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**Construyendo la belleza: feminidad, neoliberalismo y  
trabajo estético entre las mujeres jóvenes de México**

**Performing Beauty: Femininity Ideology, Neoliberalism and  
Aesthetic Labor Among Young Women in Mexico**

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**Abstract**

This research is motivated by the norms and practices of femininity that individuals create through performances and bodily practices. It investigates the levels of women's acceptance of the femininity ideology and neoliberalism in the upper middle class, their effects on aesthetic labor and the objectification of their bodies. It examines how the logic and techniques associated with neoliberalism shapes the construction of current femininities and shifts in the relationship between the self and the body. Through the use of quantitative analysis from data based on young middle class women in Monterrey, Mexico, this study aims to determine how women are making sense of their bodies through self-discipline and self-regulation, as well as the ways in which neoliberal and

postfeminist constructions of the sexual self and body are made meaningful in women's everyday lives.

*Keywords:* femininity, neoliberalism, postfeminist, beauty, aesthetic labor

### **Resumen**

Esta investigación está motivada por las normas y prácticas de feminidad que las personas crean a través de actuaciones y prácticas corporales. Investigando los niveles de aceptación de las mujeres de la ideología de la feminidad y el neoliberalismo en la clase media alta, sus efectos sobre el trabajo estético y la objetivación de sus cuerpos. Examinando cómo el neoliberalismo configura la construcción de las feminidades actuales y la relación entre el yo y el cuerpo. Se utilizó una metodología cuantitativa para analizar los datos recopilados de 100 mujeres jóvenes de clase media en Monterrey, México, este estudio tiene como objetivo determinar cómo las mujeres dan sentido a sus cuerpos a través de la autodisciplina y la autorregulación, así como las formas en que las personas y construcciones neoliberales postfeministas del yo y el cuerpo sexuales tienen sentido en la vida cotidiana de las mujeres.

*Palabras clave:* feminidad, neoliberalismo, posfeminismo, belleza, trabajo estético

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## Introduction

With the expansion of a neo-liberal consumerist economy, a hegemonic beauty ideal has been widely spread in a generalized manner. This has affected the way women think and present themselves, and consequently make them incur in exaggerated efforts and practices to achieve beauty standards often alien to their race and culture. As vain as beauty ideals might seem, they have a direct link with bodies and identity, and as this research proves, with neoliberalism and femininity ideology. The structure of the paper is as follows. First the paper sets out review of key debates related to femininity, bodily and aesthetic practices that is profoundly affected by neoliberal regimes. It then proceeds to examine contemporary Mexico, the study region which is vastly transformed by neoliberal practices, after which the data and methods are detailed. The final section examines the key findings and relevance of the research in gender studies.

### **Making sense of femininity, beauty and bodies in a neo-liberal regime**

The politics of beauty remain a key of set issues and debates for feminism, one that is stuck in polarized positions, stressing oppression versus pleasure and agency versus cultural domination. Bodies are made in a historical time with respect to class, gender, geography and aspiration, with important questions about how women are making sense of themselves, managing the struggle of agency, subjectivity and self-expression with increasing commercialization of the body, mediated by processes of globalization and westernization. A number of studies have looked at the links between beauty and gender inequalities, the most recent explore the role of labor and neoliberalism, but few explore the connection between femininity, neoliberalism and surveillance.

One can examine the politics of fundamental appearance to the feminism that emerged in the West in the 1960s and after, with beauty taking its place alongside reproductive rights, violence against women, workplace and pay equality, and sexual freedom as a key issue of the feminist concern. Perspectives on Foucauldian feminism that regards beauty as a disciplinary technology which argues that women's appearance is subject to profound discipline and regulation –even when beauty practices are seemingly freely chosen (Elias, Gil & Scharff, 2017). Further aesthetic labor and female performance as a form of currency and the role of neoliberalism in reshaping femininity and gender practices, helps portray the

complexities and contradictions involved in how gender and depictions of femininity are learned and enacted. Simone de Beauvoir said that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one through constraint and discipline, since the norms and practices of femininity have been acculturated and socially constructed by language, visual images and binary oppositions (1989 c.1952). Such practices shape gendered identities through interactions with family, organizations, institutions, media and connections with everyday life and is deeply influenced by the social discourses of sense of self and discursive practices; gender, social class, age, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity (Diamond, 2014; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffirin, 2011). In the discourse of identity, the body is central, and is constituted in the same way and regulated by the visual culture around it, using subjectivity and agency to rethread new narratives (Orbach, 2016).

Wittig (1992) pointed out how women (and increasingly men) are dominated and disciplined into various forms of media, that constitute a discourse of how gender must be performed. To become a woman one must be tall, skinny, white, pretty, feminine, sexually available, and liberated (Evans & Riley, 2015; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). These new discourses of female sexuality and femininity are limited since they are attached to greater self-surveillance and self-discipline, while expressing contradictions that mask structural inequalities and rehearse older notions of gender expectations. However, body surveillance and psychic dispositions have long been part of the performance of successful femininity, regarding beauty

as a disciplinary technique even when perceived as freely chosen. (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017; Jagtap, 2010; Evans & Riley, 2015).

