

“I LOOK BETTER WITHOUT YOU”:
EXAMINING FEMALE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE CHANGES
FOLLOWING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TERMINATION

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And the day came when the risk to remain tight in the
bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

-Anaïs Ni

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ABSTRACT

“I LOOK BETTER WITHOUT YOU”: EXAMINING FEMALE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE CHANGES FOLLOWING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TERMINATION

by Lindsay M. Henry

The purpose of this study was to identify females’ motives for changing their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination, as well as to identify actual outcomes females experienced once physical changes have been made. As identified by Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham and Cheng (2008), communication strategies and responses following dissolution have not been a particular area of scholarly focus. This study adds depth to previous romantic relationship termination research by focusing on aspects of nonverbal communication, rather than verbal communication, as a strategic response to dissolution. This project also expands gender communication research by focusing specifically on female strategies used following romantic relationship termination to increase satisfaction with self.

The researcher interviewed 17 females who experienced a significant romantic relationship termination and changed their appearance following the termination; interviews were conducted using free online chat services based on participants’ individual preferences. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified four motives explaining why females change their appearance after a breakup: communicating well-being, gaining control, increasing independence, and managing identity. In addition, three themes emerged as outcomes resulting from females making physical changes post-dissolution: increased self-confidence, newfound sense of identity, and reinforcement of independence. This study provided further insight into the process of creating identity, as

well as stressed the value of physical appearance, especially when viewed as a potential coping mechanism following romantic relationship termination. Social construction and objectification theory also offer a strong theoretical background for understanding how females internalize and respond to societal messages communicating the value of their physical appearance. Overall, this qualitative analysis provides a new perspective on the understudied area of post-dissolutional relationship research, revealing the ways in which females view, value, and use their physical appearance as a response to romantic relationship termination.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The relationships humans develop with one other allow people to create and establish a personal world of fulfillment and connection. As identified by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 hierarchy of needs model, a sense of belonging is one of the five fundamental human needs; people often use communication to develop relationships to overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation and seek to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love. To fulfill this need of belonging, Maslow (1943) states that people often will give and receive love and affection to others; this exchange of affection is generally a primary characteristic of romantic relationships.

Within the dyads that characterize romantic relationships, communication is a focus and concern in all aspects of the relationship, including in the termination of established romantic connections. Unlike family members, partners are not connected by blood to their significant other, and this type of relationship commonly centers on strong emotional feelings of love and attraction. Therefore, it no surprise that, when the romantic relationship ends, the experience can be emotionally painful for one or both partners because that connection, once established and defined, can be severed permanently. The ending of a relationship can be a highly stressful, emotional time in a person's life (Orbuch, 1992; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998).

Additionally, when people experience romantic relationship dissolution, they do not just lose their partner; they often lose a sense of themselves. This identity loss occurs because, frequently, much of their identity and other personal relationships have been attached to their partner (Stephen, 1984). Prior to the dissolution, one of the person's

primary roles was being his or her partner's partner, and with that role often comes a joint sense of identity to which the partners become accustomed (e.g., being invited to social events as a pair, having a person with whom to spend Saturday nights, speaking on behalf of one's partner when chatting with friends). Each partner can see him or herself as part of a dyad, as a "we" rather than an "I"; yet once dissolution occurs, that sense of identity is gone. In its place, each partner must reconstruct a new single identity (Stephen, 1984).

Romantic relationship dissolution, and the accompanying threat to identity, can be especially difficult for women, partially because American culture has socially constructed a stigmatized view of single women. While partner-less men are often viewed as suave, mature, and respectable "bachelors," single women are often viewed negatively by society, often labeled "washed up" or unable to attract a partner. Women, then, often must not only attempt to negotiate their new single identity, but must do so despite the fact that it is socially constructed as an undesirable identity within American culture.

Similar to romantic relationship status, physical appearance is often another primary concern for females because of how "ideal" physical appearance is socially constructed within American society. Just as women's relationship status is socially constructed to be a reflection of positive or negative social approval, physical attractiveness also can serve as a currency of self and social worth for females. Americans have socially constructed particular feminine beauty ideals, such as thinness, youthfulness, equal facial symmetry, and long, flowing hair (e.g. Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Grammer & Thornhill, 1994; Weitz, 2001)—and reinforce the idea that if women meet these and other beauty "standards," they will have or gain social approval and

acceptance. Therefore, women often place high priority, and as a result, high amounts of pressure, on themselves to meet society's standards and ideals of beauty.

Researchers have examined romantic relationship termination by focusing on specific communication areas, which include methods of terminating the relationships, coping styles after the relationship termination, and communication changes after the dissolution (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008; Wilmot, Carbaugh, & Baxter, 1985). The aftermath of romantic relationship dissolution, referred to by Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham and Cheng (2008) as post-dissolutional relationship development (PDR), is an area of little research. The communication strategies and effects following PDR, as well as the strategies utilized to increase satisfaction with self from a female perspective, has not been a particular area of scholarly focus. Romantic relationship termination effects on identity and appearance also lack communication research.

Examining the individual communicative strategies adopted by each partner as he or she makes the adjustment to being single will give a more holistic view of the post-dissolution relationship process and relational adjustment. Since females and males can develop entirely different communication cultures (Tannen, 1990), it is relevant to study females' reactions specifically to dissolution separately, as males and females often differ in communicative strategies, methods, goals and abilities.

Additionally, focus on female negotiation of a "new single identity" can expand and establish stronger scholarly connections between stigma and identity, as well as highlight ways in which today's society and American culture have redefined which qualities or conditions are considered stigmatized. For example, prior research by

Goffman (1963) outlined those who are stigmatized as individuals possessing certain “bodily qualities” such as blindness or being crippled, as well as other conditions, such as being homeless, alcoholic, or Jewish. An examination of modern-day stigmas, such as a “singleness” stigma for women, and how people negotiate identity despite the stigma can benefit the understanding of stigma and identity creation. Examining new stigmas could also help us to understand how new stigmas are created and reinforced over time through socially-constructed messages.

This study seeks to explore the possibility of a connection between romantic relationship dissolution and female physical appearance changes following dissolution. The researcher seeks to understand why women change their physical appearance following dissolution, as well as to explore how physical appearance changes following relationship termination could be related to women’s attempts to adjust to their new “single” roles in society. The study will also attempt to identify goals women may wish to achieve by changing their appearance post-dissolution. In order to do so, this thesis first reviews past literature on the value of female physical appearance and relationship status reflected by American society, romantic relationship termination, and females’ uses of physical appearance to achieve goals. The researcher then describes the methodology employed in the present study. Next, the thesis provides a section detailing the analysis of the study, followed by a discussion of the possible relationship between romantic relationship termination and female physical appearance changes after the termination. This thesis concludes with implications for future research.

Literature Review

The first section of the literature presented focuses on social construction and how women internalize messages communicated by society, objectifying themselves to achieve social approval. The second section focuses on romantic relationship termination, outlining and conceptually defining romantic relationship termination based on prior research, as well as communicative behaviors and adjustment behaviors following romantic relationship termination. The third section of this literature review focuses on the value of female romantic relationship status. This section will explore the concept of stigma, providing a definition of stigma, as well as reasons for why being single can be considered a stigma, identifying why and how romantic relationship dissolution can be a difficult process for American females. Finally, the thesis examines how physical appearance could be a means by which newly single females achieve several goals, such as marking the end of the relationship and establishing a new “single” identity.

Socially Constructing the Value of Female Appearance

Communication goes beyond verbal messages; nonverbal aspects of communication often center on one’s physical appearance (e.g., hairstyles, tattoos, piercings, and clothing style). Females’ nonverbal communication choices, including overall physical appearance and what is considered attractive, are areas of heavy focus for mass media outlets in American society. Mediated messages can serve as tools with which to communicate socially constructed meanings, establishing the high value placed on female physical appearance. Women, then, often value physical appearance because of these shared social meanings and the social approval gained if they meet the established

standards of beauty. Social constructionism offers a perspective for understanding how media create societal messages that assign high value to female physical appearance.

As the name suggests, social constructionism is considered a social approach to studying communication. According to Leeds-Hurtwitz (1995), social approaches share certain assumptions: the approaches describe events between people in the process of interaction, accept a certain definition of communication, and include some version of social construction of reality. A social construction of reality generally means that people do not live in a pre-existing world built by facts and figures, but that people create their worlds and meanings through the utilization of symbols and behaviors (Leeds-Hurtwitz, 1995).

Further, social construction is an approach centering on the assumption that groups construct knowledge for one another, collaboratively creating a culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings (Pearce, 1995). When a person is immersed within a culture of this sort, one learns about how to be a part of that culture on many levels; social constructionists are interested in the stories individuals make real within their actions. Therefore, individuals within society create their world based on the meanings they assign to things, people, and places within that world (Pearce, 1995).

Pearce (1995) outlines crucial aspects of social construction, such as these: accounts of reality are based on a continuous flow of communication between people; an utterance's meaning is created based on the entire entity of dialogue; responsive utterances both create and constrain meaning; "social languages" and "speech genres" are ways in which talking holds social groups together; people develop "official" ways of accounting for themselves and the world; and finally, individuals' talk in regards to their

perceptions and beliefs based on context. Through Americans' communication practices and media outlets, society has socially constructed the value of female appearance and what is considered attractive. Understanding the ways in which socially constructed values are placed on physical appearance and internalized by women allows us to see both how females establish their beliefs about physical appearance and how these beliefs affect their physical appearance choices.

Physical appearance, from a media industry standpoint, is a major focus of marketing, consumerism, and appearance-driven industries (e.g., hair care, cosmetics, clothing) that target females, using beauty ideals to create and maintain the desire to appear attractive. Women frequently internalize these messages featuring the "ideal attractive female" and can be swept up in a cycle of comparisons as a result of such messages. These messages often relate to women's desire to change their appearance--change their hair color, change their haircut, change their body--in order to feel adequate and accepted by society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Because these messages are frequently internalized at young ages when females establish their self-concepts and individual identities, women often hold the belief that beauty is the key that opens the gates to social approval and acceptance. According to Engeln-Maddox (2006), females tend to associate a wide variety of rewards with achieving the attractiveness ideal supported by the media. These rewards include positive psychological impact, romantic success with the opposite sex, and positive social attention. Additionally, "attractive women are less lonely, more popular and/or sexually experienced, both more likely to marry and more likely to marry men of higher socioeconomic status" (Weitz, 2001, p. 673).

Women thus tend to uphold such socially constructed beauty ideals through their behaviors or actions to achieve such goals. To do so, females often will turn to health and beauty products and services (e.g., cosmetics, hair dye, salon treatments) that promise to increase their physical attractiveness level, leading to a \$160 billion dollar per year health and beauty industry, encompassing makeup, skin, haircare, fragrances, cosmetic surgery, health clubs and diet pills (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Many women consistently buy these products and services to become closer to the beauty ideal; therefore, as stated by Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert (2007), “women’s identities are partially defined by their consumption practices” (p. 59). By utilizing cosmetics and other products as a way to improve their appearance, females can become closer to the cultural ideal.

The qualities that are considered the cultural ideal of female beauty in the United States have changed over time. Character, heart, and dignity, or personality characteristics and overall goodness, are the qualities that characterized a young girl as “beautiful” in the 1800s. These qualities stand in stark contrast to today’s American society, where beauty is based on physical appearance and “perfection” of external characteristics (Brumberg, 1997). The importance society has placed on a female’s looks has shifted the locus of value of an American woman. Today, magazines suggest that physical perfection is the beauty ideal that readers should achieve (Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991; Pierce, 1990). The same ideals are reflected in a more modern medium: the Internet. In a content analysis conducted by Labre and Walsh-Childers (2003), magazine web sites directed toward teenage girls were found to have consistent themes, which include the messages that (1) beauty requires physical perfection, and (2) beauty is the main avenue to success.

Television is another medium that strongly disseminates and reinforces the message that beauty requires physical perfection. Numerous popular television programs feature plots focusing on physical appearance makeovers, such as *The Swan* (Fox), *A Makeover Story* (TLC), *What Not to Wear* (TLC), *Bridalplasty* (E! Entertainment Television), *Extreme Makeover* (ABC), and *10 Years Younger* (TLC). These shows promote the idea of “helping” women who do not reflect the cultural stereotype of beauty to transform into the cultural ideal (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007).

With their focus on objectifying women, fixing them, making them over, and changing them, the programs communicate the message that if a woman looks at herself objectively, focuses on parts that do not match the American ideal image of physical attractiveness, and makes changes to achieve that ideal image, she will be happier and more successful. Because conforming to the cultural ideal requires a critical examination of their body parts and physical appearance, no longer a collective whole, but separated into parts (“Let’s look at your nose,” “How do you use your makeup on your face?” “See how these pants accentuate your thighs?”) and fixing each part to make it “right,” the ideal is solidified in labeling the female’s appearance prior to the makeover as “wrong” (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) provides a perspective for understanding how and why women internalize socially constructed media messages regarding physical appearance.

Objectification Theory

Objectification theory states that self-objectification occurs when people view themselves as objects, focus on the external rather than the internal, and monitor how

their body looks based on how others view them; this objectification can result in negative self-esteem and body worth (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As a result, women dissect themselves as an arrangement of body parts, focusing on how their body looks on the outside rather than the health of their body or how their body feels and functions, potentially leading to their preoccupation with appearance.

