

**The Real Truth about Beauty**

**A Global Report**

*December 2004*

**Prepared for : Unilever**

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## INTRODUCTION

This report covers the findings of a rather unique and, important piece of research conducted on behalf of Unilever in 2004.

The focus of the research is on women's feelings about beauty; how it is defined, its importance in their lives and the pressures many women feel to conform with particular stereotypes.

We at Behaviour & Attitudes were responsible for the Irish study. Interviewing was conducted from our CATI Unit in November & December 2004.

The International results derive from 3,500 interviews conducted among representative samples of women in 11 different countries.

**COUNTRIES COVERED**

- **USA**
- **Canada**
- **Great Britain**
- **France**
- **Netherlands**
- **Italy**
- **Portugal**
- **Argentina**
- **Brazil**
- **Japan**
- **and Ireland**

300 interviews were conducted in each country with the exception of the USA where a sample of 500 interviews was used.

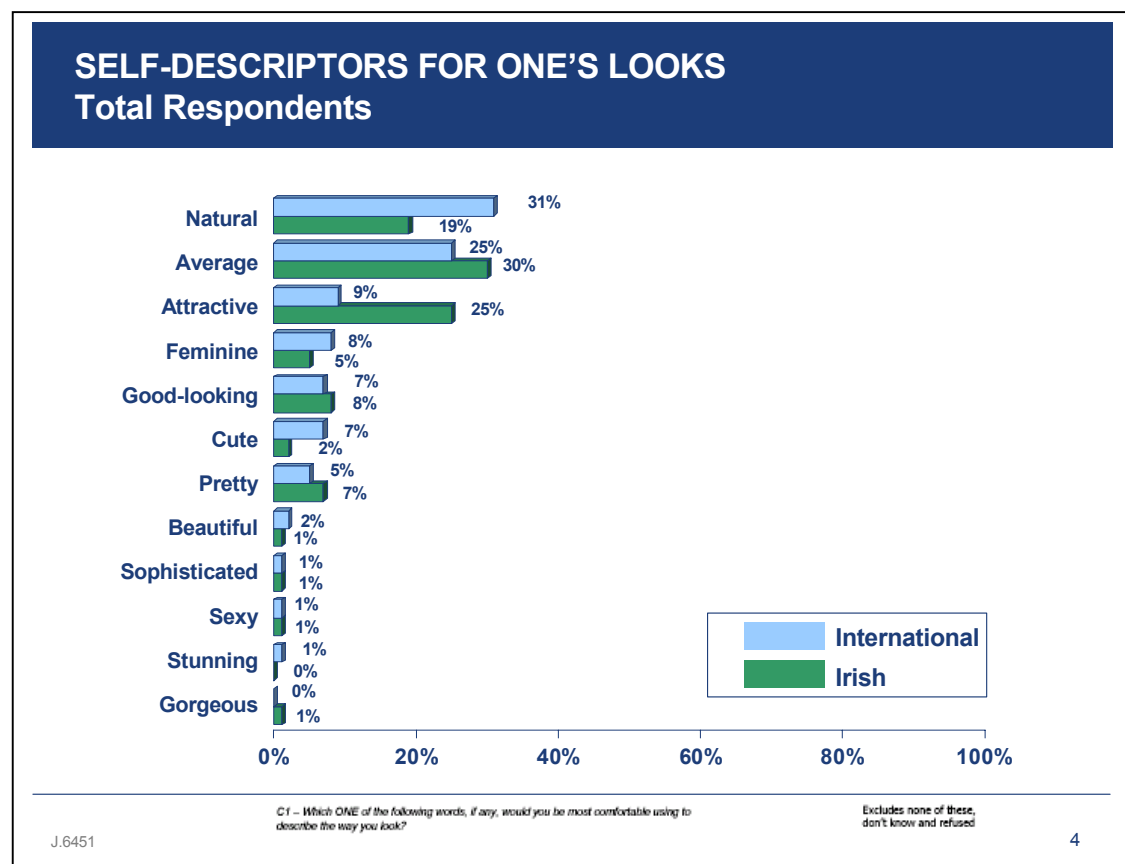
A common questionnaire was used in all countries.

In the following pages we will be looking at how women feel about beauty, its portrayal in the media and its impact on women's self-esteem. We will try to get a little bit closer to the real truth about beauty.

The story, as it unfolds, casts some interesting light on broader changes in Ireland in the areas of career opportunities, education, media consciousness and general levels of national self-confidence.

## 1. Women's Relationship with their own beauty

We begin by examining women's relationship with their beauty. In the space available we cannot comment on the findings for every country individually. Our objective is to provide a picture of the overall international results, showing how perceptions in Ireland conform to the general pattern, (which in very many cases they do), or vary from that general pattern.



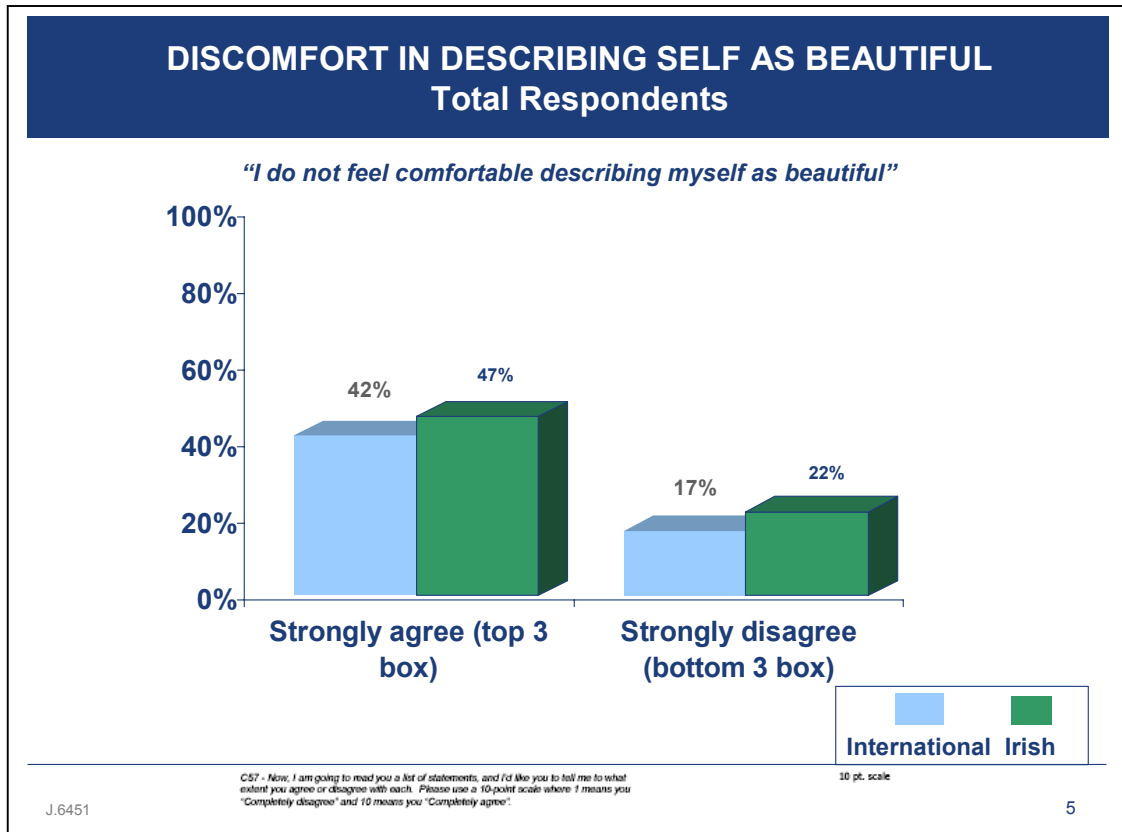
Anybody who has seen the results of this survey so far is immediately struck by the fact that so few women are willing to describe themselves as beautiful. Only 2% of all the women interviewed across the 11 countries were willing to describe themselves as beautiful. In Ireland, only 1% did so.