Just like femininity, sexual experience is conditioned by the social world and does not operate outside the process of gendering, sexualization and classing (Gill, 2009), where sexuality is a crucial dimension of femininity that can be done “in the right way”. Women are expected to explore and work in a sexuality harnessed to serve the pleasure of one’s partner (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017).

Dominant contemporary popular culture messages suggest that women’s power comes from sexuality, requiring them to consume products into making their lives pleasurable through self-monitoring, feeling sexy and looking good (Cato & Dillman Carpentier, 2010). Sexiness, then becomes a neoliberal consumer good through discourses of autonomy and liberation, asking individuals to believe that female sexuality is accepted and that it celebrates agency and empowerment (Evans & Riley, 2015). The pornified version of female empowerment erases the idea of choice, leaving a single path in how to experience sexual pleasure leading women to watch themselves doing sex with a third eye, learning to look at, rather than experience themselves, losing touch with their authentic bodily feelings and desires (Wolf, 1991; Tolman, 2012; Attwood, 2007).

The right body is broadcasted as a way of belonging to the world and as seemingly available to everyone, creating a democratic call for beauty in an increasingly homogenized and homogenizing form, creating narrower beauty ideals (Orbach, 2016). Increasingly, new forms of media continue to reinforce gender roles and female

stereotypes that are over represented with emphasis on women's youth, thinness, whiteness, heterosexuality, beauty and sexiness (Kyo, 2016); narrowing beauty ideals leave women feeling inadequate and unacceptable, causing body distress and dissatisfaction (Bissell, 2009; Orbach, 2016). Self-governing mandates of neoliberalism demand that girls and women regulate and control their bodies and appearances, introducing the notion of "aesthetic entrepreneurship", linking femininity, self-transformation and the body to understand the interaction between gender and subjectivity in the neoliberal era (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017, p. 24). These concepts make sense in the context of a neoliberal project since they allow persons to define themselves in individualistic and self-governing where women's engagement with sexual cultures as acts of free choice, structuring new sexual subjectivities and contradictions (Evans & Riley, 2015).

### **Neoliberal Mexico: Señoritas, Femininities and the Pursuit for Beauty**

Neoliberalism as a form of governance argues that market forces should be allowed to drive the economy. Its initial rise associated with the neoliberal regime shift in Britain and the US in the late 1970s following which western neoliberal forces and international institutions were heavily promoted in the 1990s, generating policy adjustments and structural changes (Jessop, 2002). In Mexico, it gained momentum with the country's entry into the GATT in 1986



with Miguel de la Madrid, reached its peak with the signing of NAFTA under the government of Carlos Salinas (Jiménez, 2017). The Mexican political economy was reorganized due to the process of neoliberal restructuring, transforming agricultural and industrial production oriented towards export, with consequences varying from agricultural crises, more mobile and flexible labor, migration, decreasing social welfare, to growing inequality and poverty (Kunz, 2010).

Such neoliberal restructuring led to an increase in women's productive role, especially in Mexican rural cities, involving them in income-generating labor as a counterpart to their migrant spouses' remittances. However, this is not always the case, as, in 2017, 29% of the households were female-headed, making women's income the only support in some domestic groups (Kunz, 2010; Inmujeres, 2003; INEGI, 2015). The gender segmentation has led to feminized sectors in which female work became an extension of domestic and family tasks, such as child care, personal services, cleaning, education and health, as well as segmented and repetitive manual tasks as found in the maquilas (Arango, 2004). Three modalities of gendered labor segregation have been identified: the first wage inequality, the second, the concentration of female workers in inferior positions, and the third, their traditional gender responsibilities at home a phenomenon that is caused due to traditional gender roles, insufficient child care services and inflexible work practices (De Oliveira & Ariza, 2000; IPADE, 2013).

Mexico is witnessing the rise of new gendered sexual subjectivities and agencies that have arisen from the spaces where neoliberalism, post-feminism and consumerism fuse, creating a new normative expectation that offers a different articulation of feminine identity. The global creation of neoliberal individualized self-regulating subjects, that shares the responsibility with the population enabling them to manage themselves is seen, as according to Foucault, a new form of governance (Evans & Riley, 2015). The fear of being misidentified disciplines both men and women, resulting in individuals behaving in manly and womanly ways, according to the standards of his or her culture (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006; Ingraham, 1994; Golver & Kaplan, 2000).

This increased surveillance culture and aesthetic labour fostered by capitalist and neo-liberal patriarchy raises interesting questions for Mexican women and their bodies. It is within the insatiable intensity of bodily practices that fuses with traditional gender roles, economic and social inequalities and internalized racism that the Mexican “look” has been achieved (Bárcena Ibarra & Byanyima, 2016). For example, in Mexico “pretty” is most often synonymous with being thin, white, able-bodied, and cis, and the closer you are to those ideals, the more often you will be labeled pretty-and benefit from that prettiness (Mock, 2017).