Self-objectification appears to be a solidified part of most American women's lives. As stated by Kilbourne (1995):

A woman is conditioned to view her face as a mask and her body as an object, as things separate from and more important than her real self, constantly in need of alteration, improvement, and disguise... Objectified by others, she learns to objectify herself. (p. 122).

Media messages are likely to instigate self-objectification by women throughout their everyday lives so much that even "the mere presence of scales, mirrors and fashion magazine covers... were sufficient enough to induce self-objectification" (Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008, p. 404).

Women tend to make great efforts to improve their physical appearance if they anticipate being in a self-objectifying situation such as dating and other social situations (Wolf, 1991). For example, a newly single woman may encounter such self-objectifying situations after she finds herself free from the romantic dyad after dissolution. She may go to bars, clubs, parties, and other social situations where new people will be looking, thus objectifying her appearance. If a woman feels her appearance did not work for that relationship, then, she can change her appearance in some way to feel "fresh" and reflect change. Just as she might paint the walls of her home a different color, a woman can

change and rearrange her appearance so it will work for the next relationship, especially since she may anticipate that she will be viewed as an object in new dating situations by potential partners.

The Role of Physical Appearance in Romantic Relationships

Physical appearance can play a role in various communication events from the beginning of the relationship to its termination and beyond. During initial interaction and the beginnings of a relationship, a person's physical characteristics and level of attractiveness are main components underlying romantic relationship initiation; physical appearance is one of the first things people consider when evaluating a person as a potential partner (Feingold, 1990; Peretti & Abplanalp, 2004). The value men place on physical attractiveness and appearance produces excessive pressure on single women to be physically attractive. Managing this pressure can become a high priority for a newly single female who wants confirmation that she is still viewed as attractive and desirable by others; appearance can affect behavior which, in turn, often plays a role in whom one meets and with whom one interacts (Garner, 1997). Media, once again, play a critical role in this value. Through movie scenes, television shows, and magazine ads, media often link good looks and sexuality as primary ways to gain attention, acceptance, desirability and positive sexual relationships (Eagley, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). Often, media outlets show women who meet the American culture ideal of beauty getting the handsome man, the nice car, and the upscale career; the main starlets cast in primary television roles are usually beautiful by American standards. Therefore, changes in physical appearance to better support the cultural ideal of beauty

can appeal to women interested in achieving these personal goals.

Not only does physical appearance play a role in attracting a partner, but it also correlates with relationship satisfaction. According to Hoyt and Kogan (2001), individuals whose dating situations and sex lives were deemed less satisfying were also less satisfied with their physical appearance. Hoyt and Kogan (2001) note this finding could be due to the fact media and society place such great pressure on the relationship between appearance and finding a partner, stating, “For the men and women who are single and displeased with being single, it is not unlikely that these men and women would attribute their lack of a relationship to not being attractive enough” (p. 212).

Overall, American culture has socially constructed female physical appearance to be valued highly in society. Media outlets (e.g., television, magazines, Internet) reinforce these values through their messages, and women often begin to compare and objectify themselves as a result, attempting to meet the set beauty standards to obtain social approval.

Yet physical appearance is not the only characteristic valued in American society; females’ relationship status—whether they are single or not—is also a top priority and holds positive and negative meanings. According to Reynolds and Taylor (2004), the meaning of singleness changes over time. As this thesis focuses on the female viewpoint, singleness is defined as single women who are not currently in a romantic relationship. Although being in a romantic relationship has its own cultural meanings crafted by society (often positive meanings), not being in a romantic relationship can often hold negative meanings. Many individuals possessing a “single” relationship status have experienced romantic relationship termination; the next portion of this thesis will explain

and define romantic relationship termination.

Romantic Relationship Termination

Romantic relationships are based on a person's selection of and decision to establish a relationship with a partner. This relationship helps to achieve several goals for individuals, including companionship, protection, and opportunities to have children (Yoshimura, 2007). Romantic relationships connect two individuals voluntarily, but because the choice is generally independent, one or both partners in the relationship can make the choice to end the relationship at any time, as well.

Romantic relationship termination, also referred to as relationship dissolution, is a common focus of scholarly research in the area of communication studies (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Emmers & Hart, 1996; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Duck, 1982). Relationship termination is the final stage of interpersonal relationships outlined in Knapp's (1978) relational developmental model. According to Knapp's model, romantic relationship termination is the end of a relationship in which both partners move on with their lives, often to find other partners eventually.

Dissolution occurs for two major types of reasons: dyadic or non-dyadic differences (Hill, Ruben, & Peplau, 1976). Dyadic differences include interest differences or personal preference changes, and non-dyadic differences include distance. Additionally, the struggle of one partner's or both partners' competing desires for autonomy and connection can be a factor in the relationship termination; for example, a dialectic tension occurs when a partner wishes to have alone time, but yet desires simultaneously that connection with another (Baxter, 1988). Relationship dissolution can

also be an end result due to conflict based on time, distance, and personal freedoms desired (Duck, 1982).

The process of relational dissolution can be longitudinal, extending beyond the official “end” of the relationship (Koeing Kellas et al., 2008; Lannutti & Cameron, 2002; Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989). Despite the termination, the relationship will live on as part (sometimes a large part) of each partner’s life in various ways: the memories of each partner, coping strategies, and even vengeful behaviors (Emmers & Hart, 1996; Koeing Kellas & Maunsov, 2003; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987; Yoshimura, 2007). Although the relationship may be officially over, the relationship history lives on for each partner individually.

Ebaugh (1988) states that when one experiences romantic relationship termination, the individual engages in the process of role exit, and therefore goes through two processes: (1) disengagement, which is when the individual withdraws from the normative expectations associated with the role of significant other; and (2) disidentification, which is when a person’s role sets shift; a role set is the collection of people occupying certain roles associated with that individual in a given social role. For example, a woman who once occupied the role of girlfriend or wife probably associated with certain people -- her partner’s parents, friends, co-workers, for example -- simply because of her role as her partner’s significant other. Once relationship termination occurs, she may not associate with these individuals anymore due to resocialization, or giving up sets of norms, and sometimes the people, associated with that particular role.

When faced with a romantic relationship termination, then, both partners’ lives often drastically change. As stated above, often ex-partners must contend with memories

of their former relationship, as well as make decisions regarding those with whom they will socialize, especially if their former social circles consisted of individuals connected to their ex-partner. Yet romantic relationship termination does not just mean the end of the romantic relationship; it also marks a new role transition within society for each partner. For example, the loss of a female's role as "girlfriend," "wife," or "partner" is replaced with the role of "single woman"; being single itself is a new role. Often caused by romantic relationship termination, being single is a new role with which each partner contends in his or her everyday life. Yet the "single" role is often a complicated one for former partners to negotiate and accept as a part of their identities. This thesis will now further examine the loss of the "significant other" role and how being single can be linked to identity confusion for single individuals.

Identity Loss

Ebaugh (1988) states:

"The self-identity of individuals performing [a role as someone's significant other] is closely connected to the roles they perform...personal identity is not merely the sum of roles played but arises from images of the self formed in...role behavior" (p. 20).

Following a breakup, ex-partners can experience identity confusion due to the absence of their role of "significant other" and previous symbolic interdependence, which can therefore threaten each partner's sense of identity (Stephen, 1984). Romantic relationship dissolution can often raise the level of uncertainty in each ex-partner, forcing the partners to re-evaluate themselves because their role as partners no longer exists.

Those who do not initiate the breakup often are highly involved emotionally within the relationship and feel a stronger sense of lost identity; the higher the levels of relationship anxiety, the stronger the reports of lost sense of identity following the dissolution (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003).

According to Ebaugh (1988), there is a high degree of role attachment (degree of intensity of involvement) in romantic relationships because there is a high degree of integration between the self and the role. Therefore, an individual who is no longer in a romantic relationship must create a new single identity that does not include the role of significant other. Once a woman begins the process of role exit, she must establish a new single identity that incorporates her past role as significant other (Ebaugh, 1988).

However, being single is not always considered a desirable status or role, and it is this stigma of singleness, and how women feel about the stigma of singleness, that this thesis will turn to next.

Stigma of Singleness

As previously mentioned, exits from a particular role, such as ex-wife or partner, carry social stigma, affecting the process of establishing an ex-identity because this role is negatively viewed by society (Ebaugh, 1988). Singleness is best viewed as socially constructed; being without a partner is a social category that helps provide an orderly and accountable framework for everyday life (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Therefore, society categorizes individuals based on relationship status, socially constructing the meaning of singleness and what it means to have a partner. According to Ebaugh (1988), “being an ex is unique sociologically in that the expectations, norms, and identity of an

ex-role relate not to what one is currently doing but rather to social expectations associated with the previous role” (p. 3). DePaulo and Morris (2005) claim single adults in American society are often targets of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping due to the overvaluing of romantic partners as the only truly important peer relationship.

Singleness is an identity of difference that, similar to stigmatized identities described by Goffman (1963), sets patterns for social interactions and carries strong cultural associations (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). Though singleness is not as “deeply discrediting” as other stigmas identified by Goffman (e.g., blindness, alcoholic traits, being labeled a criminal or insane), singleness is a stigma that women in particular carry that has negative associations, such as failure and rejection (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Gordon, 2004; Reynolds & Taylor, 2004).

The experience of being single locates women outside traditional expectations of a woman’s ideal place; the notion of what a woman’s place “should be” is socially constructed (Chasteen, 1994). According to Byrne (2000), the common dominant themes of femininity are heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. When a woman is single, then, she also unconsciously communicates she is not married, and because marriage is often connected to having children, she may also deny motherhood. Therefore, women who are single often receive negative labels, including being fussy, selfish, choosy, particular, spinsters, “dried up,” male-bashers, old maids, wallflowers, or “left on the shelf,” and others might also assume that there is “something wrong with them” (Byrne, 2000).

Byrne’s (2000) female participants reported feeling personally deficit and evaluated negatively by others because of their singleness. As stated by a study

participant, Kitty:

I felt kind of condemned. And I know I do it myself to single girls I would know... You would be wondering “Are they single or did they get married?” Or it seems the natural thing to assume that everyone grows up and then gets married. It saddens me I have to answer no to it. No, I am not married. No, I haven’t got anybody. That saddens and annoys me. (Byrne, 2000, p. 451)

People also socially construct rules that bolster the negative evaluation of singleness and the positive evaluation of being in a relationship. According to Reynolds and Wetherell (2003), “women’s lives, their experiences and their relationships have evolved in the shadow of this powerful but often tacit set of regulations about appropriate forms of desire and intimate partnership” (p. 489). Behaviors exhibited by individuals support this notion; for example, married women or women in long-term partnerships with men are rarely asked to explain their romantic relationship status, while single women may be asked to explain why they are single because society has constructed theirs as a negative state (Adams, 1976). Additionally, single women often report they feel treated by their parents as “second class,” invisible, or less important than married sisters and brothers due to how singleness is socially viewed (Byrne, 2000).

In a qualitative study focusing on single women, Byrne (2000) identified how women internalized socially constructed views of singleness. Based on interviews with single female participants, Byrne concluded that women were aware that society has constructed a meaning of singleness that they cannot change individually. For example, Cara, a participant, said: “What I would love would be if being single was OK. If society would allow people to be single...” (Byrne, 2000, p. 457).

Single women are often deeply aware of the societal constructions of singleness, and because of their awareness, develop strategies to combat or reduce the stigma (Byrne, 2000). These strategies include having a repertoire of stories for certain social situations explaining why they are single, such as not having found “Mr. Right,” the priority of caring for others, having had bad relationships in the past, a focus on career or education, being unable to do long-term relationships, or that singleness is something that “just happens” (Byrne, 2000; Gordon, 2004). Often, single women, just as those stigmatized groups as described by Goffman (1963), will create a “marginal culture” to support one another and cope with the labels cast by society (Ebaugh, 1988).

Women, then, often face many obstacles regarding their sense of self after a romantic relationship termination. Not only can they feel a loss of identity because they are no longer a part of a romantic relationship dyad, but they also can feel stigmatized because of the societal meanings associated with being single. So how do women cope with the loss of both their partner and their own role as a partner, only to face a new role to which society has assigned negative connotations? This thesis next examines how women might respond once dissolution occurs and how they contend with their new “single” roles, examining the role physical appearance may play.

Messages Communicated Through Post-Dissolution Appearance Changes

As stated earlier, women tend to believe social approval is directly related to achieving the desired image of beauty and attractiveness reflected in American culture. Therefore, women could turn to physical appearance as a way to mark a turning point in their lives, especially if they feel a sense of societal disapproval due to their single status.

Newly single women could turn to their physical appearance rather than other behaviors because, as stated earlier in this thesis, physical appearance is highly valued in American culture. Society has conveyed the notion that attractive physical appearance is a way to gain a variety of rewards, which could be desirable to newly single women, including positive psychological impact, romantic success with the opposite sex, and positive social attention (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). Beauty ideals, often disseminated by the media, can be internalized even more strongly by a woman following relationship termination, when any method for achieving social approval is appealing to combat her uncertainty about identity, reduced social approval, or both. Therefore, because single women may feel they lack social value due to their single status in society, physical appearance's high value could be a substitute and replacement for newly single women's feelings of lost social value, and women may turn to physical appearance as means to achieve a variety of goals relating to relationship dissolution and their newly single status.