In international terms, the description that women are most happy to assign to themselves is natural. The next two most broadly accepted self-descriptions are average and, at a much lower level, attractive.

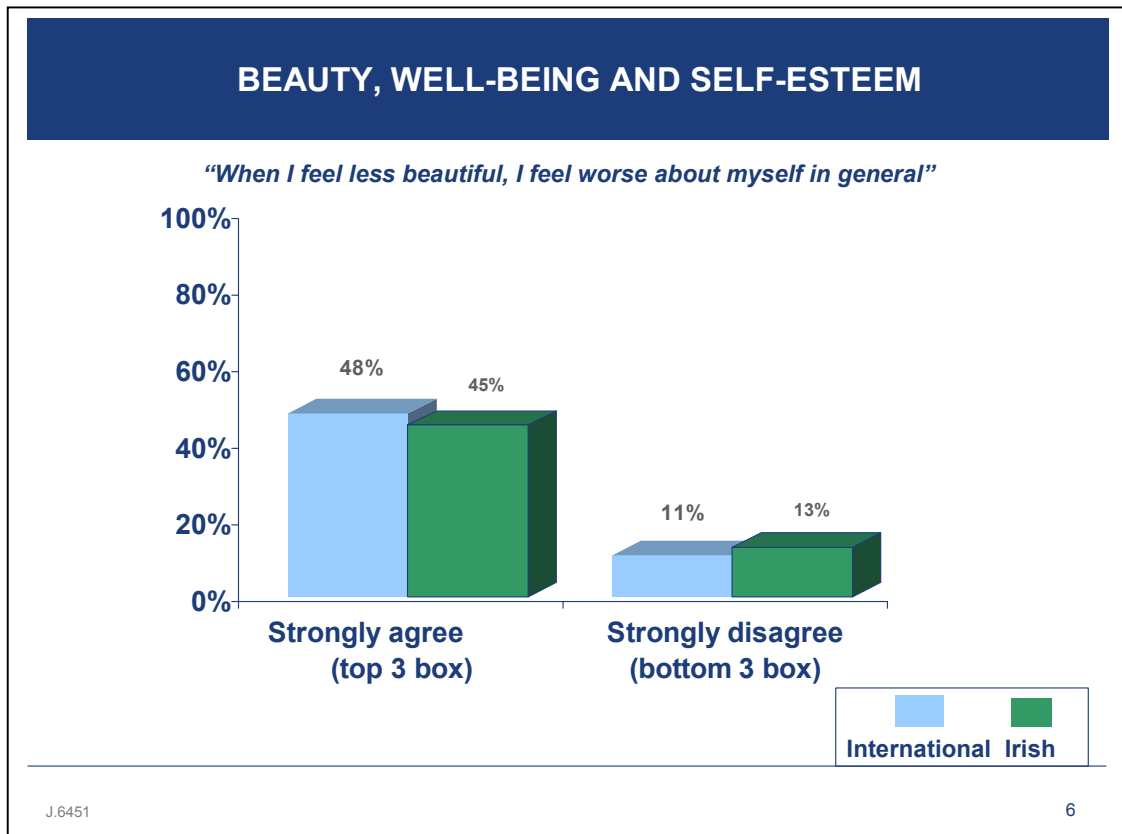
We can see from the chart that Irish women are significantly below average in the tendency to describe themselves as natural and very significantly more likely than average to describe themselves as attractive. These points of difference between the Irish and the International data are very telling. The fact that Irish women are less likely than average to describe themselves as natural is, we suspect, an escape from the stereotypical Irish cailín (a la The Quiet Man).

By the same token, the above average willingness to describe oneself as attractive suggests a real confidence which, might have been lacking in earlier generations. The greater economic liberation of women in Ireland – with more than a doubling of the number of women in paid employment in the past 15 years, has had a very significant impact here.

Having said that however, significant numbers of women clearly do not feel comfortable describing themselves as beautiful and Irish women are no exception.



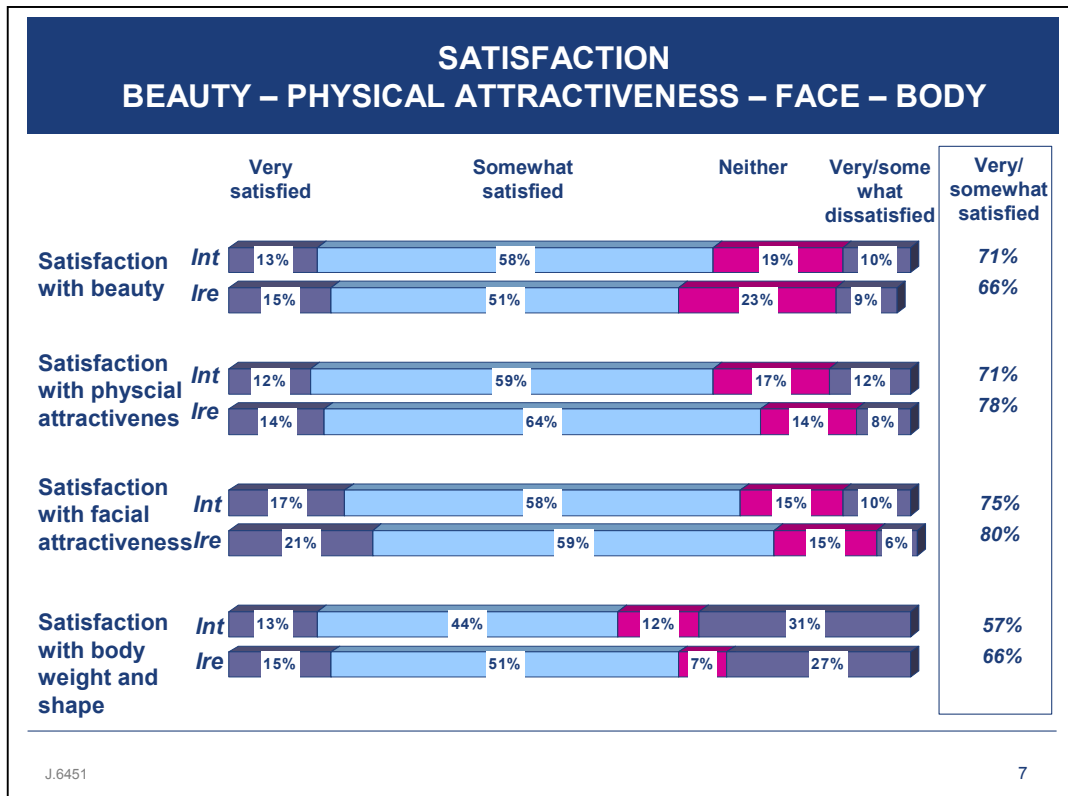
The impact of this on self-esteem is, of course, significant. Almost half of all women strongly agree that, when they feel less beautiful, they feel worse about themselves generally.