This beauty ideal has consequences for both men and women since “people with lighter skin are directors, bosses or professionals, those with darker skins are artisans, operators or support workers” (Alin, 2017). According to the INEGI (2017), of those self-classified

in the lighter skin tones, only 10% do not have any level of schooling, while figures rise above 20% for people who self-classified in darker skin tones. The darker the skin color, the percentages of people in higher-qualified activities are reduced. Further there is a correlation between the increase in whiteness and the increase of employment in medium and high-skilled activities.

Further media has displayed and perpetuated ideas regarding beauty and skin color, showing in telenovelas the dark-skinned woman as the maid and her blond counterpart as the house-owner (Rios, 2015). The impact of the telenovela on Mexican society can be profound, since they possess the power to influence and damage; to educate and dumb down (Tufte, 2003). From changing fashion trends to accepting feminine ideology, Telenovelas can influence women's lifestyles by focusing in the same ideas: women must get married, must be beautiful, pure and kind. If the character is not portrayed as any of the previously mentioned types, it is usually because she is the villain, a support character or a social pariah, something no viewer would like to be identified as, which affects perceptions of worth, status and beauty (Khroundina, 2014). Women in Mexico, have been defining themselves and femininity through the use of aesthetic labor, i.e. a series of bodily practices that include, but are not limited to, shaving, dieting, styling their hair in a particular way, fashion trends, the use of soaps, lotions, deodorants, make up, Botox, plastic surgery and many others. Subsequently this research sets its main question in the Mexican context where gender

roles, institutionalized heterosexuality, and capitalist and neoliberal patriarchy regulate how women, as individuals present themselves.

### Data and Methods

This research sought to focus on both traditional femininity and neoliberalism and their relationship with aesthetic labor. Based on this, the main research focused on two main questions: a) Is there a relationship between the femininity ideology acceptance and the objectification of the female body? and b) Is there a relationship between the acceptance of neoliberal perceptions and the objectification of the female body?

The study aims were accomplished by fulfilling the following objectives: identifying the acceptance of traditional femininity ideology, recognizing the acceptance of neoliberal perceptions, and analyzing the degree to which participants objectify their own bodies. By recognizing these three areas, it was possible to determine if there is a relationship among them, thus proposing the following hypotheses: Hypothesis 1 (H1): With a higher acceptance of femininity ideology there is a higher objectification of the female body. Hypothesis 2 (H2): With a higher acceptance of neoliberal ideas there is a higher objectification of the female body. Hypothesis 3 (H3): Social class will influence femininity ideology acceptance. Hypothesis 4 (H4): Social class will influence the acceptance of neoliberal perceptions. Hypothesis 5 (H5): Heterosexual women will accept femininity ideology more than homosexual and bisexual

women. Hypothesis 6 (H6): Heterosexual women will objectify the female body more than homosexual and bisexual women.

This research is largely exploratory, transversal and with a unifactorial design. The degree to which respondents endorse traditional femininity ideology, surveillance, body-shame, and appearance control beliefs were evaluated through standardized quantitative inventories, and neoliberal agreement through a questionnaire of perceptions. The sample of this study was composed of female university students in the State of Nuevo León, México, in San Pedro Garza García. A range of ages between 18 and 27 was considered.

The type of sampling was non-random probabilistic. A total sample of 100 female university students aged 18-27 years, with a mean age of 20.57 and a standard deviation of 1.56, were included in this study. All of the students belong to private university and responded in their facilities. Around 30% of the participants identified themselves as white or European descent, 63% as *mestizos* or mixed race, 2% Asian, 1 % as afro-Mexican, 1% Indigenous and the remaining 3% as other race. Most participants classified themselves as middle or high class, with 5% of them in lower middle, 81% in upper middle and 14% in lower high class. Questions were presented in the same order to all participants: demographic questions, Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale, the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale, and the Neoliberal Perceptions Questionnaire. All participants completed the questionnaire in Spanish since it is Mexico's official language. All participants were asked their age,

sex, sexual orientation, race and social class. All the demographic data, except age, were treated as categorical for statistical analysis purposes. Race and social class were in accordance with the categories proposed by the INEGI and the Profeco.

The Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (AFIS), a 20-item scale composed of two subscales, has acceptable internal consistency and temporal stability, and is grounded in girls' own words, was used to measure the extent to which adolescent girls have internalized or resisted two negative conventions of femininity in two psychological domains: experience of self in relationships with others and relationship with one's body (Tolman & Porche, 2000). Initially, the FIS (The Femininity Ideology Scale) which measures the degree to which respondents endorse traditional femininity ideology, i.e. beliefs about how women and men should act, was going to be used (Levant, Richmond, Cook, House, & Aupont, 2007), but it was substituted by the AFIS after pilot questionnaires reported insignificant results while using the FIS. The OBC scale is a self-reported measure of body consciousness. The OBC has three subscales; Body Surveillance – A measure of defining the body by how it looks, as opposed to how it feels. Body Shame—A measure of whether someone believes they are a bad person because they do not meet the cultural standard for what a body should look like. Appearance Control Beliefs – A measure of whether or not a person believes they can control their own appearance, or if it is controlled by other things (McKinley & Hyde, The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale: Development and Validation, 1996). Once

participants had completed the first two questionnaires, they answered the degree of agreement on neoliberal perceptions. These statements were designed and selected due to the link with neoliberal aesthetics and entrepreneurship, and agency. Each of the questions is answered on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Prior to the data collection, a series of instructions were given, explaining the order of the survey, asking the participant to read the informed consent carefully, ensuring that their participation was voluntary, confidential and anonymous.

Statistical analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS program. Once the quantitative data was organized and captured, a reliability analysis was first run to study the properties of the scales.

### **Findings and Discussion**

A total sample of 100 female university students aged 18-27 years, with a mean age of 20.57 and a standard deviation of 1.56, were included in this study. Racial groups and social class were limited and showed almost no diversity (See Table 1). Both aspects were self-identified by the participant, in the case of class a table portraying the composition of each class making it easier for the participant to identify which group did she belong to (See Table 11).

**Table 1***Descriptive statistics of the sample*

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Heterosexual	89	89%
Bisexual	7	7%
Homosexual	4	4%
<b>Age</b>		
18	8	8%
19	16	16%
20	28	28%
21	23	23%
22	15	15%
23	7	7%
24	2	2%
25	-	-
26	-	-
27	1	1%
<b>Race</b>		
European descent	30	30%
Mixed Race	63	63%
Indigenous	1	1%
Afro-Mexican	1	1%
Asian	2	2%
Other	3	3%



Social Class		
Lower Low	-	-
Upper Low	-	-
Lower Middle	5	5%
Upper Middle	81	81%
Lower High	14	14%
Upper High	-	-

Reliability analyses were run in the three scales used. The Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale had a good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .572$ ), as did its ISR and OBR subscales, with an internal consistence of ( $\alpha = .472$ ) and ( $\alpha = .404$ ) respectively. The OBC with a Cronbach's Alpha of ( $\alpha = .609$ ) is divided into three subscales, the first, Surveillance, has a good internal consistency of ( $\alpha = .394$ ), the second, Body Shame and Control Beliefs also with a Cronbach's Alpha of ( $\alpha = .499$ ) and ( $\alpha = .462$ ) correspondingly. Finally, Neoliberal Principals has an internal consistency of ( $\alpha = .212$ ).

A descriptive analysis of the three scales used was applied in order to compare them with the development and validation studies and determine whether they represent a higher, lower or the same acceptance of the femininity ideology, objectified body consciousness and neoliberalism. The AFIS was developed to measure adolescent girls' internalization of two negative aspects of femininity ideology through the use of two ten-item subscales, the ISH and the ORB. Although they were initially intended to be used separately, this research used them together to substitute the FIS, the scale that

was originally intended to be used for the same. After the pilot research, using the FIS proved insignificant, so this version for younger women was explored, especially since it showed two constructs of the femininity ideology, focusing on surveillance and objectification of the body in one area, and the inauthentic relationship with the self.

The AFIS has good psychometric properties, adequate internal consistency and temporal stability. The ISR subscale in this research has a slightly lower mean than the one found in first year of college by Tolman (2000), with a mean of 3.0480 compared to that of 3.2910. The OBR has a mean of 2.94, lower than the one of first-year college students of 3.575.

The OBC was developed to measure objectified body consciousness in women, focusing on three subscales: surveillance, body shame and appearance control beliefs. Higher levels of OBC are theorized to lead to negative body experiences for women. This scale relies on the assumption that women are responsible for how their bodies look and can, given enough effort, control their appearance to comply with cultural standards. Making them accept that they are responsible for how they look, and that attractiveness is a reasonable standard by which to judge themselves, seeing beauty as a personal choice with which to conform. The total score is calculated by finding the sum of the 21 items, after reverse coding. The total score ranges from 24-168, with a higher score indicating a higher body consciousness. The means of the OBC and its subscales

in this research portray a medium to high body consciousness, as portrayed in Table 2.