Marking the end. The communication strategies following the termination of romantic relationships are significant in determining strategies newly-single partners utilize to establish themselves within society (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Through communication and gaining a new perspective, a sense of adjustment can be achieved for each partner signified by feelings of closure, understanding the relationship termination itself, and accepting that the relationship is over (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003).

How does one begin the period of adjustment following the relationship dissolution? After a breakup, several factors can affect the adjustment process for a newly

single individual who must contend with the fact he or she is now, in fact, single. First, how an individual adjusts following the dissolution often depends on how distressed the person is over the breakup (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). For example, a person who was significantly emotionally invested in the romantic relationship and did not want the relationship to end may have a harder time adjusting to their newly single status because he or she is highly distressed about the relationship ending. On the other hand, a person who was already emotionally “checked out” of the relationship prior to the final end of the relationship, or considers the breakup a positive step in his or her life, may adjust much more quickly to being single. Other factors affect the rate and success of each partner’s adjustment; these factors include who initiated the break-up, actual relationship characteristics, and personality differences between the partners as individuals (e.g., Frazier & Cook, 1993; Sprecher et al., 1998). Accepting the end of a romantic relationship and going through the adjustment process to being single can be identified as a turning point.

Turning points within a romantic relationship focus on events that transform the relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). For example, various turning points identified by partners follow the ending of a romantic relationship, including holding on, letting go, moving on, maintaining contact, and romantic reconciliation (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). In terms of nonverbal communication behaviors, physical changes in appearance could be examined and categorized as a reflection of a turning point within a relationship. As related to this research, changing one’s appearance could be viewed as marking a turning point of moving on by the ex-partner, signifying the end of the romantic relationship by also literally “ending” the woman’s appearance style she had during the relationship.

Additionally, as physical appearance cues such as clothing, hair color, and body adornments communicate and symbolize one's personality, a physical change can serve as a symbol of a "new chapter" in the female partner's life. Weitz (2001) identified reasons females engage in changing or cutting their hair, including wanting to spite a boyfriend, to feel more like "themselves," and to feel a sense of power because other men found them attractive. Turning points help ex-partners to understand the change, or end, of the relationships; perhaps changing physically can reflect the internal turning point in an external way.

According to Emmers and Hart (1996), self-enhancement is one of 12 common rituals utilized by individuals as a method of coping following a romantic relationship termination. Types of self-enhancement individuals exhibit following a romantic relationship termination include trying to get into shape, shopping to change a look or image, and changing outer appearance (Emmers & Hart, 1996). Overall, self-enhancement is a common method of coping for both partners in a relationship. Emmers and Hart (1996) found 53% of the "leavers" of the relationship and 55.6% of those "left" participate in self-enhancement following the relationship termination. These methods are a way to protect oneself and deal with the emotional effects of such dissolution. Self-enhancement, therefore, is a type of coping strategy and aid in the adjustment process that serves as a symbol of relational disengagement (Emmers & Hart, 1996). Self-enhancement could often be a part of females' adjusting and coping process because it helps to mark changes associated with the relationship.

Gaining control. Women also might change their appearance after a romantic relationship termination to gain a sense of control. In the context of this research, women

could change their appearance as a way to internally take control of their breakup situation. If a woman felt she lost control of her relationship due to an external force (her partner's choice to end the relationship), she may change her appearance as a way to gain control that was once given to an external source (her partner). Now that she is single, she alone has a say in what she can change with her physical appearance. In other words, a newly single woman could gain a sense of internal control by modifying her external appearance, and in doing so, may feel less distressed because she feels in control of the change. By dealing with the uncertainty and helplessness of the relationship termination by modifying one's external appearance, a female can be "distracted" from her internal emotional issues by the more controllable, obvious external changes. For example, the woman could feel more positive despite her current breakup situation, all because she had her hair professionally styled. Changing one's appearance, therefore, could serve as a "quick fix" for negative feelings associated with the breakup, possibly because she and others can see external physical changes; she chose a tangible sign of control that can offer hope for controlling her internal negative emotions. This experience of increased self-esteem, even if the feelings are temporary, can be helpful when a female experiences emotional pain (McFarquhar & Lewis, 2000).

Goal achievement. Females may utilize their physical appearance to achieve certain conscious, personal goals following the dissolution, as well. In other words, women may turn to their own physical appearance as a medium for enacting vengeful behaviors directed at the ex-partner, such as purposefully changing their appearance to reflect a look their ex-partner did not like; females may also utilize appearance as a way to communicate power and express rebellion (Weitz, 2001; Yoshimura, 2007). Women

may consciously adopt certain hairstyles to gain power by accepting and accommodating American cultural norms of beauty (such as having long, wavy, blonde hair) or resisting the cultural norms that define beauty (such as cutting hair very short or having dreadlocks) (Weitz, 2001). In Weitz's 2001 study, respondent Stacy described how she changed her appearance deliberately in response to her ex-partner's preferences:

My boyfriend...used to say that... what made me attractive was my hair, was so pretty. So I deliberately kind of cut it off, a little bit spitefully, but kind of just to say I'm more than my hair. I felt powerful when I cut my hair off. Like maybe in the sense that I feel that [men] prefer long hair, that I wasn't ruled by that and I could like set my own standards (Weitz, 2001, p. 689).

As explained, females might make physical appearance changes to regain a sense of control and respond to the relationship dissolution; women might perform certain physical appearance changes to communicate a response. However, after dissolution occurs, physical appearance changes could also be an outlet for a female who wants to change her appearance not to mark the end of the relationship, but to mark the beginning of her new role as an independent woman. Thus physical appearance is related to identity, and physical appearance changes could help a woman begin to establish her "new single woman" identity within society.

Establishing a New Single Identity Through Appearance

As stated earlier in this thesis, romantic relationship termination marks the end of one's role as a significant other and the beginning of one's role as a single person in society. A female must establish and contend with her identity as a single woman in

society, but at the same time, she creates a new identity that incorporates her past role as significant other (Ebaugh, 1988). In other words, a woman's identification as "single woman" prior to the romantic relationship probably differs from the woman's identification as a single woman post dissolution due to her new experiences and choices she now must incorporate into this new single identity. Thus, women create both a new and single identity simultaneously following a romantic relationship termination. Physical appearance can serve as one outlet for women to communicate and establish this new single identity. How physical appearance relates to identity will now be explained, followed by a possible explanation of how physical appearance changes could bolster the creation of females' new single identities.

Physical appearance is a communication channel; choices in physical appearance can construct and reflect one's identity or self-concept, which Schouten (1991) defines as "...the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are" (p. 413). Body symbols and adornments are basic foundations for one's self-concept and identity, supporting the role identity of an individual, as well. Today's fashions are not just utilized in the practical sense of keeping warm and appearing appropriate, but as ways in which we communicate self-identity (Mandziuk, 2008; Negrin, 1999). As stated by Negrin (1999), "...self-identity has become equated with one's style of presentation...The modern individual is fashioned and is more interested in the authority of the sign than in the elements it represents" (pp. 112-113).

The specific physical appearance changes a woman makes can create or maintain a specific impression (Schouten, 1991). Research supports the notion that females may turn to physical appearance outlets --clothing, hairstyle, body adornments--in an effort to

transform themselves, as well as communicate group membership (Hallpike, 1969; McAlexander & Schouten, 1989; McCracken, 1996; Weitz, 2001). Females, then, can be strategic in what they choose to wear, including the levels of masculinity or femininity the female wishes to portray. For example, while campaigning during the 2008 presidential election, Hilary Rodham Clinton consistently rejected certain “feminine” fashion choices in lieu of more “masculine” clothing pieces, such as square-shoulder jackets, pantsuits, and less cleavage-baring outfits in an effort to portray a more powerful image. Clinton’s fashion choices helped her to communicate her intentions to be considered a serious candidate for the male-dominated position of United States President (Mandziuk, 2008).

The concept of transformation through the process of a physical appearance makeover also can be appealing in an effort to support a new single identity. According to Ouellette (1999), magazine columns, such as the 1972 *Cosmo* column “So You’re Bored to Death with the Same Old You?,” promote the idea to women that changing their fashion and style can help them construct an entirely new identity. During new role transitions, such as ex-partner to single woman, physical appearance changes can be symbolically important for coping with the new role; people can feel uncomfortable in their new role and often are more likely to use symbols such as physical appearance to reinforce the idea they are confident in the new role and formulate “possible selves” or new identities to fit their new role (McAlexander & Schouten, 1989; Schouten, 1991; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Females can achieve personal goals based solely on appearance changes with little financial investment (Weitz, 2001). For example, a woman whose ex-partner loved

her long hair can simply cut her hair for roughly 30 dollars at a hair salon and as a result, achieve her goal of gaining some independence and control. A newly single woman may want to feel more beautiful, so she may spend 15 dollars at the local pharmacy on cosmetics; the act of putting makeup on her face may give her a new boost of confidence. Physical appearance, therefore, is easy to manipulate because it involves a person's conscious decision and effort to present him or herself; for example, a person's decisions to wear a particular outfit and hairstyle allows him or her to show others externally a certain attitude or personality characteristics simply based on those physical appearance choices. According to Goffman (1959), one's nonverbal presentation of self is an ongoing process; it is easier for an individual to manipulate the expressions one gives than those expressions one gives off. That is, a female can specifically and purposefully utilize cosmetics, hairstyle, clothing, and other physical appearance selections as a way to communicate her personal identity; these conscious choices are easier to manipulate and make versus her actual emotional expression. This function can be key in a situation in which a woman attempts to establish or cement her new single identity.

More importantly, females' changes in appearance could reinforce the idea to themselves that they are comfortable taking on the "single" role and have a new look to prove that they are fine being single. Physical appearance changes could reinforce the message to women intrapersonally every time they look in the mirror, "I am single; I am fine. I have a new look to prove it."

Summary and Research Questions

As research indicates, romantic relationship termination is a difficult process in which individuals exit the role as one's significant other and negotiate a new single identity within society. Earlier, the woman and her partner would have experienced romantic escalation, which involves the romantic dyad developing an identity centered on the romantic relationship. When this identity is lost, a woman must negotiate a new single identity and establish a new role within society, often exiting other social groups due to the disassociation with her partner or lack of things in common because of her new single status.

Although romantic relationship termination can be a highly emotional event, females who negotiate a new single identity can face even more turmoil due to the negative meanings associated with singleness in American culture. Women are often highly aware of the stigma surrounding singleness, but desire social acceptance. Women's feelings of stigma could affect how they create and manage their new identity as single women, especially because romantic relationships have societal value. It becomes necessary to overcome negative societal meanings when creating single identities females can accept positively.

Real-life narratives provide insight into the internalization of society's stigmatization of singleness (Byrne, 2000; Weitz, 2001). Combined with research identifying how romantic relationships affect female identity, as well as how role exit allows for the creation of a new identity, there is ample evidence to suggest that the behaviors exhibited by single women are often the result of socially constructed meanings assigned to singleness. Further research is necessary to explore the ways in

which single women establish new identities following romantic relationship termination amidst emotional turmoil and the social stigma of singleness.

Because both romantic relationship status and female physical appearance are of high priority within American culture, it is valuable to examine whether physical appearance changes are methods of coping used after relationship termination; this examination can potentially provide insight into the coping and adjustment process following relationship dissolution and possibly identify new outlets females specifically turn to when attempting to adjust to their newly single status. Most current research examines romantic relationship dissolution in terms of the communication strategies used to terminate the relationship; understanding how nonverbal communicative strategies are utilized as a response to relationship termination will help to provide a more complete understanding of the post-dissolution adjustment process.

A qualitative study is proposed explore females' conscious and deliberate physical appearance changes exhibited following a romantic relationship termination to uncover their possible meaning and the factors influencing these decisions. Two research questions are identified for the desired study:

- RQ1: What are the motives women mention for making physical appearance changes post relational dissolution?
- RQ2: What are the outcomes of women's physical appearance changes post relational dissolution?

Overall romantic relationship termination is often a hurtful experience that tests the communication and coping skills of both partners. Physical appearance is an important part of individuals' self-concept and identity that communicates their comfort

and role identity. Women's romantic relationship status and physical appearance are valued by society, as communicated through marketing and advertising through media outlets including the Internet, television, and magazines. Both relational status and appearance play an important role in many women's lives, as well. Studying women's perceptions of the relationship between romantic relationship termination and physical appearance changes can benefit a better understanding of interpersonal, nonverbal, and gender communication areas of study.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter focuses on the research methods used for this study. First, a discussion of the benefits of the qualitative interview research method is provided. Second, participant demographics and how they were obtained are discussed. Third, a description of the interview and analysis procedures performed is given.

Benefits of a Qualitative Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research approach utilizing in-depth interviews with single females via computer-mediated communication was used. Qualitative research methods offered advantages in comparison to quantitative research methods due to the focus of this study: the potential meaning making of participants' appearance changes post-dissolution. People attribute meaning to the social interactions and behaviors exhibited in their everyday lives (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). By utilizing qualitative research methods, the researcher can better understand how respondents' view and associate meaning to create their world (Patton, 1990). Quantitative methods, on the other hand, generally use standardized measures so respondents' perspectives and experiences are reduced to predetermined response selections that are converted into numerical data (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research methods can elicit a wealth of detailed information because participants describe their experiences in their own words (Patton, 1990). Additionally, a requirement of qualitative research methods is that the researcher read, analyze, and reflect on responses in order to find the meaning, unlike quantitative

research, where the numbers speak for themselves (Hunter, Lusardi, Zucker, Jacelon, & Chandler, 2002).