## 2. The Component Elements of Beauty

This chart looks at four different attributes of beauty; not the complete picture by any means, as we will see later: But they help us develop the story.



The chart shows how satisfied or dissatisfied women are with their beauty, their physical attractiveness, their facial attractiveness and their body weight and shape. There are a number of interesting points in this chart:-

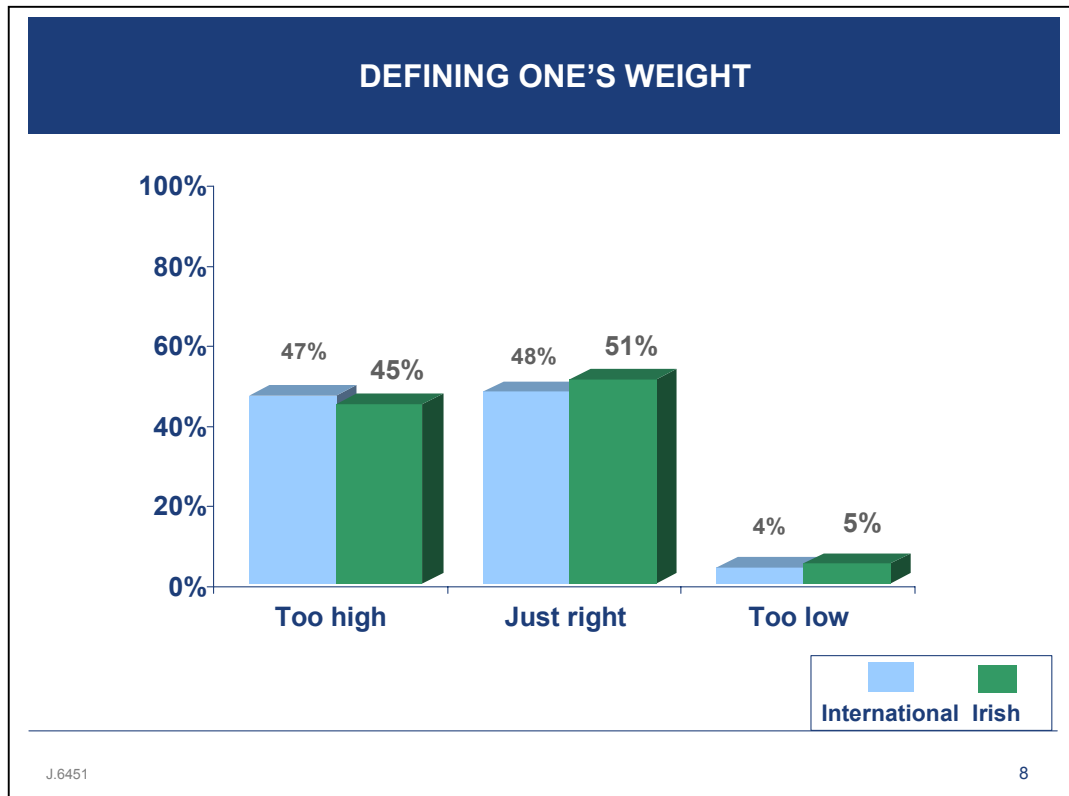
- ➔ There are sizeable minorities across the board who are not satisfied with various aspects of their beauty.
- ➔ In three out of the four areas considered, Irish women are more satisfied than average.

→ The biggest bugbear for women internationally (and in Ireland specifically) is that of body weight and shape.

More women are dissatisfied on this score than on any of the four elements listed.

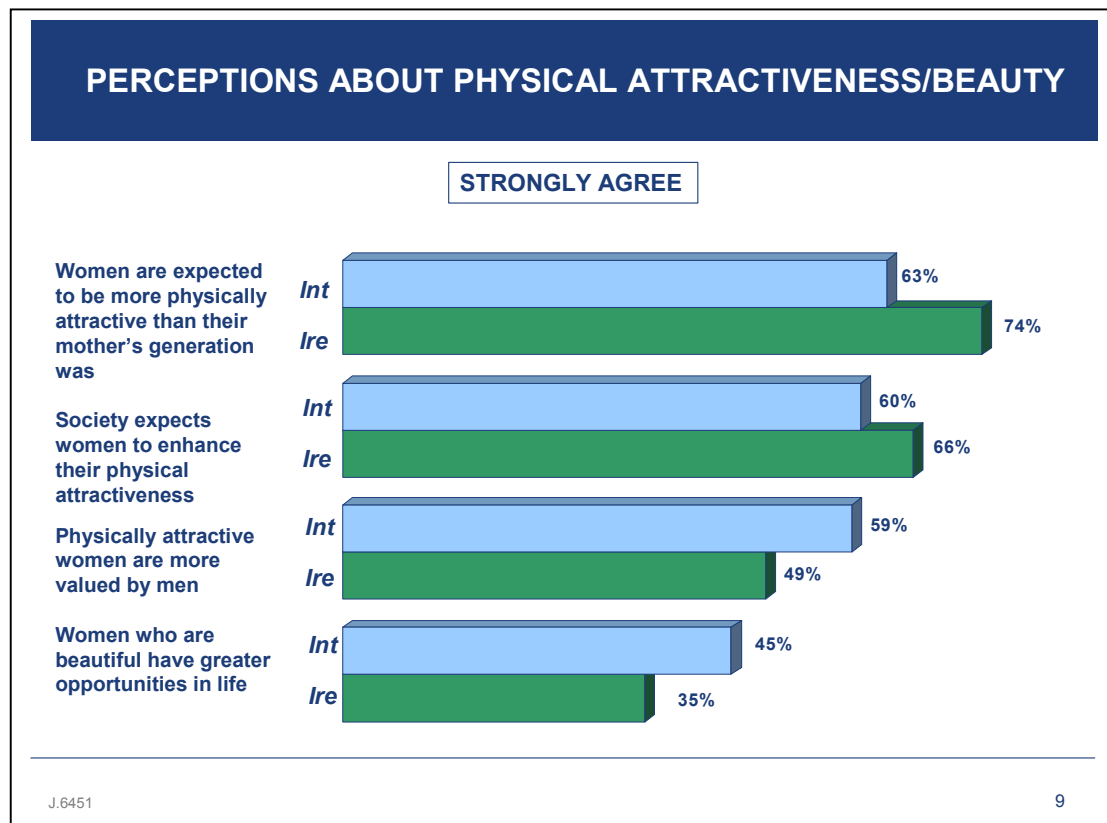
Guess which of the nationalities covered in the research came out with the highest level of dissatisfaction with body weight and shape? Would you believe, the Japanese. 6 in 10 of them said they were dissatisfied with their body weight and shape. It seems to me a very clear illustration of the pressures that can be brought to bear by specific cultural norms.

Almost half of all women interviewed in this project described their body weight as too high. The figure for Ireland is only marginally below that average.



The tyranny of the weighing scales is a clear and evident pressure point. What of other pressures?