The neoliberal perceptions include a series of statements that relate to neoliberal ideas, having a mean of 4.1 indicate acceptance of neoliberalism in general. It was expected that a mean of 3.5 would indicate the highest acceptance possible and anything higher or lower would simply decrease acceptance of neoliberal ideas.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics*

	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>AFIS</b>	2.9945	0.42284
ISR	3.0480	0.52310
OBR	2.9400	0.51561
<b>OBC</b>	3.3357	0.50622
Surveillance	3.5500	0.64794
Body Shame	3.0327	0.79569
Control	3.4237	0.79569
<b>NP</b>	4.1260	0.57623

**Hypothesis 1: Acceptance of femininity ideology and the objectified body consciousness.**

A Bivariate Pearson Correlation was completed between the means of the AFIS and the OBC, taking into consideration all of their

respective subscales. The examination found out that there is a relationship between the acceptance of femininity ideology and the objectified body consciousness with  $p=0.017$  and  $r=0.238$  (Table 3). Proving the first hypothesis: with a higher acceptance of femininity ideology there is a higher objectification of the female body.

**Table 3**

*Bivariate Person Correlation between AFIS and OBC*

	Mean AFIS	Mean OBC
AFIS	Pearson Correlation 1	.238*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017
	N 100	100
Mean OBC	Pearson Correlation .238*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017
	N 100	100

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Hypothesis 2: Acceptance of neoliberal ideas and the objectification of the female body.**

The second hypothesis, with a higher acceptance of neoliberal ideas there is a higher objectification of the female body was proven with a Bivariate Pearson Correlation was completed between the means of the OBC and the NP. This analysis proved there is a relationship

between the acceptance of neoliberalism and the objectification of the female body with a  $p=0.026$  and  $r=0,238$  as portrayed below.

**Table 4**

*Bivariate Person Correlation between OBC and NP*

		Mean OBC	Mean NP
Mean OBC	Pearson Correlation	1	.223*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.026
	N	100	100
Mean NP	Pearson Correlation	.223*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026	
	N	100	100

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 3 & 4: Social class and the acceptance of femininity ideology and neoliberal perceptions.

Hypotheses three through five used a T-test for independent samples. Hypotheses three and four used a T-test for independent sample to measure the relationship between social class and the acceptance of femininity ideology and neoliberal perceptions, both were disregarded since they were not supported by the data.

Social class also seemed insignificant in predicting the internalization of femininity ideology, showing no real difference between the answers of the participants who identified themselves

as members of the lower middle class and the lower high class. The lower middle class was compared with the lower high class since they represent the lowest and highest classes found in the sample. The results show no real relation between class and acceptance of the femininity ideology with a  $p=0.213$  and a  $t=1,008$ , disregarding Hypothesis 3 (H3).

**Table 5**

*Group Statistics*

	Social Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Error
Mean AFIS	Lower High	14	2.9321	.55318	.14784	
	Lower Middle	5	3.1800	.27973	.12510	

*Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						T-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Man Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean AFIS	Equal variances assumed	1.676	0.213	-0.947	17	0.357	-0.24786	0.26175	-0.8001	0.30438
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.28	14.358	0.221	-0.24786	0.19367	-0.66226	0.16655

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Social class will influence the acceptance of neoliberal perceptions was also insignificant. A T test was run to analyze the relationship between class and the acceptance of neoliberal perceptions. Just as in all the previous tests regarding social class, the results are insignificant with  $p=.654$  and  $t=.198$  as seen below.

**Table 6**

*Group Statistics*

	Social Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mean NP	Lower High	14	3.9500	.53887	.14402
	Lower Middle	5	3.9000	.46368	.20736

*Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					T-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Man Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean AFIS	Equal variances assumed	0.208	0.654	0.184	17	0.856	0.05	0.27204	-0.52395	0.62395
	Equal variances not assumed			0.198	8.202	0.848	0.05	0.25247	-0.52971	0.62971

Hypothesis 5: Acceptance of femininity ideology and sexual orientation

Sexual orientation had the most significant results in comparison to social class or race, partially accepting the last two hypotheses. A T-test showed a marginal significance between the acceptance of femininity ideology and sexual orientation. As seen in the table below, heterosexuals tend to accept femininity ideas more than homosexuals, with a  $p=0.052$  and a  $t=0.154$  (Table 7). Thus, marginally accepting Hypothesis 5 (H5): Heterosexual women will accept femininity ideology more than homosexual and bisexual women.

**Table 7**

*Group Statistics*

	Sexual Orientation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Mean	Error
Mean AFIS	Lower High	89	2.9837	.43378	.04598	
	Lower Middle	4	2.9500	.10801	.05401	



### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean AFIS	Equal variances assumed	3.874	0.052	0.154	91	0.878	0.03371	0.21826	-0.39983	0.46725
	Equal variances not assumed			0.475	8.769	0.646	0.03371	0.07093	-0.12739	0.19481

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** Heterosexual women will objectify the female body more than homosexual and bisexual women.

While running both a T-test and an ANOVA comparing the three groups with the OBC scale, the results proved insignificant. Three T-tests were run to analyze the relationship of sexual orientation with the objectification of the female body. The first two compared the relationship with body objectification consciousness of heterosexuals and bisexuals, and heterosexuals and homosexuals, showing insignificant results with a  $p=0.157$  and  $p=0.737$  respectively. The last T-test compared the relationship between sexual orientation and body control beliefs of bisexuals and homosexuals, portraying marginal significance. Later an ANOVA test was run and denied this relationship with a  $p=0.596$ , while confirming there is no relationship between any sexual orientation and OBC (See Table 8).