Although quantitative research leads to more generalizable results, qualitative research is able to discover the meanings people associate with their behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Though quantitative methods could reflect such information as frequency, types, and amounts of physical appearance changes chosen by participants following romantic relationship termination, these aspects are not the aim of this research. The study attempts to understand the reasoning behind possible physical appearance changes, and it is probable that quantitative methods could not uncover as clearly when and why females made certain physical appearance changes. Such choices require explanation by the participants themselves, in their own words, in order for the researcher to better understand participants' thought processes.

The subject matter examined in this study also aligns itself better with qualitative methods than quantitative methods because of its highly personal and individualistic nature. Romantic relationship termination often inspires complicated and deep emotions felt by an individual. These emotions must be explained by the participant for the researcher to garner complete understanding. As stated by Taylor and Bogdan (1984),

“When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society. We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, and love, whose essence is lost through other research approaches.” (p. 7)

Because the emotions involved and reasons for behaviors following romantic relationship termination are unique and personal, such behaviors and emotions are also

more difficult to generalize, which is the aim of quantitative research. Rather, it is best to gain rich descriptions of the participants' experiences from the participants themselves, which is the aim of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Additionally, areas that have received little study—such as the focus of this thesis—are best studied initially through qualitative research methods. Shank (2002) uses two metaphors to explain why qualitative research is a solid approach to utilize when focusing on understudied areas of research. In quantitative research, the researcher “sees” the research subject matter through a window, looking in from the outside, identifying how the window is flawed (to identify error), and correcting for smudges (to avoid bias). In qualitative research, the researcher uses a lantern to “see” the subject matter, thus “shedding light in dark corners” (Shank, 2002, p. 11). Qualitative research finds “...meaning where no meaning has been clearly understood before” (Shank, 2002, p. 11).

Interviewing

One method of qualitative research is the interview, an adaptable, flexible, and dynamic method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), “Qualitative researchers interview people to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve their experiences from the past... to understand sensitive relationships, and to create a record of discourse that can subsequently be analyzed” (pp. 4-5). Because of their adaptability, interviews allow the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences through the participants' own words. The interviewer encourages participants to tell stories of their own experiences, and through analysis of

participants' direct statements, the researcher can gain a deeper sense of understanding (Patton, 1990).

Open-ended interview questions, or questions that require the respondent to answer in his or her own words, were used in this study to gain such perspective. According to Patton (1990), using participant responses to open-ended interview questions allows the researcher "to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories" (p. 24). Direct answers to open-ended questions are then considered raw data for the qualitative study and reflect participants' emotions and organization of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (Patton, 1990).

According to Fontana and Frey (1994), there are several types of interview formats. Structured interviews involve the interviewer asking each respondent pre-established questions; the participants then answer based on a limited set of response categories. Structured interviewing allows for very little flexibility or spontaneity, and the interviewer must not respond personally or divert from the structured question format. Group interviewing takes place when an interviewer asks a series of questions to a number of respondents at the same time; the format can be either structured or unstructured, depending on the purpose of the interview. Unstructured interviewing's primary purpose is to gain understanding; it allows for a great breadth in the types of responses it elicits; the traditional type of unstructured interviewing is the in-depth interview. Unstructured interviewing is "used in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366). Interviewers must establish

adequate rapport with participants in order to garner a strong sense of understanding; interviewers also must be able to display empathy and see the situation from the participants' point of view (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

For the purposes of this study, the researcher used a semi-structured, open-ended interview question format. This approach allowed the researcher to determine questions in advance, but also the freedom to ask un-predetermined questions based on the various responses given by participants. This format ensured a solid foundation of consistency and coherence in regards to the concepts and topics covered by the researcher and the participants, yet the flexibility to ask additional questions unique to participants' responses to allow for more complete understanding by the researcher. These additional questions were deemed "probing questions," or questions that call for richer explanation, deeper understanding, and detailed answers by the participants following the initial response (Patton, 1990).

Participants

Participants were obtained through a convenience sample of female students from a mid-sized Midwestern university, as well as females who responded to an advertisement and event profile placed on the online social networking site Facebook.com. Selection of participants was based on a variety of criteria. First, as this study focuses solely on the female perspective following romantic relationship termination, participants must have identified themselves as female. Second, participants must have identified the terminated romantic relationship as a relationship in which she was significantly, emotionally invested. This requirement aligns with this study's focus

on romantic relationships that have effort invested by one or both partners; people are often affected on a deeper level by the termination of relationships experiences in which they were invested comparison to the termination of a more casual “fling-like” romantic relationship, and female responses to a more significant termination are the focus of this study. Third, since interviews were conducted using an online chat service selected by each participant, participants must have had access to their preferred online chat service. Fourth, because this study focuses on the social construction of meanings within American culture, all participants had to be residents of the United States. Finally, participants had to be at least 18 years old. Additionally, because this study focused on identifying the motives and outcomes of females who made physical appearance changes following a romantic relationship termination, participants must have actually made physical appearance changes post-dissolution.

Procedures

The use of computer-mediated communication technologies is fast-growing; the Internet’s highly available nature has made technology an everyday part of people’s lives through the use of numerous mediums, including personal blogs, social networking sites, online forums, and dating websites (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Joinson, 2001). The increase in computer-mediated communication (CMC) benefits communication research because CMC allows participants to maintain anonymity. Because participants do not have to see a researcher face-to-face, they may feel more comfortable disclosing personal information without fear of being judged or embarrassed. Therefore, due to a potential increased comfort level of participants, researchers may gain deeper, richer

responses and an expanded understanding of participants' experiences with sensitive topics, such as romantic relationship termination (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). The following sections will now discuss a) the interview setting, b) recruiting of participants, and c) the interview schedule.

Interviews for this research were conducted utilizing free synchronous Internet text-based chat services. Participants indicated which chat program they preferred to use for the interview from a list of free chat services e-mailed to them by the researcher (Appendix E). Options included AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Facebook Chat, Apple iChat, Google Talk (Gchat), Skype, Yahoo! Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, and Other, which represented any unlisted chat program. Participants informed the researcher of their desired program when they replied via e-mail to the electronic informed consent form (Appendix B).

To provide complete understanding of these chat services, the technological characteristics of these synchronous programs will now be briefly explained. Justifications for the researcher's choice to use computer-mediated communication will also be provided, as well as drawbacks to computer-mediated communication and benefits of interviewing through the Internet.

The chat programs utilized in this study are synchronous. People can chat directly with one another via the Internet and receive responses in real time. Additionally, the programs are text-based; the researcher and participants communicated one-on-one through exchanging messages in a text-box chat window. The programs are mutually exclusive, which means individuals utilizing a specific chat program can only communicate with others utilizing the same chat program. Finally, the pre-selected

programs are free of cost. In comparison to the nature of face-to-face (FtF) communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC) does have unique limitations. One main drawback of CMC is its reduced nonverbal communication cues (Kindred & Roper, 2004). With fewer nonverbal communication cues, the researcher could misinterpret participants' response due to lack of vocal tone or facial expression; a person's social cues, including intended silences and gestures, are overall absent in online settings (Culnan & Markus, 1987).

To overcome CMC's limited nonverbal cues, Kindred and Roper (2004) found people often utilize emoticons (e.g. ☺, ☹) and emotext (e.g., *smile*, LOL). The ability to type these nonverbal cues can provide interpersonal insight and prevent misunderstandings. Additionally, reduced nonverbal cues may lead to increased intimacy and intimate self-disclosures (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). This is because participants may feel anonymous and less judged by a person; they do not have to see the nonverbal responses a person might give that could make a participant feel embarrassed, for a decreased sense of social presence allows for less bias to be formed (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998).

The present study's researcher chose to use CMC technologies to conduct interviews for several reasons. According to Shiu and Lenhart (2004), 53 million American adults use instant messaging chat services; both men and women equally use these services. Instant messenger services have even expanded to the workplace; 11 million people use instant messenger services at work (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). With this expansion in technology and CMC use, communication research methods should also reflect this advancement. According to Kazmer and Xie (2008), the likelihood increases

that researchers will use internet technologies, including services such as e-mail and instant messaging, as means to conduct qualitative research. This research, then, is current with the growth of communication research and utilizing CMC for data collection.

As stated earlier, the researcher created announcements that were made in college classrooms as a method to recruit participants, thus increasing the chance that potential participants for this study would be college students. Using CMC as part of the methods for this study, then, aligns well with such a targeted college demographic. For example, Shiu and Lehgart (2004) found that 75% of young adults ages 18 through 24 have a profile on a social networking site. Additionally, college students prefer instant messaging services in comparison to more traditional communication methods, such as the telephone or face-to-face conversations (Kindred & Roper, 2004).

The researcher also chose to use CMC technologies to conduct interviews to increase participants' comfort and ease while disclosing highly sensitive and personal information. Research has found people make more intimate self-disclosures in CMC than FtF interactions (Tidwell & Walther, 2002); a decreased sense of physical presence can encourage participants to disclose more sensitive information, which improves the quality and accuracy of data (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). Data quality may also be improved because of the online interviewing's unique self-transcribing chat feature, which allows the interaction to be double-documented on both the interviewer and interviewee's computers; this chat logging feature could prevent the loss of interview documentation due to technical difficulties (Curasi 2001; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Because of the conversational, synchronous nature of instant messaging, the interview itself

closely resembles an oral interview (Kazmer & Xie, 2008), and also remains private in nature because the interviewer and participant do not share a physical space; this privacy can allow each person to remain in a safe and comfortable environment (Mann & Stewart, 2002; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998).

Recruiting Participants

In-Class Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited through announcements made in communication courses at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Instructors received an announcement (Appendix A) that was read to students describing the purpose of this research; instructors also received an e-mail (Appendix D) containing an electronic informed consent form (Appendix B) to send to students. This form described the purpose and goals of the research, as well as the procedures to be used in this study. Participants were also informed of the risks and benefits to participating in this research; the informed consent form also outlined the researcher's steps to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participant. The participant was informed that her name and transcript will be kept confidential and she could terminate the interview at any time, as well as refuse to answer any questions without fear of penalty. Instructors who offered an extra credit option for those who participated in the study were also encouraged to offer an alternative way for those who cannot or do not wish to participate in the study to earn extra credit of the same value.

Online Recruitment

In addition to in-class recruitment, the researcher also purchased an advertisement (Appendix G) and created a public event profile describing this research study on the online social networking site Facebook.com to recruit participants. Because of Facebook's advertising tools, the researcher could select the advertisement to target the Facebook profiles of females 18 and older for a time period of two weeks. After the researcher purchased the advertisement and created the public event page describing the study, the advertisement was displayed on the Facebook profiles of those who met the targeted demographic. Upon viewing the advertisement, interested females could click on the advertisement, which then linked to the open Facebook event page (Appendix H). Additionally, the researcher created a digital video clip which featured the researcher describing the purpose of this study and participation requirements; the video clip was then posted to the video-sharing website Youtube.com, as well as posted to the Facebook event page for interested females to view. Because the researcher made the Facebook event page and digital video clip detailing the research study entirely open to the public, participants could learn about the event without necessarily viewing the advertisement. Once exposed to the Facebook advertisement, the Facebook event page, or the digital video, these interested participants were encouraged to message the researcher.

Upon receiving a message from an interested participant, the researcher then sent an informed consent form (Appendix B) to interested participants electronically. Because this study was conducted through computer-mediated communication, no actual participant signatures were obtained on the consent forms. Instead, the participants were asked to reply via e-mail to the electronic informed consent form by typing their name;

this reply served as a substitute for an actual signature and provided their informed consent.

Once the participant gave her consent, the researcher and participant scheduled a convenient interview time and preferred chat program for the interview to take place (Appendix E). The participant was also asked to select a pseudonym to maintain her privacy. Additionally, the participant was asked to identify any individuals she felt met the criteria and who would also be interested in participating in this study; this step allowed the researcher to create a network sample to gain more participants. However, only one participant suggested an individual who may want to participate; therefore, all participants for this study were recruited via self-selection rather than by referral from a previous participant.

Upon full completion of the interviews and data analysis, the present study's researcher sent a confirmation of completion e-mail (Appendix F) to each participant; this confirmed that the participant completed the interview process and her name was placed into a drawing to win one \$50 Amazon.com gift certificate. The confirmation e-mail also allowed participants to individually confirm their participation in the study to instructors in order to receive extra credit, if offered. Once all data were collected, the researcher randomly selected one participant e-mail address; the \$50 electronic Amazon gift certificate was then sent to the selected e-mail address.

Interview Schedule

The interview (Appendix C) began with warm-up questions; the purpose of warm-up questions is to gain participant demographic information as well as to establish

rapport between the researcher and the interviewee. Building rapport is an important act for qualitative interviewing, and can occur through computer-mediated communication (Baym, 1995). The warm-up questions elicited participant information such as age and relationship status, and may have helped the interviewee to become comfortable with the computer-mediated communication interview process.

Following the basic demographic questions, the researcher asked additional broad warm-up questions uncovering details about participants' romantic relationship (How long had you been in the relationship? Who initiated the breakup? What was the reason for the breakup?). These questions were designed to reflect conversation between friends, again, as a way to establish rapport as well as create a casual tone that could put the participants at ease. As stated by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), "...most qualitative interviews take on the form and feel of talk between friends: loose, interactive and open-ended" (p. 170).