As we can see from this chart, a clear majority of women believe that they are expected to be more physically attractive than their mothers generation and that society expects women to enhance their physical attractiveness.



Women in Ireland feel these pressures to a significantly above average degree.

Having said that, Irish women are less likely than their peers around the world to accept the notion that physically attractive women are more valued by men or that women who are beautiful have greater opportunities in life.

Although the Irish figures are lower than average on these two points, it is nevertheless the case that almost half of all women strongly agree with the first proposition and one in three with the second.

### **3. Perceptions of how beauty is portrayed in popular culture**

This leads us to the whole issue of how beauty is portrayed in the media and in popular culture.

As we will see, Irish women are particularly acutely aware of media issues.

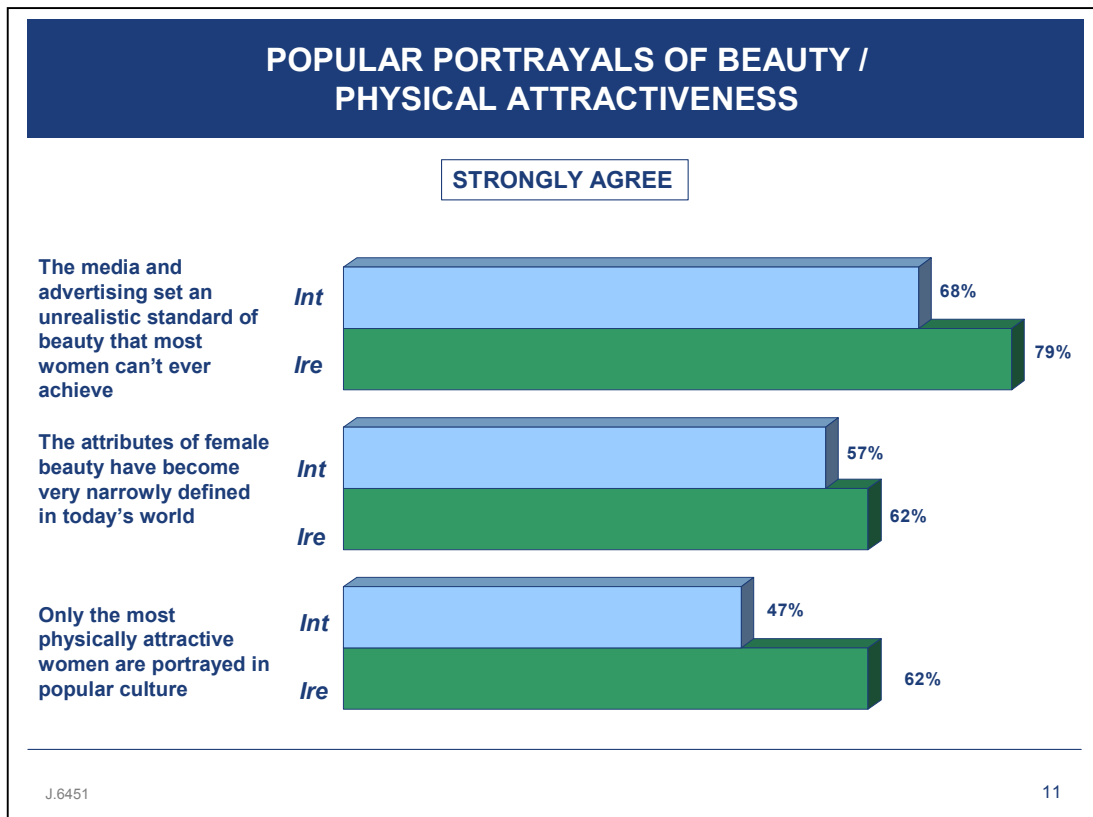
We believe that this is partly a function of the extremely open nature of the media market in Ireland – in print and electronic media.

We suspect it is also explained to a significant degree by a particularly Irish focus on education and debate.

Although they may have been disadvantaged in the jobs market over the past 50 years, women have enjoyed broad parity of educational opportunities.

It has been suggested that the particular success of talk radio in Ireland has its roots in that particular fact.

Two-thirds of women around the world believe that the media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty that most women can't ever achieve.

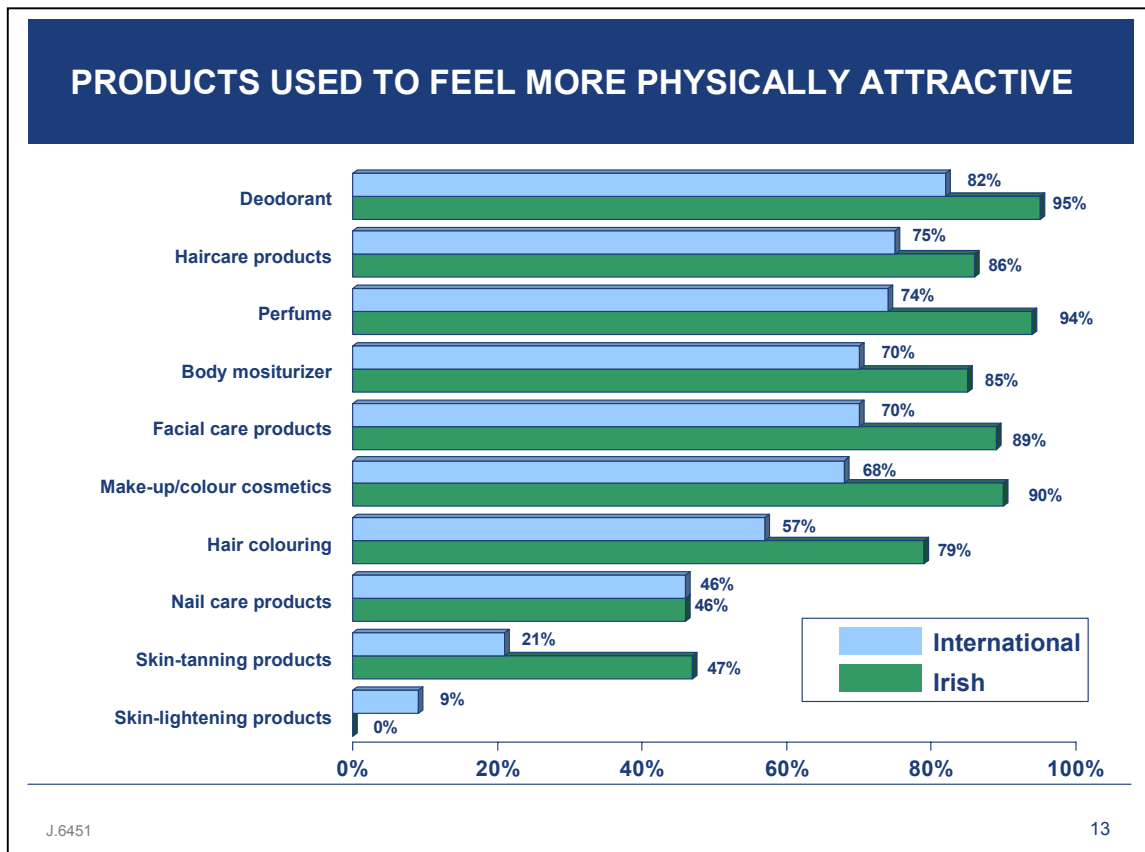


Almost 6 in 10 believe strongly that the attributes of female beauty have become very narrowly defined in today's world and almost half agree strongly that only the most physically attractive women are portrayed in popular culture.