**Table 8****ANOVA: Mean OBC**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.269	2	.134	.519	.596
Within Groups	25.101	97	.259		
Total	25.370	99			

**Post Hoc Tests****Multiple Comparisons****Dependent Variable: Mean OBC****Scheffe**

Sexual Orientation	Sexual Orientation	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Heterosexual	Bisexual	.08363	.19969	.916	-.4128	.5801
	Homosexual	.24732	.26000	.637	-.3990	.8937
Bisexual	Heterosexual	-.08363	.19969	.916	-.5801	.4128
	Homosexual	.16369	.31884	.877	-.6290	.9563
Homosexual	Heterosexual	-.24732	.26000	.637	-.8937	.3990
	Bisexual	-.16369	.31884	.877	-.9563	.6290

However, when running the T-test with the AFIS subscale of body objectification the ORB, portraying a significant relationship among the two concepts. Heterosexual and homosexual women seem to accept more the ORB, the second subscale composed of 10 items.

Two T-tests were run, the first showed that bisexual women tend to accept the ORB more than homosexual women with a  $p=0.048$  and a  $t=.723$  (Table 9), and the second showed that heterosexual women accept the ORB more than homosexual women with a  $p=0.015$  and  $t=1.860$  (Table 10).

**Table 9**

*Group Statistics*

	Sexual Orientation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mean	Bisexual	7	3.0000	.59161	.22361
FIS_ORB	Homosexual	4	2.4750	.09574	.04787

*Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean AFIS	Equal variances assumed	5.21	0.048	1.723	9	0.119	0.525	0.30474	-0.16437	1.21437
	Equal variances not assumed			2.296	6.535	0.058	0.525	0.22867	-0.02362	1.07362

**Table 10***Group Statistics*

	Sexual Orientation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mean FIS_ORB	Heterosexual	9	2.9562	.51433	.05452
	Homosexual	4	2.4750	.09574	.04787

*Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Man Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean AFIS	Equal variances assumed	6.177	0.015	1.86	91	0.066	0.48118	0.25866	-0.03262	0.99498
	Equal variances not assumed			6.632	14.97	0	0.48118	0.07255	0.32651	0.63585

In all, this research aimed to find if there are, in fact, ideologies that motivate the use of aesthetic labor, surveillance and control of the own body. The way femininity is constituted has made the disciplinary practices key to perform a successful feminine ideal, one that not only focuses on beauty and the body, but also sexuality. This has led to the notion of “beauty capital”, a form of currency that reshapes and reforms gender practices. Here we see that female identity is then formed by two major ideas: femininity ideology and neoliberalism, both taking their place in how identity is portrayed, how gender is exhibited and the interactions and complexities between them. This relationship was found by using the AFIS scale and the Neoliberal perception statements as an independent variable and comparing it with the OBC, a scale that was used to determine the participants’ relationship with their body and their involvement in aesthetic labor core components: body shame, surveillance and control beliefs. A discussion of the results found from these variables is presented below.

### **Beauty is pain: Aesthetic labor in Performing Femininities**

As observed in the study, the participants that accept femininity ideology more tend to objectify their bodies more, participating more deeply in self-surveillance and self-discipline regimes. Thinking of gender as a performance conditions women into living their femininity as such, acting in “common-sense” ways that socialize them to be thin, sexy, suggestive, padded, tanned when white,

bleached when brown, shaved, plucked and waxed (O'Toole, 2016). This makes the relationship between performing femininity and aesthetic labor obvious, since these acts have been internalized into female behavior so much that there is no way to conceive a successful femininity without considering the beauty acts that come with it.

The reproduction of these codes and behaviors is extremely powerful because they constitute identity, showing where individuals come from, underpinning how they wish to be seen, and giving pleasure and gain to bodily codes (Orbach, 2017). This process can be seen in Mexican femininities. The preparation of *quinceañeras*, a rite of passage from girl to woman, successful femininities are grounded in profound cultural meanings. Through the use of make-up, fashion and family events, young women present themselves in society by accepting and implementing disciplining practices to make them the most beautiful possible versions of themselves, and accepting that this should be the way they present themselves from that moment on, reproducing gender and heteronormative identities, making girls eligible for suitors and placing the importance of their self in their looks (Davalos, 1996).

The link between femininity and beauty is clearly seen in the way Mexican women negotiate their identities. Being the fourth country with the most plastic surgeries (ISAPS, 2016) in the world, there is a clear relationship in the importance of aesthetic labor for a successful portrayal of femininity. Media influences women's lifestyles by portraying beautiful married women that are pure and

kind (Khroundina, 2014). Perpetuating European beauty standards, western conceptions of beauty and increasing the desire for being white, thin and beautiful, no matter the hard work involved (Rios, 2015).