Following the broad romantic relationship termination history questions, the interview focused on the participant's romantic relationship termination that affected her significantly; the general and personal juxtaposition of questions allowed for continuous rapport building. Following this discussion, the researcher asked participants to discuss changes (focusing more on physical appearance changes, if these changes were made) participants exhibited following romantic relationship termination. This topic required a great deal of self-disclosure and explanation by participants; this set of questions was the last part of the interview, by which time rapport was established. The focused questions specifically related to the research questions, while probing questions helped the researcher to have a more deep and complete understanding of the details involving

participants' possible choices in making changes following romantic relationship termination.

The researcher closed the interview by allowing participants to ask the researcher any questions regarding the interview process. This step ensured a more complete interview in which confusion could be cleared or questions explained. Following each interview, the immediate transcript of the interview was saved as a Microsoft Word file and participants' screen names were replaced with their selected pseudonyms. The researcher then saved each transcript to a specific flash drive used only for this research study and stored in a secure location. Any reference to personal contact information, including names of participant's ex-partners, was removed to protect privacy. Analysis of the data will now be discussed.

Theme Generation

Though there are many ways to analyze participants' commentary about their experiences (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), the generation of themes is one process often used in qualitative research (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998). Themes are "recurrent patterns that run through a text much as musical themes are melodic subjects embedded in musical compositions" (Stone, 1997, p. 36). The word "theme" is used in a general way for analyzing patterns in a text (Stone, 1997), and can describe and organize possible observations, as well as interpret aspects of phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998). A theme may be identified at two levels: the *manifest* level, or themes directly observable in the information, and the *latent* level, or those themes that underlie the phenomenon or behavior that is the focus of study (Boyatzis, 1998). Examples of units and patterns that

establish themes include "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p.131). As outlined by Stone (1997), thematic analysis becomes "especially worthwhile when used to ...make non-obvious but valid inferences" (p. 39). Thematic analysis is beneficial in gaining a better understanding of why physical appearance changes are made by females following romantic relationship termination.

Thematic analysis is a unique part of the methodological process because, as Boyatzis (1998) states, "Thematic analysis is a way of seeing. Often what one sees through thematic analysis does not appear to others, even if they are observing the same information, events, or situations" (pp. 4-5). During thematic analysis, the researcher recognizes patterns within the transcriptions of participants' commentary (Boyatzis, 1998).

According to Aronson (1994), the first step to thematic analysis is to collect the data; patterns or themes of experiences can come from direct quotations or paraphrasing of ideas found in the transcribed interviews. Polkinghorne (1983) states the purpose of the researcher's initial reading of a transcript is to gain understanding of certain ideas or concepts within the text. The next step to thematic analysis is for the researcher to read the transcript a second time and combine and organize related patterns into sub-themes; often it is easy to see patterns emerge during the collection of sub-themes (Aronson, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983). A third reading of the transcript helps to finalize themes and reduce redundancies; the researcher must also build a valid argument for choosing themes by referring to related literature (Aronson, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983). Finally, the researcher draws conclusions based on the identified themes.

Data Analysis

To identify consistent and clear themes as highlighted by the process described above, the researcher read the transcripts several times for clarity and understanding. Following multiple readings, the researcher then digitally highlighted passages of interest from each participant's electronic transcripts as related to the research questions. Participants' passages were then digitally highlighted with a different color; for example, any passage of interest from participant Alice's commentary was highlighted in pink; any passage of interest from participant Barbara's transcript was highlighted in red, and so on.

After identifying specific passages of interest from each of the 17 transcripts, the researcher then digitally copied each of the highlighted passages of interest and sorted the passages into categories in a separate Microsoft Word document; at the top of the document, the researcher typed a key that identified each color with its corresponding participant. The researcher decided to assign a separate color for each participant because the different colors served as a quick, efficient way for the researcher to visualize the number of participants who provided similar responses or themes within their commentary; the researcher operated under the notion that the more variety of colors under a category heading, the stronger the theme.

To identify categories and sort passages these categories, the researcher organized each passage of interest based on commentary relevant to the research questions, the significance of response, or the amount of times a similar idea was conveyed by participants. After the readings, 11 categories were identified: moving on and doing well, affecting internal emotions through external appearance, control, awareness of others'

judgment, reclaiming independence, feeling like “me,” creation of identity, increase in confidence/happiness, rebellion, distraction, and attention from ex-partner.

After the researcher established the categories and identified recurring themes, the researcher once again read through the data several times. Following the readings, the researcher was able to collapse/combine particular categories (e.g., feeling like “me” and creation of identity) to identify seven central themes specific to each of the two research questions. In response to the first research question, the following themes were identified: communicating well-being, gaining control, increasing independence, and managing identity; three themes were identified in response to the second research question: increase in confidence, newfound sense of self-identity, and reinforcement of independence. These themes will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Summary

Qualitative research is an appropriate method utilized for this research; this method is more appropriate than quantitative methods for this study because it focuses on establishing deep understanding and meaning from participants. Qualitative interviewing about physical appearance changes following romantic relationship termination is a solid method for the researcher to gain insight directly from participants. Rapport was created through the use of broad and probing questions in a comfortable environment via computer-mediated communication. This method also elicited answers that revealed meaning, which is the focus of this study. High data quality was maintained through the immediate transcription of participants’ responses.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS

This chapter focuses on the data analysis resulting from the researcher's qualitative interviews. Seventeen females participated in moderately scheduled interviews using online chat programs; participants' ages ranged from 18 to 36 years old. Thirteen participants were from Michigan, one was from Ohio, one was from Pennsylvania, one was from Washington, and one was from Wyoming. Seven participants described their current relationship status as being in a relationship, while nine participants described their current relationship status as single; one participant stated she was currently in the process of breaking up with her partner. From the nature of participant commentaries, the researcher assumed all participants described romantic relationship terminations between a man and a woman; the researcher did not ask specifically whether a participant's ex-partner was a man or a woman. Sixteen participants described dating relationships; one participant described the termination of a marital relationship.

As described earlier, the researcher used a thematic analysis after multiple transcript readings to reveal themes related to the two research questions posed at the end of the literature review section. The following sections identify and discuss these themes as related to each research question. The first section discusses participants' responses concerning their motives for making physical appearance changes after romantic relationship dissolution. The second section discusses actual outcomes resulting from physical appearance changes participants made post-dissolution. Both sections provide participants' supporting commentary as related to each research question. When

highlighting participant commentary in describing each theme, the researcher chose not to change spelling or grammatical errors in order to preserve the integrity of the interviews conducted. Because the researcher used several different online chat programs when interviewing participants, the researcher's identification or screen name may vary; this identification reflects a different online chat program was used for that particular interview.

Motives

Collectively, participants made a variety of physical appearance changes post-dissolution, including change in hair color, change in hair style (e.g., large amount of length cut off, getting bangs), getting a new tattoo, getting nails done, going to a tanning salon, and wearing a new style of clothes (e.g., dressing more professionally, femininely, or as a "hipster"). Participants also stated they lost weight, though six participants specified that the weight loss was not intentional, but rather the result of a lack of appetite following the breakup. However, five participants stated they become consciously dedicated to increased exercise following the breakup. The first research question the researcher posed for this study involved females' motives for changing their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination.

Participants identified motives for making a change or several changes to their appearance following the relationship termination. Four themes emerged from the researcher's analysis of the interview transcripts: communicating well-being, gaining control, increasing independence, and managing identity. These themes will be individually discussed next.

Communicating Well-Being

The researcher identified a recurring theme of participants' desire to communicate well-being as a motive for changing their physical appearance following a termination. By appearing put-together on the outside, reinforced by changes made to their physical appearance, a participant could nonverbally communicate to others she was not heartbroken over the breakup and would not "let myself go," a phrase used similarly by two participants. Participant Barbara described how she "began to look more presentable" following the romantic relationship termination by losing weight, going to the gym, dressing better, and wearing more makeup in order to communicate her well-being to others:

- Barbara:** I felt it showed I was taking care of myself and that although I had recently had a break up, I was still being positive. I think it showed I still cared about myself, which I wanted people around me to know.
- Barbara:** ... I felt it communicated that I'm not going to let the break up harm me emotionally.

Reese also explained how deliberate weight loss due to a newfound dedication to going to the gym and getting caramel colored highlights to her hair post-dissolution was a way to communicate to others she was taking care of herself. The new changes could show she had a positive attitude despite the sadness she may have felt due to the breakup:

- Reese:** I think it [physical appearance changes] communicates to them too that I care about myself enough to not let this break up affect me in a negative way to the point where I am actually depressed and self-harming myself though negative thoughts.
- Reese:** ...I think because some people they stay in that sad state of when they have a break up and I realized I didn't want to be like that. I knew that ultimately, it's up to ourselves if we are happy or not. I can choose to be sad, or I can choose to be happy...

Several participants described how they wanted to communicate their well-being following the romantic relationship termination not only to others in general, but to their ex-partners specifically. A consistent message participants wished to send to their ex-partners through physical appearance changes was that they are better off without the ex-partner, or, as stated by a participant, “It’s his loss, not mine.” Four of the participants stated that by changing their appearance, they wanted to make sure their ex-partners knew what “he was missing out on.” For example, a participant described how her ex-boyfriend commented positively on her physical appearance changes and she thought, “Haha, yeah, and you dumped me.” Following her romantic relationship termination, participant Brooklyn got a tattoo and trimmed her long, wavy blonde hair, as well as adding bangs and heavy-duty layers to her hairstyle, in order to show her ex-partner what he was missing:

Brooklyn: i was making sure he knew he was the one who lost the best thing he had... his best friend. he looked like shit when i went to talk with him after the initial emotional explosion so i felt even better about myself lol

Though some participants wanted their physical appearance changes simply to show their ex-partners what they were missing out on, others had another goal in mind: they wanted their physical appearance changes to serve as a strategic reminder of what their ex-partners were missing out on in order to potentially inspire desires within the ex-partners to get back together. Marie stated that after her boyfriend of 23 months broke up with her, “I did a 180 on my appearance” by cutting her hair the shortest it has ever been --just below her ear-- and dyeing her hair a dark shade of brown. She described her desire for these physical appearance changes to spark interest in her ex-partner:

Marie: With [ex-boyfriend], part of it was my need to show him that this is what he was missing out on and giving up

Researcher: ...So you wanted your external appearance to reflect a message to him that you were okay?

Marie: Yeah, I knew that he would never want me back if I were a disaster

Researcher: So did you want him to want you back because of the changes?

Marie: I wanted him to see that I could be better for him and try and be what he wanted
I felt like I failed when we broke up, so in my mind, I had to prove to him that I could be his perfect girl

Researcher: ...Did he notice the changes?

Marie: He did, he commented on them, but it didn't really matter
It was ok though, just that he noticed was enough for me
...As long as I wasn't invisible, he couldn't forget me.

Similarly, Lexi also wanted to spark a new interest in her ex-boyfriend through a change in hair color. Lexi stated she would dye her hair dark brown every time she and her boyfriend broke up because she preferred her hair dark. But once the couple got back together, Lexi would highlight her hair, which is what her ex-boyfriend preferred. Lexi stated she participated in this process --dyeing her hair dark when she and her boyfriend broke up, then highlighting it when they got back together--at least six times. When asked why she would dye her hair dark after her ex-boyfriend and she broke up, Lexi explained:

Lexi: because then i remembered how hot i was and how he felt cool because he had a good looking gf and that he realized my personality was great and that maybe its important to be in a relationship bcuz you love someone not bcuz it isnt fresh

Lexi: i think that was the problem
he alwasy wanted something fresh.. so when he'd break up with me id get fresh i guess

These commentaries highlight how participants wanted their new “fresh” look to inspire their ex-partners to feel fresh feelings for them. Yet some participants did not

want their new looks to get their ex-partners back; they wanted their new looks to inspire their ex-partners to move on. For example, Alice, who cut her hair after the breakup, stated:

Alice: He had planned on being with me forever and I had always been the more confident, sure person in the relationship (in general) so I guess by me being like 'hey - look I'm sad but fine!' I was hoping he could do the same.

Barbara also described how she wanted her physical appearance changes to inspire her ex-partner's healing process. She stated, "I also wanted him to know that I was okay, so that he could detach himself from me. It was hard on me to see him down, I didn't want him to see me that way."

By changing their physical appearance, participants wished to convey a message to others that they were doing well. Their new looks could help bolster the notion that if they could still look good and keep themselves together on the outside, then perhaps they were doing well on the inside despite their romantic relationship termination. Their physical changes could also communicate their well-being to their ex-partner specifically, and by communicating their well-being, participants could also show their ex-partners what they are missing out on, what they could have once again, or that they needed to move on. By making physical appearance changes, participants could also gain a sense of control.

Gaining Control

A second motive for changing one's physical appearance after a relationship termination, according to participants, was a desire to gain a sense of control. When dissolution occurs, an ex-partner can feel a lack of control, especially if he or she was not

the one who initiated the breakup. Thus by taking control of their physical appearance and making changes, participants could regain that lost sense of control by showing themselves whenever they look in the mirror that they are, in fact, in control of something; their sense of external control could affect their internal sense of control. As one participant stated, "I took control of the only things I could change." Mary, who cut her hair following a romantic relationship termination, further discussed the concept of gaining a sense of control through her external appearance:

Mary: Well, it obviously can be very hard to change your emotions, and at times your physical attributes. The only things we have control over would be our hair, nails, ears (piercings), skin (tattoos). If I want to feel and see a change right away, especially during a sad or emotional time that might take a while to be done and heal, I will either cut my hair or color it.