Irish women have a higher than average tendency to strongly agree with all of these propositions: suggesting that we in this country are particularly aware of media influences.

#### 4. Beauty, Physical Attractiveness and the role of Grooming and Cosmetic Surgery

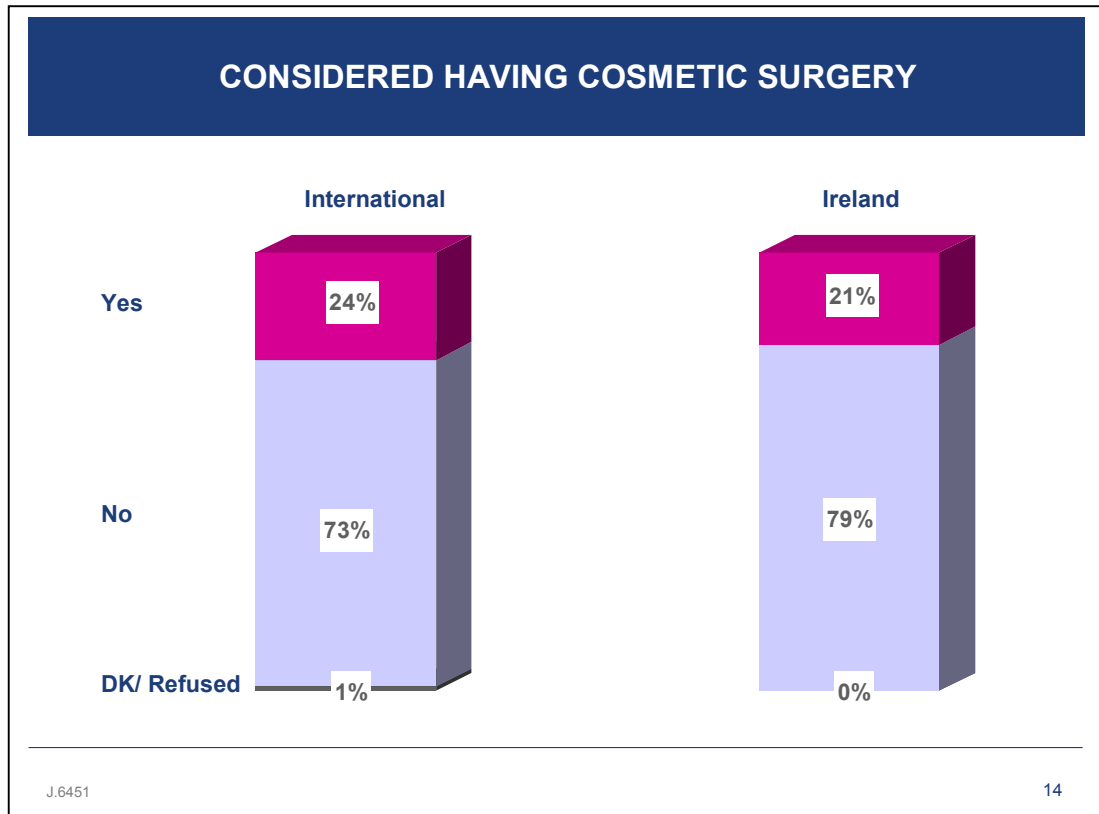
What impact do these pressures have on issues such as personal grooming and leanings towards cosmetic surgery?



As we can see here, Irish women have an above average tendency to use a whole range of personal grooming products.

The least surprising finding in the whole survey is the fact that we rank number 1 of the 11 countries covered in the research in our use of skin tanning products.

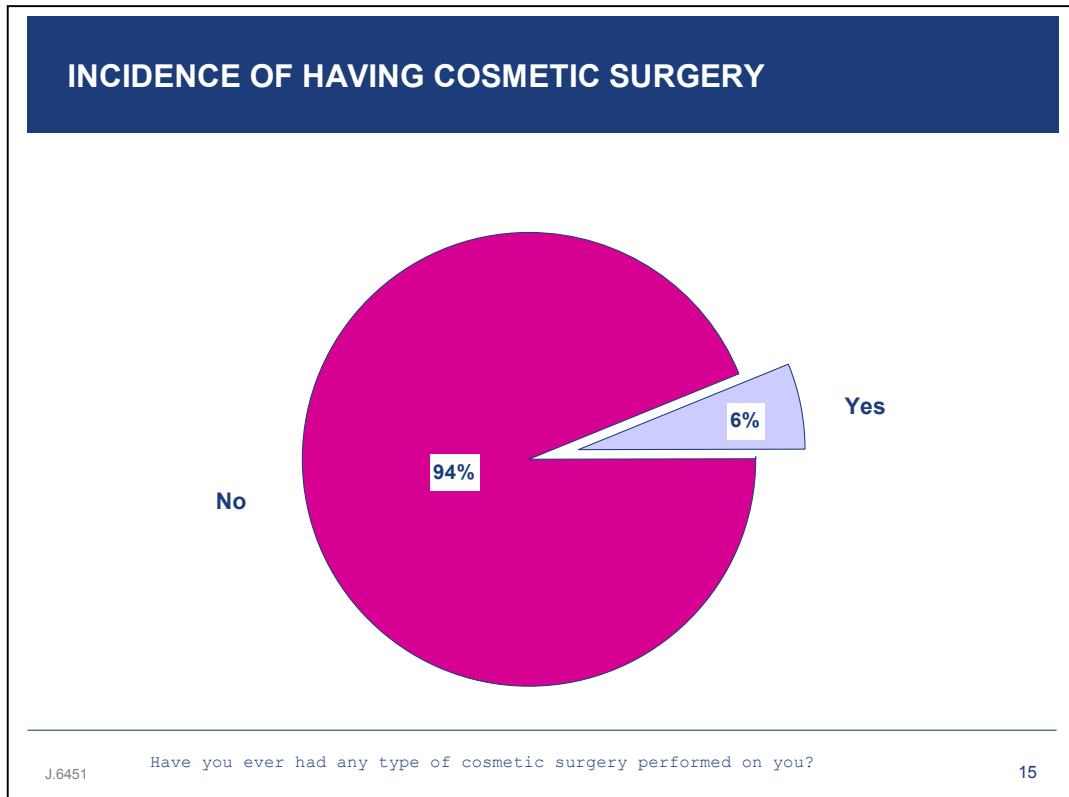
It may come as slightly more of a surprise to find that 1 in 5 Irish women say they have considered cosmetic surgery at some stage: only slightly below the international average.



