics* 60.140-59.
- GLADKOVA, ANNA AND JESÚS ROMERO-TRILLO. 2021. Is ugliness in the mind of the beholder?: The conceptualization of 'ugly' in English. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.106-27.
- GODDARD, CLIFF. 2011. *Semantic analysis: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- LABOV, WILLIAM. 1973. The boundaries of words and their meanings. In C. N. Bailey & R. W. Shuy (Eds.), *New ways of analyzing variation in English* (pp. 340-373). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- LANGLOIS, JUDITH H.; LORI A. ROGGMAN; AND LISA MUSSELMAN. 1994. What is average and what is not average about attractive faces? *Psychological Sciences* 5.214-20.
- LÖBNER, SEBASTIAN. 2002. *Understanding semantics*. London: Arnold.
- MILLER, LAURA AND CAROLYN S. STEVENS. 2021. From beautiful to cute: Shifting meanings in Japanese language and culture. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.62-83.
- MURPHY, M. LYNNE. 2010. *Lexical Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- POPENOE, REBECCA. 2004. *Feeding desire: Fatness, beauty, and sexuality among a Saharan people*. London and New York: Routledge.
- RHODES, GILLIAN. 2006. The evolutionary psychology of facial beauty. *Annual Review of Psychology* 57.199-226.
- ROMERO-TRILLO, JESÚS. 2021. The good, the bad ... and the ugly?: The conceptualization of aesthetics in Spanish. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.147-68.
- ROSCH, ELEANOR H. 1973. On the internal structure of perceptual and semantic categories. In T. E. Moore (Ed.), *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language* (pp.111-44). New York: Academic.
- SIMMONS, ANN M. 1998. "Where Fat Is a Mark of Beauty" *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA).
- STANFIELD, MICHAEL EDWARD. 2013. *Of beasts and beauty: Gender, race, and identity in Colombia*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- TAYEBI, TAHMINEH. 2021. Conceptualizations of ugly and beautiful: An analysis of im/politeness metapragmatic markers in Persian. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.128-46.

- WHEELER, EVA MICHELLE. 2015a. Race, Legacy and Lineage in the Dominican Republic: Shifting Paradigms. *The Black Scholar* 45.34-44.
- WHEELER, EVA MICHELLE. 2015b. *(Re)Framing Raza: Language as a Lens for Examining Race and Skin Color Categories in the Dominican Republic*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)
- WHEELER, EVA MICHELLE. 2017. La semántica de las categorías de matiz racial en la República Dominicana: Hacia centros y periferias ['The semantics of *matiz racial* categories in the Dominican Republic. Toward centers and peripheries']. In J. Santos Rovira (Ed.), *Centros de irradiación y periferias de la lengua española* (pp. 49-60). Editorial AXAC.
- WHITEFIELD-MADRANO, AUTUMN. 2016. *Face Value: The Hidden Ways Beauty Shapes Women's Lives*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- WOLF, NAOMI. 2002. *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. New York: Harper Collins.
- WONG, JOCK AND MARSHAL OR. 2021. "Is beauty only skin deep?": The conceptualization of 'beauty' in Mandarin Chinese. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8.35-61.