Mary: It's almost like a segway into healing.

Researcher: ...How does changing your outside affect how you heal on the inside?

Mary: ll, segue*

Mary: Well, naturally we cannot physically see our emotions, so it is hard to gauge where we are in the healing process. It takes a lot of looking inward to know for sure where we are, emotionally and mentally. And it may be very hard, especially after a difficult breakup, to look inward because it hurts so much. It is so much easier to change your outside appearance. Most people, including me, feel powerless after breakup. And the only thing you can really have power over is your body.

I guess it makes us feel powerful..

Researcher: ... Describe your feeling of power. Power over what? who?

Mary: Maybe, power over my emotions.

Kate also described her attempt to take control by changing what she could control; she cut her blonde hair and dyed it dark after she learned her ex-boyfriend cheated on her with her best friend. Kate described her attempt to affect her internal emotions by gaining control through her external appearance:

- Kate:** ...Then by cutting it [hair], I was getting rid of metaphorical weight and starting over. Kind of a fresh start - cutting away all the bad parts for a new beginning
- Kate:** ...That was my train of thought - it didn't work too well, and I was still sad, but as long as I took some form of action (whether it was appearance based or internal) I felt better.
- Kate:** ...I was devastated, and the only thing that I could control and change seemed to be my appearance...

Other participants described how, once they recognized their appearance as a way to reflect their control, making physical appearance changes could also serve as a distraction from what they could not control. Rather than focusing on the breakup, they could focus on their new physical appearance changes, which could replace the negative feelings towards the breakup with positive feelings about their appearance. Alice described how focusing on something she was in control of --cutting her hair-- distracted her from the potentially sad emotions as a result of the breakup:

- Alice:** I was really just trying to give myself a little something to be excited about (I LOVE getting my hair cut/changed).. so regardless of being bummed out about something that was somewhat out of my control I was able to be super excited about my new hair. I think not changing it would have left me in a bit of a dull... lull (haha)

Reese similarly described how gaining a sense of control through her physical appearance changes also changed her attitude towards a romantic relationship termination. After Reese's breakup with her on again/off again boyfriend of three and a half years, Reese made a resolution to lose weight every year, but said she never stuck to it. Following the breakup, however, she "put the goal in motion" and lost roughly 10 pounds. Reese described her experience further:

- CMRschr:** ...you mentioned you set a goal every year of trying to lose weight. What was it about the breakup that had you stick to the goal more consistently?

Reese: Oh, I don't know. I think because I didn't know any other way with how to deal with it. I knew I couldn't control whether he wanted to stay together or break up, but this weight loss, I could control. I knew I NEEDED a change... If I couldn't change the situation, then I had to change how I looked at it. And I knew if I started working out and losing weight, I would feel better about myself, see myself in a different light and not worry so much about him

Taking control of what could be controlled describes the second theme several participants identify as a motive for changing their physical appearance post relational-dissolution. Many participants used the actual word “control” and described how their physical appearance was one of the things they turned to and viewed as something over which they were in control. By making the decision to change their appearance in some way, participants could regain a sense of control they may have lost when their relationship ended. Along with gaining control, participants also wanted to reflect a sense of independence, the third theme concerning females’ motives for making physical appearance changes post-dissolution.

Increasing Independence

When two people enter into a romantic relationship dyad, the decision-making process for the individuals can change. Though it depends on the relationship norms and rules each dyad establishes within that relationship, individuals in romantic relationships generally want to make decisions that are not only best for them, but also best for their partner and the relationship. Now in a relationship, each partner often makes decisions while taking their partner into consideration. This can include decisions about where to live, what to do on a Friday night, or what to wear. In this study, for example, nine

participants openly described how they considered their partner's preferences or individual style when making decisions regarding their own physical appearance. Participant Brooklyn said she knew her boyfriend preferred long hair, so she never cut it in the year that they dated. Similarly, participant Maida wanted to dye her blonde hair red, but never did because her boyfriend "always said red hair reminded him of his sister, so obviously I didn't really want to dye it while I was with him."

Several participants described how they felt they no longer had to take that partner into consideration when making decisions once the romantic relationship ended; they were now single, and thus could make decisions that they alone preferred. Because they now could make independent decisions, participants wanted to reflect that independence, and making physical appearance changes that they alone wanted to make was an adequate outlet to do so. Several participants wanted to be clear they made the physical appearance changes only for themselves, with comments such as, "I did it only for me though," "I guess these changes were just, something I wanted to do for myself," and "I was doing this for me, rather than for him." Post-dissolution, Brooklyn's decision to get a tattoo and haircut reflected her independence from her ex-partner and her decision to do something for herself. As she described:

CMRschr: ...How did the breakup affect your decision to get this tattoo?

Brooklyn: i just went for it...with out this "partner" i had before who i made decisions with, i had room to make my own decisions regardless of what he thought. my boyfriend was never controlling, but i had a feeling before that i should get his approval for certain things or i would consider what he thought

Brooklyn: ...when i got my hair cut, i was by a salon and figured that id see if they took walk-in appts... they did so i stayed. i had the urge and i went with it. i didnt have thoughts of "hmm, i wanna know what he thinks about this..." it was

just my choice to make and i didnt worry about what he would think. so although thoughts of cutting my hair had crossed my mind previously, i didnt have his voice telling me not too

CMResrchr: How did it feel, to not have his voice telling you not to?

Brooklyn: it was a weight lifted. he was never controlling but i wanted to please him, so not thinking twice was reckless (this word might be too extreme... lol) almost but i needed it to reclaim my independence. it was to the point in our relationship where ppl, our friends, saw us as one.

Jessie, who changed her brown, shoulder-length hair to a short, two-toned, asymmetrical style the day after her boyfriend broke up with her, stated, “not changing my hair was not an option.” She described how she felt the need to reflect her independence through her decisions regarding her physical appearance:

Jessie: i felt like i needed to do something for myself that i really wanted to do. i kept my hair long and tried to grow it out while i was with him mainly because i thought he'd like that better. i think that's normal to do for your significant other. i mean i always want to be myself and do what makes me feel good about myself...what makes me feel comfortable, but if my boyfriend likes my hair long i definitely take that in consideration... so that's part of the reason i kept it longer while we were together, yes. and when we broke up that part didn't matter anymore, and i was able to do something for myself, to make me feel new...and different....

Jessie: ...also it was something i had been wanting to do for a long time but never did out of consideration for [ex-boyfriend]...thinking he would probably hate it and that simply didn't matter anymore

Similarly, Maida, as described earlier, always wanted to dye her hair red, but had refrained due to her boyfriend's preferences. Post-dissolution, she felt the freedom to make the decision to dye her hair the way she had always wanted because her boyfriend's preferences no longer mattered:

Maida: I just wanted to try it out so badly, and not having to think "ugh, my boyfriend is going to see me with red hair and think of his SISTER..." was all the go ahead I needed to make the change for myself.

Several participants changed their appearance in order to reflect their independence by consciously making physical appearance changes that were not only something they wanted to do, but also the changes were the exact opposite of their ex-partner's physical appearance preferences. This also could give them a sense of control as well as an increased sense of disassociation from the relationship. Participant Lynn described how her physical appearance changes post-dissolution were a form of rebellion against her ex-partner's wishes:

Lynn: ... the guy I had casually dated loved my hair long and he actually dared to ask me to promise never to cut when he broke up with me by telling me he was gay...I couldn't let him think he could control me, so I chopped it off!

Samantha also made conscious decisions to go tanning and dye her hair black following her romantic relationship termination in opposition to her ex-boyfriend's preferences:

Samantha: i was cheating for about the last 3 months of our relationship, thats when i met my boyfriend, it was then that i decided i cared more about myself, so i did everything i wanted, that he didnt like (he hated when i would dye my hair black) and he didnt like when i tanned. after it was completely over, i started making changes immediately

CMRschr: ...How do you think you would have felt if you had not changed your appearance after the breakup?

Samantha: Probably defeated, if i didnt change something, or make any changes, i wouldve felt like he took the best of me...

Samantha: I was very positive, and confident before i met him, i always got along with everyone and was always so full of life...i didnt want to feel like he took the best of me too, meaning, i didnt want to feel like he took everything from me.

Kate described how dying and cutting her hair after the dissolution was a way to reflect her independence from the relationship and her ex-boyfriend's preferences, as well as to disassociate herself from the woman her ex-boyfriend cheated on her with:

Kate: ...My ex and I dated for 7 yrs, and it was a very traumatic breakup, as he cheated on me with my best friend.

Kate: She also happens to be blonde, so in a fit of "I DON'T WANT TO LOOK ANYTHING LIKE HER" I went to an all-night drug store, bought Herbal Essences hair color, went home and dyed my hair. The color was supposed to be a dark brown but it turned almost black - I've been getting my hair highlighted since I was 20 or so, and I had no idea what I was doing

Researcher: ...So tell me more about why you decided to dye your hair dark right after the breakup. Why go so dark? Why dye your hair at all?

Kate: ...I was so disgusted and hurt - I guess I associated blonde hair with her [best friend] and I hated it. Sounds stupid, I know, but at the time it made PERFECT sense lol

By changing their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination, participants could reflect their newfound sense of independence. The decision to get a new hairstyle or haircut, for example, could reinforce the message to participants, "I am independent. I can do this for me and me alone." Several participants made changes that were something they always wanted to do, considered doing, or now wanted to do not only because they themselves wanted to make the change, but also because their ex-partner would not like the change.

Upon experiencing a romantic relationship termination, females may feel a new sense of independence; however, because they are no longer linked to their partners, they also may experience a loss sense of self or identity. Identity management is the fourth and final theme regarding motives for females to change their physical appearance.

Managing Identity

When discussing why they made physical appearance changes post-dissolution, several participants used the phrase “new identity.” They had been connected to a partner for a significant amount of time, having the role of “significant other;” losing that role caused confusion and inspired participants’ need to establish a new sense of identity as a single female. Their physical appearance changes, then, could represent a fresh start, a change, and the beginning of participants’ new identity as a single person in society, which also could serve as another external sign as the beginning of a new life and reinforcement that they would be okay without the ex-partner. Marie described how her relationship clouded her sense of individual identity and making physical appearance changes could help her manage her new identity:

- Marie:** I think I convinced myself that it [changing appearance] was just something I needed to do to feel ok again
- Researcher:** Tell me more about that.
- Marie:** Sadly, when [ex-boyfriend] and I broke up, I felt like I had lost my identity and this was my way of trying to find a new one
I had my image of myself so wrapped in being a couple that I had completely lost sight of what it was to be me, I lost who I was
- Researcher:** Because you had been [ex-boyfriend’s] girlfriend
- Marie:** Yeah, I had put all of my time and energy into being his girlfriend
that I hadn't put anything into just being me

Kate also described how she wanted to disassociate herself from her identity that she connected to her ex-boyfriend and help herself feel better through the changes:

- Kate:** I did want to feel better - and I wanted a change. Any change. I wanted to get out of my skin and feel anything different than what I was currently feeling. That was a rational shortcut in my mind - dye my hair. Buy new makeup, new clothes, shed my "old" skin...I wanted a "new" me. Not the dumb-blonde chick that was cheated on.

Kate: ...I associated my appearance with [ex-boyfriend]. He loved my hair, and it was tied in to my identity, as it is with a lot of girls. By changing it, I was giving him the middle finger of sorts...

In this study, seven participants identified the romantic relationship termination where they changed their physical appearance afterwards as their “first love,” first relationship, or an emotionally significant relationship. Three participants even described how they did not feel the need to change their appearance following the end of other relationships they identified as less emotionally significant to them because they did not feel as “lost” as they did when they experienced the termination with the first love or significant relationship. The nature and significance of a first relationship or love, for example, can impact one’s sense of identity strongly because they had never had the identity as a significant other in such a way prior to this relationship. This first relationship could be why they feel a stronger need to get a new identity and turn to their physical appearance changes as an outlet to reflect or begin to create a new identity. As participant Mary described:

CMRsrchr: ...Why do you think you needed the change after that first relationship?

Mary: I was still learning about myself at that point. And it was my very first relationship. I had already started growing and learning about myself when I dated my first boyfriend - and when we broke up, I almost needed to start all over again. I almost didn't know who I was anymore. I guess I needed a new identity. I was very slowly learning and growing a new identity, emotionally, mentally, and physically. I guess it made sense to make all three changes. The physical changes definitely had some affect on my emotions and thought processes..

In summary, four themes emerged concerning female motives for changing their physical appearance post-dissolution: communicating well-being, gaining control,

increasing independence, and managing identity. By changing their external appearance post-dissolution, many participants wanted to communicate certain messages to others, as well as communicate messages to themselves; these messages could then reinforce their independence, well-being, and control. In addition to identifying female motives for making physical changes post-dissolution, respondents described the outcomes of their physical appearance changes post-dissolution.

Outcomes

The second research question that guided this study focused on the actual outcomes produced by the physical appearance changes made by females following romantic relationship termination. Three themes emerged from participants' commentary: increase in self-confidence, newfound sense of identity, and reinforcement of self-reliance. These themes are individually explored in the following sections.