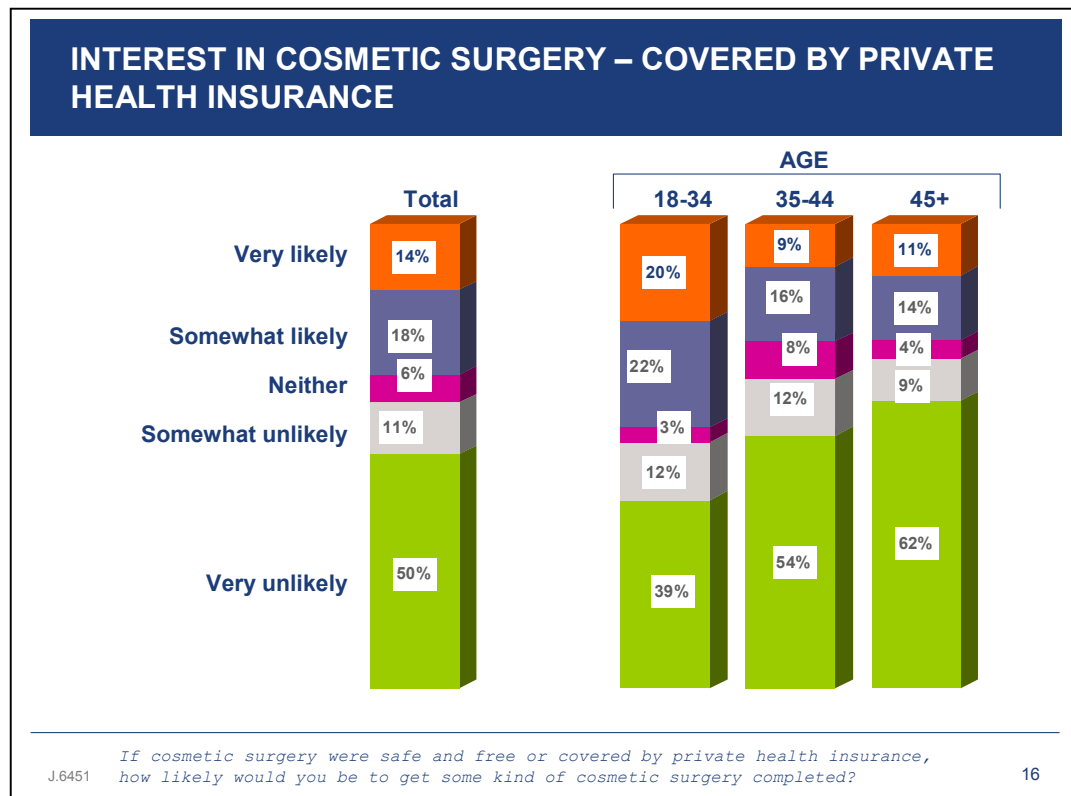
Incidentally, more than half the women in Brazil have considered cosmetic surgery. Another example of specific cultural pressure.



6% of Irish women say that they have had some cosmetic surgical procedure.



The pressure in that direction is even more clearly emphasised by the pattern of replies in this chart. It shows that, if cosmetic surgery were considered safe and covered by private health insurance, as many as 1 in 3 Irish women would be at least somewhat likely to have cosmetic surgery.

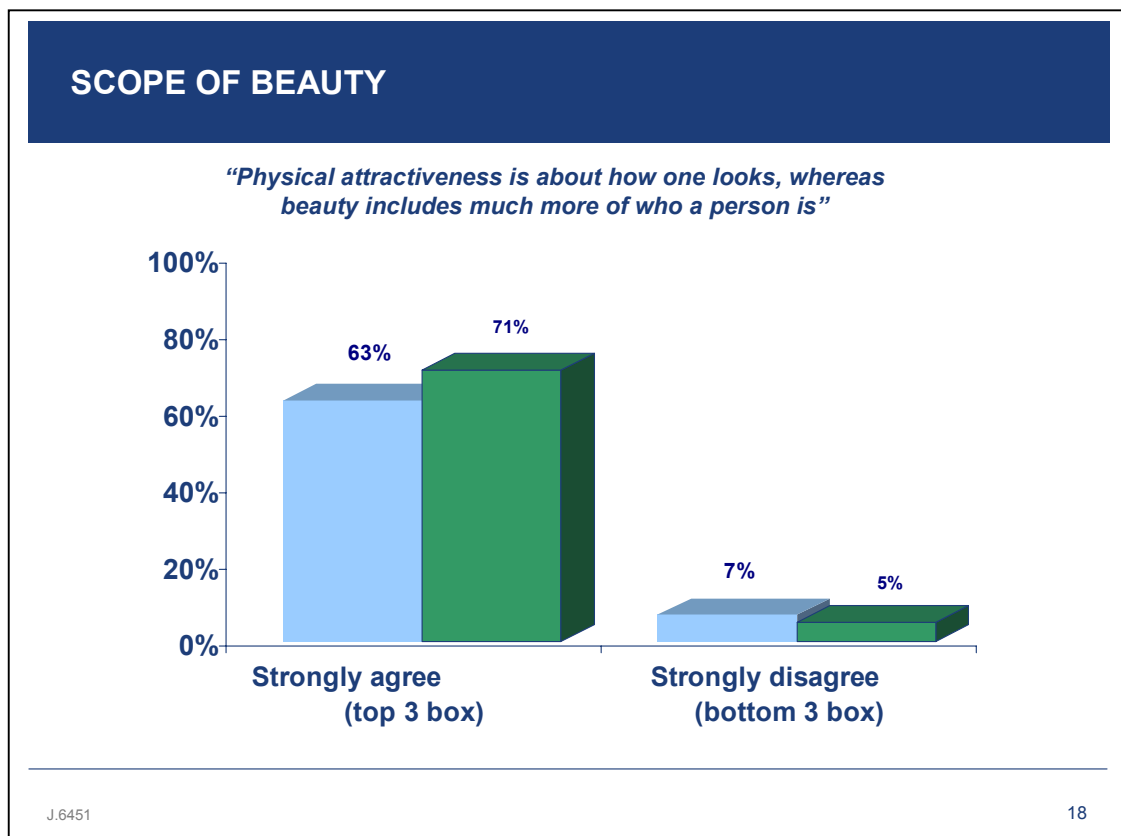


Interest in cosmetic surgery is highest among those aged under 35. Here over 4 in 10 would be interested in such a proposition.

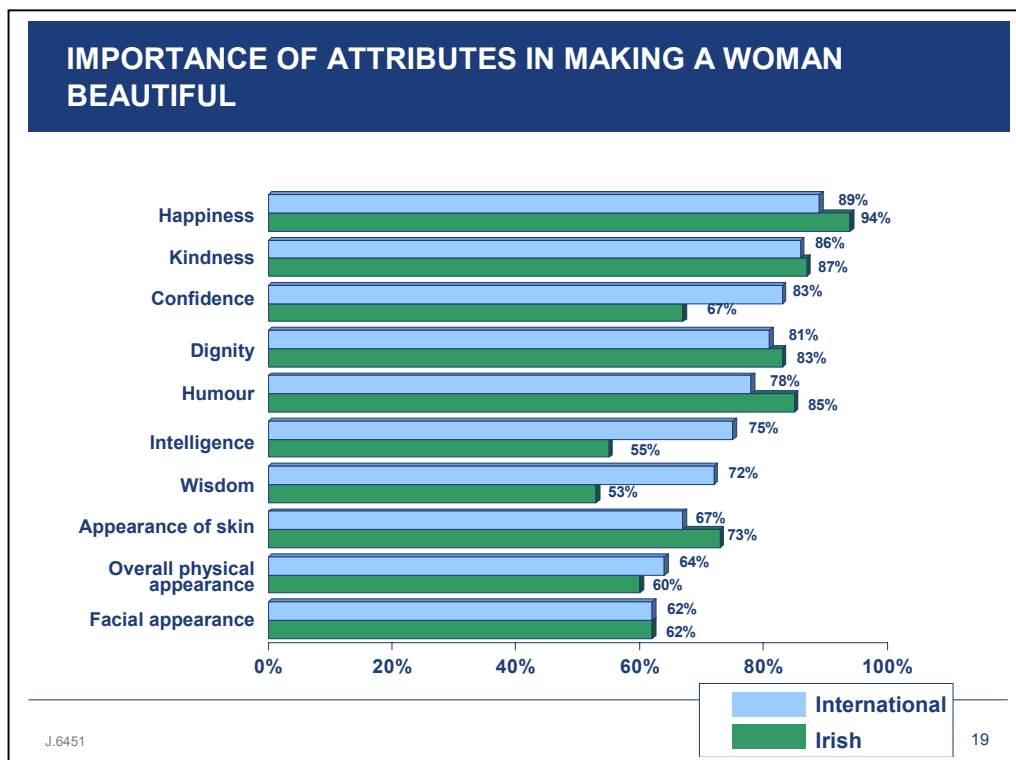
## 5. Telling the Real Truth about Beauty