### **The only way is up: Self-regulation and Responsibility in Neoliberal Beauty**

Most of the recent work on beauty raises questions around race, class, nation, religion, and colonial and imperial dynamics. The second aim of this research is to link beauty work with neoliberalism and the ideas it promotes. The impulse of the free market, the signing of NAFTA and Mexico's entry to GATT has given a whole new context to individuals and how they see and construct themselves (Méndez Morales, 2012). The demands of the postindustrial body celebrate fragmentation, making it a series of visual images and a labor process. Individual bodies cannot measure up if they are not manufactured to today's standards (Orbach, 2016).

While many argue that NAFTA and the neoliberal regime promote and delimit new forms of female agency, others suggest that they have caused new forms of labor and violence against women, emphasizing in particular the role of beauty, as Wolf (1991) proposed it as a backlash against feminism, one that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement. But, "is every experience of beauty also a source of harm? Is beauty intrinsically and inevitably wrong? Can feminism only be true to itself by insisting

on the primacy of female suffering? Or is there a place in feminist thought for a positive aesthetic... of beauty and aesthetic as pleasure?" (Fleski, 2006, p. 273). A neoliberal aesthetic might pose an alternate reality for beauty, seeing it as a source of pleasure and gain instead of pain and suffering. It introduces the notion of "aesthetic entrepreneurship" as a link between femininity, self-transformation and the body, key to understanding the interplay between gender and subjectivity in the neoliberal era (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017).

Either pleasure or violence, the assimilation of beauty norms is rapidly increasing; women worldwide are trying to create the perfect image for themselves. The false perception of ideal beauty as a narrow set of characteristics only serves to position woman as feeling inadequate and unacceptable. However, they are conditioned to continue working on constructing the best versions of themselves through gain, pleasure and socialization (Bissell, 2009; O'Toole, 2016). Women have used and will continue to use beauty as a form of currency, understanding their own beauty as part of economy; this is evidenced in whitening practices, the effects of which go beyond beauty ideals, influencing females' job prospects, social status, earning potential and marriage possibilities. However, it promotes a blame-the-victim mentality, where the individual must work harder in order to make it (Wolf, 1991).

### **Beauty beyond class boundaries**

Most of the participants are upper middle class, this was self-defined by the participants according to the information showed in Table 11.



**Table 11***Class Composition according to the PROFECO*

Lower-Low	Temporary workers, immigrants, informal traders, the unemployed and people living on welfare.	Upper-Middle	Businessmen and professionals who have triumphed
Upper-Low	Workers and peasants	Lower-Upper	Families that are rich, but few generations ago
Lower-Middle	Clerks, supervisors and skilled artisans.	Upper-Upper	Old rich families, prominent for several generations

Theory confirms that extremes of body dissatisfaction, and accompanying eating disorders, are often conceptualized as the province of young, middle-class, European-American women, researchers have only begun to explore the relationship of cultural body standards to body esteem in other groups of women and are finding other women may be both protected from and multiply oppressed by cultural body standards (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Although there are a few participants from the lower middle class and lower upper class, it could be said it is a homogenous

sample. The major difference between the upper middle-class and lower upper-class composition is the number of generations that have been considered rich. Members of the middle class can be newly rich while members of the upper class must have been rich for a few generations. However, since their income, jobs, education, and life experiences might be quite similar, UDEM students comprise a very homogenous group, disregarding the small differences among classes. This leads us to believe that any conclusions about body experience, acceptance of femininity ideology and neoliberalism are limited, and more groups should be surveyed. It is not possible to disregard class as an influencer towards femininity ideology acceptance. The insignificance of the results relay on the homogeneity of the sample, not in the role of class for the acceptance of traditional femininity, since, most theory suggest otherwise.

### **Complexities of Sexuality and Heteronormativity**

Sex is an important aspect of aesthetic labor, ever since the introduction of beauty pornography (i.e. the hypersexual representations of women in mainstream media), beauty has been linked and commodified explicitly to sexuality. Women's behavior is noticed and labelled sexual even if it is not intended as such, giving them another area to discipline and surveil, in which they need to become feminine, but not too feminine, sexy, but not too sexy, following informal rules and guidelines about the appropriateness of appearance. This introduces new complexities

and contradictions in which women wish to be considered desirable, attractive and responsible neoliberal subjects without entering into the dangerous zone of being over or under feminine and sexual (Wolf, 1991).

Why is it so important to be considered a feminine, sexual, beautiful subject? There is much to gain from being traditionally pretty and sexy, but so much more to lose. When women step away from conventional femininity their safety can be in jeopardy. Morales, et al. (2007) suggest that by acting and behaving in a different way than the traditional gender roles, the individual can be treated differently, even victimized and harassed; this goes for both hypersexual portrayals of femininity or women who are not considered feminine enough.