Increase in Self-Confidence

Several participants repeatedly used the term "confidence" when discussing how they felt after they made physical appearance changes post-dissolution. Confidence was generally used in a positive way (e.g., participants felt an increase in confidence, gained confidence, received compliments that made them feel confident), and the increase in self-confidence was directly related to their physical appearance changes. For example, when referring to her physical appearance changes made following her breakup, participant Alice stated, "I am a confident person anyway- but changing something as insignificant as that [getting a haircut] helped me to feel confident again." In a similar vein, participant Reese stated she would have felt "still sad" and "not as confident as I do

now” had she not made physical appearance changes post-dissolution. Feelings of increased self-confidence in their appearance could occur almost immediately following their physical appearance changes. This was the case for participant Marie, who stated she felt “a lot more confident” once she got a tattoo after her breakup:

Marie: Like after I got the tattoo, I wanted to go show off. I had a strappy little black tank top on and that just isn't me, I still don't walk around in public like that, but I was very confident that day

Participants’ increase in self-confidence related to their external appearance was often inspired or bolstered by attention and compliments by others. For example, once Brooklyn changed her appearance, she said, “i was getting compliments and was feeling confident after being cheated on, a situation that can hit your confidence hard.” Similarly, compliments from others also added to Kristin’s already increased level of self-confidence after changing her style post-dissolution:

Kristin: I don't want to sound like I live for compliments but when you get ones like that [being called sexy] especially ones that are out of the ordinary, it's just reassuring. Makes me feel good about myself. I've always felt different. Now, I embrace it and use it to my advantage stand out. I'm bright and I know I have a successful future ahead of me. But in order to be successful you have to be confident and my style changes reflect that new found confidence

The self-confidence increase was not limited to an increase in confidence in participants’ external appearances. Several participants described how they felt an increase in confidence internally and emotionally about themselves at their core. Rather, participants felt more confident in their abilities and themselves rather than just feeling confident in the fact that they looked good on the outside. As participant Barbara stated,

“I think I may have felt good about my appearance before, but I feel better knowing I'm trying. I feel good knowing I look good, because it means I care about myself.”

More importantly, participants' physical appearance changes often inspired a new increase in internal self-confidence in how they were going to choose to live their lives and make decisions as newly single women. When the researcher asked participant Marie when she looked in the mirror, what did her new look communicate to herself, she replied, “That I was strong enough to do this. I was going to survive.” Participant Lynn also felt a new sense of confidence in herself and her decisions:

Lynn: during and after the break up, my life seemed completely out of my control and putting myself back together in appearance seemed to encourage me to put myself back together emotionally and mentally as well.

Lynn: ...it boosted my confidence in myself. If I could take care of me on the outside, then I could take care of me on the inside where it matters the most.

Brooklyn described how changing her appearance increased her level of self-confidence, thus affecting how she felt internally:

Brooklyn: ...it [physical appearance changes] gave me confidence in how i looked which put me in a better mood and helped, even in the tiniest bit, with how sad, mad and betrayed i was feeling on the inside...

Brooklyn: i took the good from the outside and tried to bring it in to help with the mess of emotions...It got me out of bed and moving forward. it made me happier at a time when the smallest things would help. i cut off my dead ends and kept living lol

An increased sense of self-confidence inspired several participants to make other changes in their lives aside from their external appearance. With their increased self-confidence levels they might not have had while in a relationship, newly single participants could do things or make changes they did not have the confidence to do

before. For example, when discussing how she felt after she dyed her hair dark following her breakup, participant Lexi stated, “it made me outgoing and fun and i did alot of stuff because i wasnt scared.” One participant, Samantha, was in a relationship she described as abusive, which left her with a decreased sense of self-confidence. After making several physical appearance changes near the end of the relationship and following the romantic relationship termination, Samantha went back to college, increasing her grade point average from a 2.1 to 3.7 average. Samantha described how she began to make physical changes before the relationship was officially over, though it was over in her mind. Once the relationship ended, she made changes immediately:

Samantha: Well, my ex boyfriend was very abusive, he never told me i looked bad, but i think because he lowered my self esteem so much, i felt i needed to not only leave him but change everything, since ive left him, ive found that not only did i start working out, ive dyed my hair , and i now make it a point to do my make up (helps me feel better about myself)

Samantha: ...I use to feel disgusting, I didnt care if i was in my sweat pants or if i even took a shower after work, now, I love to go out and do things, i love gettting dressed up. I started realizing how pretty i was all along, doing things for myself, made my confidence start to come back, and once i got my confidence back, i went back to school and left him [ended the relationship]

CMRschr: So it seems like it started with the physical appearance changes and went from there?

Samantha: yes

Similarly, participant Sarah’s newfound sense of confidence affected her choices in better romantic relationship partners:

Sarah: I'm feeling good about myself, Im starting to date a really nice guy, and wondering why I never did this in the past. I always chose jerks, I dont know if it's because I just couldn't find them or because I didn't think I was worth it but this guy is making me realize what I truly deserve. I don't think the changes made me score him.. but maybe they made me feel better about myself and give me more

confidence to realize i do deserve someone who is going to treat me well

An increased sense of confidence often inspired participants to experience an overall internal attitude change; they felt a sense of confidence in how they looked, but also felt an increased sense of confidence in themselves and personal capabilities. The physical appearance changes also could attract attention from others, which only increased participants' sense of confidence even more. By making physical appearance changes, participants could feel confident in themselves as single women, both externally, and internally. As a newly single female, physical appearance changes also helped several participants to discover a newfound sense of identity, and the researcher explores this theme next.

Newfound Sense of Identity

Several participants discussed the connection between identity and their role as significant other, describing how physical appearance changes post-dissolution helped them to solidify their individual sense of identity they may have felt they lost in the relationship. Several participants used the word "me" in an identity-focused context when describing the outcomes of their physical appearance changes, such as "feel like me" or "I was me again." For example, participant Samantha stated her new look post-dissolution showed others "that I was back...that the person I once was, was back." She said her new look communicated to herself, "That i was pretty all along. i just needed to find myself," reflecting the notion that the physical appearance changes helped in discovering an individual sense of identity post-dissolution.

Similar to Samantha's feelings that she was "back," participant Kristin also felt her new style post-dissolution allowed her to feel like herself again. While in a relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Kristin had adapted her style to accommodate her partner's style, and as a result, Kristin felt she was not reflecting her true identity:

Kristin: He [ex-boyfriend] was very simple. I generally like to dress a little more hipster-y with my outfits but when I was with him I toned it down for some reason. Like I didn't want to look out of place, which is totally not me to do that. I wore a lot of jeans and t-shirts... it was just another way I wasn't acting my true self around him. Him [ex-boyfriend] and his family were all simple people and I guess I didn't want to stand out too much as the girl who dresses weird.

CMRschr: So once you two broke up, did your style change?

Kristin: Yea, if anything it got a little more edgy... I started wearing glasses, dark rimmed glasses to be specific. I throw a hat on every once and a while. I wear lot more dresses. I just have more of a care free attitude about the way I look because I'm not afraid to be me anymore... The break up made me realize that I wasn't happy pretending. I just realized I need to be with someone who would like to do most of the things I like to do and thinks my weirdo wardrobe is funky and cool... Now, I'm not afraid to take chances.

Kristin: ...I put a lot of effort into appearance/style [after the break-up because... it's another way to show your creative side. When I was with [ex-boyfriend] I was still unsure about myself. I knew I didn't like the person I was and my style reflected that. It was generic but I knew I wasn't that person.

Maida also felt like she was not being herself while she was in the romantic relationship with her ex-partner, but making physical appearance changes helped her to reflect what she felt was her true identity:

Maida: ...I expect a little hesitation here and there, no one is absolutely sure of themselves; but, regardless, I always look like me now.

CMRschr: When before, you felt you didn't look like you.

CMRschr: Is that right?

Maida: Right, I felt like a fake me. A comfortable, expected me.

In addition to feeling like themselves again, other participants discussed how changing their appearance gave them a new sense of identity all together. As stated by

Jessie:

Jessie: it [making physical appearance changes] almost makes you feel like you have some sort of new identity...like a fresh start. like ok this is the new me. i can move on from that heartbreak and do things for me. focus on what i want for myself

Jessie: ...when you're with someone...in a serious relationship with someone, that person feels like a part of your identity. it made me feel like i could move on from him more easily

Similarly, Marie said she felt she created a new identity with her physical appearance changes:

Marie: I think my changing my appearance helped me kind of create a new identity
It was kind of like a fresh start, even though at the time I didn't see it like that

Marie: I guess to that by changing, I kind of got to get rid of bad memories
I no longer looked the same, so when I looked in the mirror I wasn't the Marie that had been with [ex-boyfriend], I was the new Marie

This theme highlights the role physical appearance plays in allowing individuals to reflect their identity. As participants described, several females felt they regained their sense of self-identity once they changed their appearance to what allowed them to “feel like me.” Overall, participants described how they regained or created their sense of self-identity through physical appearance changes made post-dissolution. The third and final theme concerning outcomes was reinforcement of independence.

Reinforcement of Independence

Several participants described some sense of reclaimed independence as a result of physical appearance changes made post-dissolution. Independence was also a primary theme in regards to participant motives for changing their appearance post-dissolution, thus highlighting how participants' motives could match the actual outcomes of making physical appearance changes. In other words, one could assume participants may have achieved what they wanted --a sense of independence-- through their physical appearance changes. Because commentary regarding independence for motives and outcomes was similar in nature, the researcher identified independence as a motive if the participant described a desire for independence when making the decision to change her appearance; the researcher identified independence as an outcome if the participant talked about feeling independent following the actual physical appearance change or changes made.

Many participants described how changing their appearance reflected to themselves their ability to make independent decisions and be in control; they were calling the shots again and felt independent in making decisions in their lives. For example, participant Lynn stated that cutting her hair short after an ex-partner told her not to following the breakup "gave me a sense of not letting anyone control me...not making something think they could guilt me into doing anything I didn't want to do." Similarly, Alice described how, after getting a new haircut, she felt comfortable and independent in making her own decisions following the breakup:

Alice: I think it [new haircut] helped reinforce the fact that I can do what I need to do AND I can be happy doing it. I decided to end the relationship and was, naturally, distressed/sad/confused about all of it -- but by doing this made me realize that I can still make myself happy (even

by treating to myself to a new cut, etc) or whatever. I can be happy with my life just as it was/is

Physical appearance changes also reinforced participants' independence by reflecting externally to themselves that they were moving on without their ex-partner.

Their new look was theirs and theirs alone. As Brooklyn described:

Researcher: What do you think your new hairstyle communicated to yourself?

Brooklyn: sassy! lol it wasnt like anything i'd had before. i was an independent woman and i was moving forward i could make decisions without him. i didnt need his advice for everything which made me smile as it reinforced my independence

Brooklyn: ...after spending one yr together, it was like everything in that time was "ours" but this look was "mine" which i hadnt felt in a while...it gave me hope that i could do stuff on my own. after getting my hair cut i went over to hang out with friends and knew i wouldnt be alone.

Finally, physical appearance changes also reinforced several participants' independence in regards to self-reliance. No longer with a partner, participants' physical appearance changes could communicate to themselves they did not have their partner to rely on for compliments or opinions in making decisions regarding their appearance.

They were single women with a new look and could do things independently. Barbara described how making physical appearance changes allowed her to no longer use her ex-partner's compliments as a crutch in feeling attractive:

Barbara: First, it [making changes to physical appearance] communicated change. I felt it was positive. When you live with a serious partner, you don't really care about how you look. You get used to each other so it doesn't matter...

CMRschr: Absolutely. You mentioned you felt good about your appearance after the breakup. Compare how you felt before you made the changes, such as the weight loss and makeup, etc. and how you felt afterwards.

Barbara: I think before I made those changes to my appearance, I felt

less attractive. Being in a relationship, I was constantly told I was attractive. I felt like I was relying on those compliments to feel good about my appearance. Afterward, I was relying on myself, on actual change.

In summary, a consistent theme of independence was expressed and identified through participants' commentaries. Physical appearance changes post-dissolution reinforced the message to participants that they were independent and able to in make their own decisions. In changing their wardrobe style or hair, for example, participants could see the external reflection that marked their independence and control, highlighting their newly single status in a positive way by reinforcing they no longer had to consider their ex-partner in the decision-making process.

Summary

Through a thematic analysis, the researcher identified a total of seven consistent themes; these themes provide answers to research questions one and two. Four themes regarding the first research question, which asked to identify the motives for females changing their physical appearance post-dissolution, were found in this study: communicating well-being, gaining control, maintaining independence, and managing identity. The second research question asked what the actual outcomes were for females who changed their appearance post-dissolution. Three themes resulted from this study's analysis: increase in confidence, newfound sense of self-identity, and reinforcement of independence. These seven themes as a whole provide a strong foundation to begin to understand how and why females often change their physical appearance following romantic relationship termination. Chapter IV will discuss the implications of this research, including limitations of this research and suggestions for further study.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

I've worked hard to become a self that I actually more-or-less like and I realize that that work is always "relational" so I'm increasingly unwilling to spend time with people who do not "construct" me in the way that I want to be...I'm increasingly intent on spending time with people who do "construct" me in the way I want to be. And to be with others in a way that constructs them as the best that they can and want to be (Pearce, 2009).