In this study we have seen ample evidence of the anxieties induced by this whole topic. In these final few charts we address some themes, which might “show the way forward” or help towards some resolution of these tensions.

The starting point is in the definition of beauty as being more than just physical attractiveness. The vast majority of women strongly believe that physical attractiveness is about how one looks whereas beauty includes much more of who a person is.



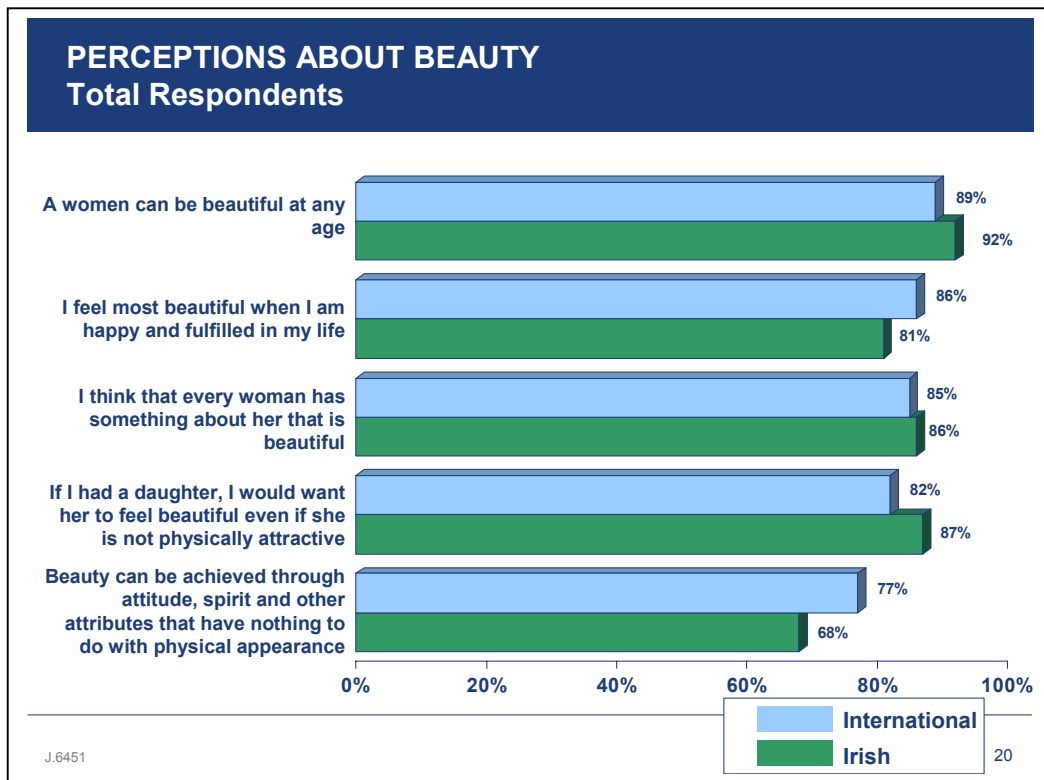
There is widespread acceptance that a great many factors contribute to making a woman feel beautiful. Here are the top 10 (out of about 20 considered) that women believe can make an important contribution to their sense of beauty.



Physical attributes such as facial appearance or the appearance of one's skin rank significantly below issues such as happiness, kindness, confidence, dignity and humour.

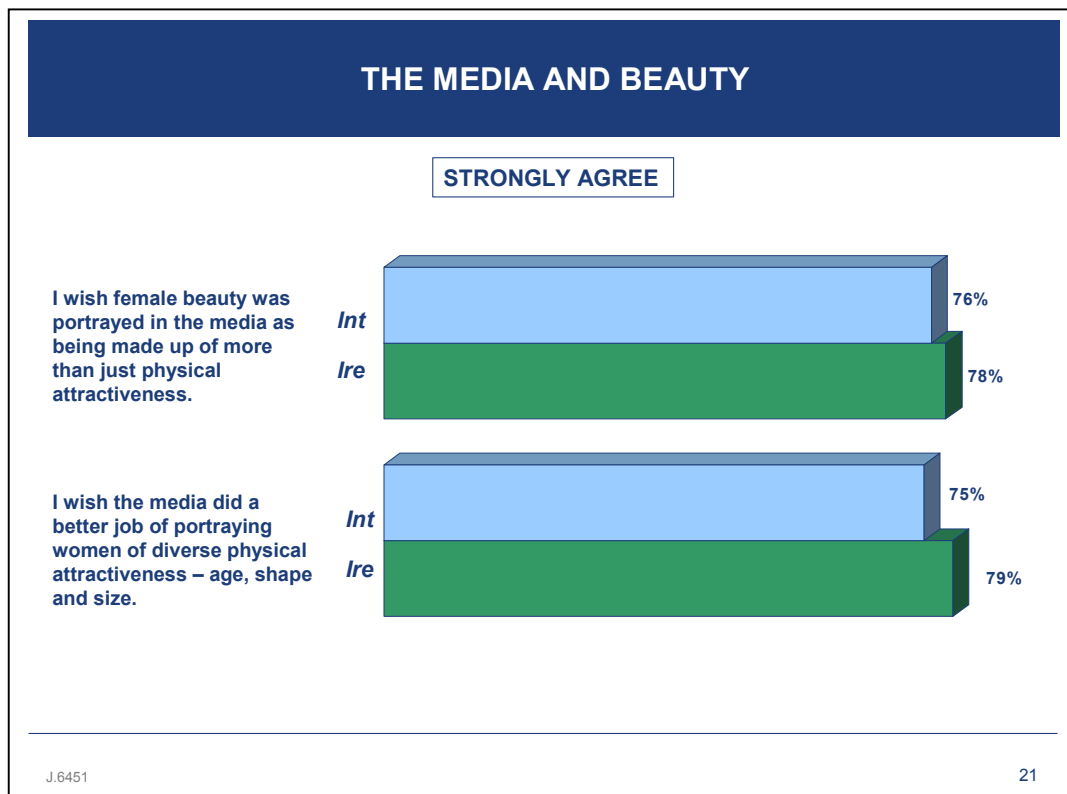
We saw evidence earlier that women feel that the concept of beauty has been too narrowly defined and assigned only to a minority stereotype.