There was an effort to include women who belong to sexual minorities in this research. Since the internalization of the domains of femininity ideology proposed by AFIS are seen as a form of oppression, it is especially important to see how they function with groups of women who are systematically oppressed because they don't conform to another domain of hegemonic femininity ideology, namely, heterosexuality, as well as evaluating how it relates to other scales that measure the specific effects of women's objectification of their bodies, in this case the OBC (See Tolman and Porche, 2000).

Interestingly, sexualization operates inside the process of gendering, racialization and classing, further intersected by age and heteronormativity. This leads to highly patterned, exclusive and

limited representations of sexualized women, where only *some* women can be sexual subjects: those who are young, white, heterosexual and conventionally attractive (Gill, 2009). As seen in the results, homosexual and bisexual women do tend to accept less traditional femininity. Although the OBC scale in relationship with sexual orientation didn't portray a significant result regarding its acceptance, the AFIS subscale that measures the objectified relationship with the body did, showing differences in how body dissatisfaction is lived among different minority groups.

Although sexual orientation does have an effect on how women construct femininity and the degree to which they accept traditional feminine ideals, it has little to no effect on how much they objectify their bodies. Neoliberalism becomes the key predictor for objectification in this case. Marxian theory states that the economic system and production would determine other aspects of the self, including the responsibility of the self, suggesting surveillance and self-discipline as the only available schema. However, Gayle Rubin's critical theory of the exchange of women and the sex/gender system identifies a system of hierarchical relations between men and women, connecting the theory of patriarchy with a more developed line of thought regarding how the suppression of women also leads to the suppression of different sexualities and identities, leading to the suppression of transgressive or non-conventional femininities (Herz & Johansson, 2015). Either way, women continue to be oppressed, with an apparent position of power and choice, in which they have to choose between the lesser of two evils: either conform to the

femininity ideology and construct an ideal self or accept the consequences of transgressing.

As mentioned throughout the results, the sample of this study was very homogenous, which would lead to believe that more groups of women should be surveyed to make definite conclusions about the body experience of all Mexican women. Besides the homogeneity of the sample, there was another major limitation. Given that femininity ideology is a social construction and the hegemonic cultural conventions associated with femininity shift over time, the AFIS and the OBC could, and should, be updated. As mentioned in the methodology, this research intended to use the Femininity Ideology Scale, but in a pilot sample it proved obsolete, which led to the use of another scale. However, the AFIS would have been more efficient if it had been updated and regionalized appropriately. Lastly, understanding the process of how women come to construct their identities, perform their femininity, relate to their bodies, and develop objectified relationships with their bodies, requires qualitative approaches. Quantitative data, in this case, gives an understanding, but ignores individualities, losing some of the richness in the topic of femininity and aesthetic labor.

## Conclusions

This research contributes to the growing literature on the social perception of femininity ideology and aesthetic labor in the Mexican context and introduces new forms of analyzing its relationship with

neoliberalism. The internalizations of conventions regulating how women are supposed to look and behave have been identified through qualitative analyses, investigating the scope and strength of relationships between the domain of femininity ideology and neoliberalism and aesthetic labor, focusing on three quantifiable outcomes: body shame, surveillance and control beliefs.

The main motivation of this research was to analyze the relationship between aesthetic labor, which was often referred to in this study as objectification of the female body or the self, and two ideologies: femininity and neoliberalism. Using two scales, the AFIS and the OBC and a neoliberal perception questionnaire, a quantitative analysis was undertaken. The analysis was carried out with the premise of choice, agency and personal responsibility, core themes in neoliberalism, as well as Foucauldian feminism (1988), namely the contract between the (objectifying) technologies of domination of others and the (subjectifying) technologies of the self. This perspective regards beauty as a disciplinary technology, arguing that women's appearance is subject to profound discipline and regulation –even when beauty practices are seemingly freely chosen.

This is not the first study to measure femininity as a social construction. However, it evaluates how women are negotiating a widespread and oppressive ideology and investigates the role and effects of such ideology in behaviors, self-discipline and responsibility, thus helping to achieve a better understanding of how femininity is performed and constructed, its relationship with sexuality and

economics. This perspective makes obvious the effects of neoliberalism in self-objectification, since neoliberal subjects are expected to devise and implement their own self-improvement practices.

In addition, the findings are relevant since the sample includes a larger number of minorities, especially in the realm of sexual orientation, groups that are not usually thought of as high risk for body image disturbance. Also, Mexico was chosen as the canvas for the research. Latinas have been used as an ethnic group in American research, but it is one of the few research undertakings that use a Latin-American country to study aesthetic labor, providing interesting data on differing experiences of women across the globe and the relevance of objectified body consciousness across diverse groups of women.

The findings demonstrate that accepting both traditional femininity and neoliberalism has a fundamental effect on females' objectification of their own body, or aesthetic labor. The use of feminist theory and the sociological perspective is an enriching addition to current psychological knowledge of women's body experience. The emphasis on social context, both in social constructions of the body and external pressure for objectification, is important in order to add individualizing accounts for body dissatisfaction.

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