Here in this chart we can see that almost all women believe that a woman can be beautiful at any age or that every woman has something about her that is beautiful.



A final word about the portrayal of women and beauty in the media.

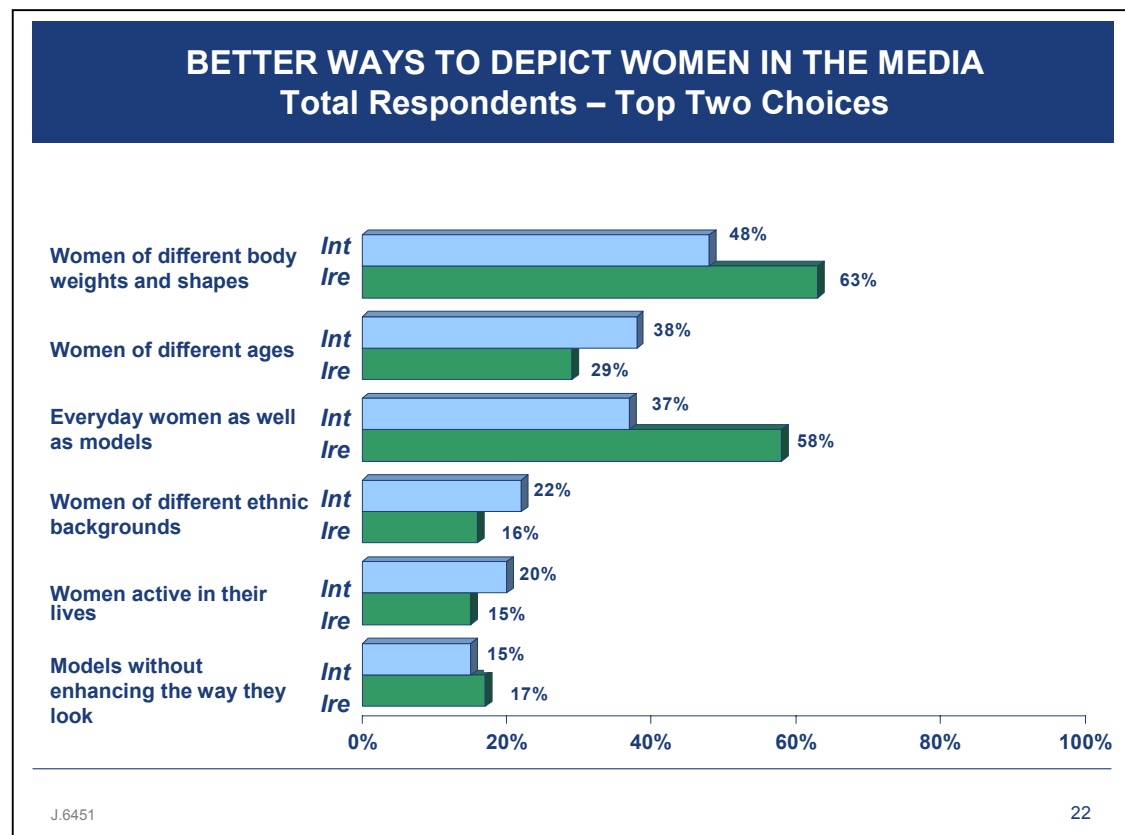
Given what we found earlier, it comes as no surprise that three out of four women strongly agree that they wish female beauty was portrayed in the media as being made up of more than just physical attractiveness.



Similar numbers wish the media did a better job in portraying women of diverse physical attractiveness, age, shape and size.

Irish women are even more emphatically in agreement with these ideas.

When we asked these women for suggestions as to how matters might be improved, this is what they came up with:-



Irish women are significantly above average in the extent to which they would like to see a stronger depiction in the media of:

- ➔ Women of different body weights and shapes
- ➔ Everyday women as well as models

These are their top two choices but there is significant support for the other initiatives listed also.

## 6. Summary & Conclusions

Just to recap, the key finding from this study are:-

- ➔ Women around the world seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of describing themselves as beautiful.
- ➔ Generally, women are more content to describe themselves as average, natural or attractive.
- ➔ Irish women are less likely than average to describe themselves as natural. We suspect because they want to get away from that particular stereotype.
- ➔ They are more likely than average to describe themselves as attractive – a real sign of self-confidence which, one suspects, is linked to changes in economic status in the past fifteen years or so – which have had a particular impact on women.
- ➔ Women around the world are strongly conscious of the pressure to be more physically attractive than their mothers' generation.
- ➔ Irish women are particularly conscious of this pressure. 3 out of 4 of them believe that this is the case.
- ➔ 2 out of 3 Irish women are strongly of the view that society expects women to enhance their physical attractiveness (again Irish women are more aware than their counterparts in other countries of this pressure).



- Half of all Irish women believe that physically attractive women are more valued by men.
- Just over a third feel that women who are beautiful have greater opportunities in life.
- On both these points, Irish women are below average in holding these beliefs.
- The specific aspect of beauty that Irish women are most dissatisfied with is that of body shape and size: (this is the pattern across all the countries covered in the research).
- 45% of Irish women believe that their body weight is too high.
- Irish women are particularly conscious of their portrayal in the media:
  - Almost 8 in 10 of them feel that media and advertising set an unrealistic standard for beauty that most women can't ever achieve.
  - 62% feel that the attributes of female beauty have become very narrowly defined.
  - A similar proportion believe that only the most physically attractive women are portrayed in popular culture.
- 6% of Irish women claim to have had some cosmetic surgical procedures. 21% had considered such a procedure.
- 34% would consider cosmetic surgery if it were deemed safe and available under private health insurance.

- ➔ Women, around the world, draw a distinction between beauty and physical attractiveness.
- ➔ They see emotional factors (happiness, kindness etc.) as more significant contributors to a sense of beauty than sheer physical aspects.
- ➔ Reflecting their view that stereotypes of beauty have been too narrowly defined:-
  - 9 in 10 Irish women believe that a woman can be beautiful at any age.
  - Almost as many believe that every woman has something about her that is beautiful.
  - 2 out of 3 stress that beauty can be achieved through attitude, spirit and other attributes that have nothing to do with physical appearance.
- ➔ 8 in 10 Irish women strongly wish that female beauty was portrayed in the media as being more in line with their own sense of beauty (i.e. made up of more than just physical attractiveness.)

## **SURVEY DETAILS**

- ➔ "The Real Truth About Beauty" study was commissioned by Dove, one of Unilever's largest beauty brands, to further the global understanding of women, beauty and well being and the relationships between them.
- ➔ This report presents the results of the Irish study and compares these with the findings from equivalent studies in The United States, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, France, Portugal, Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina, and Japan.
- ➔ 300 interviews were conducted with women aged 18-64 in each of the countries (with the exception of the United States where a sample of 500 respondents was used).
- ➔ The Irish study was completed by Behaviour & Attitudes Ltd using a nationally representative sample of women in the appropriate age grouping. All interviewing was conducted by trained members of the Behaviour & Attitudes fieldforce, working under supervision from our computer assisted telephone interviewing unit. Fieldwork was conducted between the 18<sup>th</sup> of November and the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2004.