In the above passage, Pearce (2009) highlights how people often define themselves based on the constructs others assign to them. As Pearce (2009) notes, however, people make their own choices in the individuals they surround themselves with, and in doing so, they can make the choice to internalize or reject such social constructs. People are in control of surrounding themselves with others who view them positively and support who they truly are. In the context of this study, many participants were able to rid themselves of negative or unwanted social constructs assigned to them within their romantic relationship; the romantic relationship termination—and the physical changes made after the termination—were the first steps in allowing a woman to begin to socially construct her own view of self, her own identity, in accordance to her own terms. This chapter focuses on this notion of how physical appearance changes relate to females' sense of identity and the implications that can be interpreted from this study's analysis.

Through a thematic analysis, a total of seven themes were discovered regarding the two research questions posed at the end of the literature review section; these questions concerned females' motives for making physical appearance changes following romantic relationship termination and the outcomes that result from making such physical appearance changes post-dissolution. The implications from this research study's seven themes will be discussed within this chapter.

This project's implications could prompt further research in the areas of identity, interpersonal communication, and gender communication. Further, the findings of this study are useful for newly single women, women experiencing a romantic relationship termination, and interpersonal, nonverbal, and gender communication scholars. In this chapter, the researcher will connect this study's findings to existing research in the areas of social construction, objectification theory, identity, and development of post-dissolution research. Additionally, limitations and areas of future research are identified.

Implications

The primary focus of this study was to understand the reasons why females often change their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination, as well as the outcomes of such physical changes made post-dissolution. At this time, no other studies have examined these two areas—romantic relationship termination and physical appearance as a strategic response—together in this context. Additionally, this study examines identity in a unique way by focusing on both physical appearance and an individual's roles together in creating and maintaining one's identity; prior research often focused on either physical appearance or roles and their connection to identity

individually rather than focusing on both components: how one may affect the other and one's overall sense of identity. From this study, there are three significant areas from which implications can be drawn: conforming to socially constructed beauty expectations, regaining identity through role disengagement, and affecting and reflecting identity and emotional changes through appearance.

Conforming to Socially Constructed Beauty Expectations

As stated earlier in this thesis, the high value placed on female beauty and what characteristics are considered “beautiful” in American society are social constructions. Media outlets and individuals socially construct standards and determine a value on female appearance within society; female beauty is then based on physical appearance and “perfection” of external characteristics (Brumberg, 1997; Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991; Pierce, 1990).

To review, females may internalize the value placed on female appearance communicated and attempt to meet the standards created by socially constructed beauty messages; these messages promise many rewards for the beautiful, including positive psychological impact, romantic success, and positive social attention (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). As a result of the internalization of socially constructed messages, women also may be more apt to objectify their bodies, focusing on outside appearance rather than how their body feels, and become preoccupied with how they look in order to meet these beauty expectations; this behavior is the basis of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In alignment with social construction and objectification theory, participants in this study exemplify how women may internalize socially constructed messages of beauty and as a result, preoccupy themselves with their external appearance, often making physical appearance changes accordingly. Participants often said they felt positive feelings following physical appearance changes, including an increased sense of self-confidence and a more positive attitude. As one participant stated, “I just felt prettier” after making physical appearance changes. Participant Barbara made the specific decision to work out more and wear make-up; this inspired her to feel more confident about herself:

I made these changes specifically, because I felt I was insecure in those areas.

Working out changes your body, but also generally gives you a sense of confidence. Make up is more superficial, but it does the same. I wanted to go out into the world with that confidence.

So the question becomes: Why the increased sense of self-confidence after making physical changes post-dissolution? Or why make physical changes at all? By focusing on their looks and making physical appearance changes post-dissolution, newly single women often make the conscious choice to conform to the beauty ideals and norms identified and constructed within society. Thus, in choosing to modify her appearance in a way that makes her feel more attractive, a newly single woman is staying consistent with societal expectations and norms; in making changes to her appearance, she is communicating that she values her appearance in some way, aligning with society’s message that a woman should take value in her appearance.

A newly single woman can gain self-confidence in knowing she is conforming to the norm by making physical appearance changes that allow her to feel and look beautiful. What participants consider “beautiful” is more than likely due to socially constructed beauty ideals. By taking action to appear attractive on the outside, a newly single woman is thus increasing her self-worth because female beauty is of high worth in society.

Newly single women also can reap rewards of conforming to societal constructs of beauty, such as new romantic relationship partners, jealous ex-partners, and positive feedback from others. Compliments can serve as an example of socially constructed messages that reinforce the worth of appearance and increase the appeal of conforming to beauty norms; a woman who receives compliments from others can feel an increased sense of worth because the compliments reinforce to her that she is meeting the valued ideal. For example, participant Kristin explained how others’ messages inspired a feeling of confidence within:

I feel more myself and more confident but I've also seen results because for the first time in my life I actually have had people refer to me as sexy which is something i never got before

Though a newly single woman can choose to conform to societal norms in accepting the value placed on her physical appearance, changing her physical appearance also allows a woman to gain a sense of empowerment in adjusting to her new role as a single person and, in doing so, renegotiating her personal definition of beauty. As part of a romantic relationship dyad, a woman will often make appearance decisions regarding her appearance while consciously taking her partner’s preferences or style into

consideration, as stated by several participants within this study. Certain characteristics may have constituted what she identified as beautiful or how she “should” look, often aligning with her partner’s preferences. Once she is no longer a part of the romantic relationship dyad, however, a newly single woman can turn to her appearance as a way to reflect her newfound independence and, in doing so, gain a sense of empowerment. A newly single woman can think, “Now, only I have input in how I look”; she is able to redefine what beauty means to her, separate from her partner’s preferences. Women may strategically make physical appearance changes to resist their partner’s preferences following dissolution. As Tretheway (1997) explains, many feminists believe contextual and local acts of resistance are a way women utilize to communicate resistance to patriarchal power; changing one’s appearance against their partner’s preferences can be considered a “private” act of resistance. Private acts of resistance can give a woman a sense of power and the ability to redefine herself (Tretheway, 1997). In resisting what she “should” look like, as defined by her partner, a woman can feel empowered and transform her identity. Therefore, a woman can make physical changes that more accurately reflect her preferences or what she considers attractive; these new changes are also made separate from her partner, and can serve as a symbol of disassociation from the relationship and her role as a partner. This notion of independence and disassociation from the “partner” role closely aligns with role disengagement, the next implication discussed.

Regaining Identity Through Role Disengagement

Prior research has shown how both physical appearance and an individual's various roles (e.g., significant other, mother, professor) help to create a person's sense of identity (Ebaugh, 1988; Mandziuk, 2008; Negrin, 1999; Stephen, 1984). Consistent with this research, several participants throughout this study referenced how their physical appearance and roles—or in this case, their lost role as a significant other—affected their sense of identity in some way. For example, some participants' statements implied that they felt a sense of lost identity because they were no longer someone's significant other, or they found a new sense of identity because they adopted a style post-dissolution they felt reflected their "true" self.

According to Ebaugh (1988), a newly single woman goes through a process of role exit following a romantic relationship termination; she must establish a new single identity that incorporates her past role as significant other. As cited earlier in this thesis, a part of the role exit process is role disengagement, when a newly single woman, for example, withdraws from normative expectations associated with her previous role as a significant other (Ebaugh, 1988). Withdrawing from these role expectations, she can also begin to accept her single status and create a new identity as a single woman. In order to create this new single identity, a woman must first accept that she is single and disengage from her previous role as a partner.

According to Duck (1982), one of the phases of relationship disengagement and dissolution is the grave-dressing phase; the goal of this process is for the individual to come out of the relationship socially and psychologically intact, to get over the relationship and put it behind him or her. As a part of the grave-dressing stage, a woman,

for example, could change her appearance as a way to mark the end of the relationship, take on a new role in society and begin to move on from the relationship. As Duck (1982) explains, such processes in the grave-dressing phase are “probably psychologically crucial to the persons coming to terms with the relationship dissolution” (p. 28).

The unique and appealing aspect of considering physical appearance changes as a part of the role disengagement process is that women can actually see appearance changes, whereas other identity changes involve more intrapersonal, and less visible processes (e.g., thinking, “I am single now. I am no longer with him or her.”) A new hairstyle—one they did not have when they were with their partner, for example—can also visually reflect and reinforce the message to women that they are single. For example, as stated by participant Barbara:

I believe if I hadn't changed my appearance, I would've felt like less of a transition had been made. Changing my appearance made the emotional and mental changes visual changes as well, which I believe helped me get to realize things were different.

The decision to incorporate a new look post-dissolution can also serve as a visual disassociation from the relationship, communicating and bolstering a message of independence; a woman might think, “See? I am single. This hairstyle is something that has nothing to do with my ex-partner. I am no longer with him or her; I no longer have to consider his or her point of view.” As participant Brooklyn explained, “The haircut was a step to my new start in a direction that did not concern him.” In accepting this new look, she may accept her new role as a single woman and see her new look as part of her new identity as a single woman.

The researcher must note that two participants in this study did make physical appearance changes in an attempt to get their ex-partner back, in which case their new look may not communicate the messages discussed above or affect the role disengagement and role exit process. By changing their appearance in order to gain the attention of their ex-partner with the hope of getting back together, these participants may not have been ready to engage in the role disengagement process. Rather than use their physical appearance as an outlet for coping, these two individuals could have used their external appearance as a strategy to re-initiate or maintain a relationship rather than accept the termination of the relationship; with only two relevant cases, this finding was not a theme central to this study, but does provide a different avenue ripe for further research. The majority of this study's participants, however, discussed how they made physical appearance changes for themselves, which is the basis of this discussion.

This study also revealed that females may compensate for the part of their lost identity by focusing on another part of their identity over which they may have more control. In other words, when a female loses one component of her identity—her role as someone's significant other—she may turn to another aspect of her identity—her physical appearance—to compensate. As cited by several participants, physical appearance is an aspect of their identity they can control, whereas their role as a significant other is something they cannot completely control, especially if their ex-partner terminated the relationship. Gaining a sense of control of their identity through their physical appearance may help reduce the possible identity confusion a newly single woman may feel. Although she may not be able to prevent or change the relationship's termination, she can at least control the color of her hair or the style of her clothes, so she

may feel her identity is not completely lost as a result of the breakup.

This implication is significant to communication research on issues of identity because it highlights how individuals can respond to feelings of lost identity, and offers a way one can begin to accept and communicate a new identity through physical appearance changes. Specifically, this study highlights how a haircut is often so much more than a haircut; a new tattoo or clothing style can mean more than simply a new look for a woman who recently experienced a significant breakup. As stated by the participants in this study, making a physical appearance change was a way for a newly single woman to find herself again when she felt lost without her role as someone's partner. Though much attention is often focused on what women may lose following the end of a romantic relationship (e.g., their role as a partner, people associated with the terminated relationship, the partner themselves)—it is important to recognize the positives of a romantic relationship termination and what a woman can gain, such as independence, the ability to make choices without another person to consider, more “me” time and a new single identity. As Duck (1982) states, “...dissolution can be a creative act of rejuvenation, full of promise and freedom” (p. 3). Along with regaining identity through role disengagement, changing one's external appearance can affect women's internal emotions in several positive ways.

Appearance: Affecting and Reflecting Identity and Emotional Changes

Previous research on romantic relationship termination has found dissolution to often be a painful, stressful, and emotional time for a person (Orbuch, 1992; Sprecher, Felmies, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Consistent with this research, many participants in

this study explained how a significant breakup with their partner inspired feelings of sadness or uncertainty. But by making a change or changes to their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination, many participants in this study felt a shift away from negative emotions they felt as a result of the relationship dissolution and a move toward positive emotions. This shift aligns with Emmers and Hart's (1996) study, which identified self-enhancement as one of 12 common rituals utilized by individuals as a method of coping following a romantic relationship termination. This study offers support to the claim that making physical appearance changes post-dissolution can help with the coping and adjustment process following a romantic relationship termination (Emmers & Hart, 1996).

Several participants in this study discussed how external appearance changes helped them feel better following the romantic relationship termination. As stated by participant Lynn:

During and after the break up, my life seemed completely out of my control and putting myself back together in appearance seemed to encourage me to put myself back together emotionally and mentally as well. . . .it boosted my confidence in myself. If I could take care of me on the outside, then I could take care of me on the inside where it matters the most.

Rather than focusing on negative emotions they may have felt about the breakup, participants described how making physical appearance changes allowed them to feel more positive. This finding also supports prior research findings that an increased sense of self-esteem helps when a female experiences emotional pain (McFarquhar & Lewis, 2000). Examples of common words used by the current study's participants to describe

how they felt post-physical appearance change included “empowered,” “brave,” “proud,” and “confident.” As participant Jessie explained:

Well it [changing hairstyle] was a big change, so i felt like with that drastic change came new confidence, my entire attitude changed. i stopped feeling so self conscious and more excited about who i am. i felt like i didn't need approval from anyone but myself

Additionally, by gaining a new perspective inspired by physical appearance change, a sense of adjustment can be achieved for a partner signified by feelings of closure, understanding the relationship termination, and accepting that the relationship is over (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003). As stated by participant Brooklyn: “...i knew i had grieving to do on the inside, but making external changes was a start that gave me hope. i was going to be okay.” Through their physical appearance changes, some women were inspired to feel hopeful, independent, or strong in ways that they may not have experienced otherwise.

By having a positive attitude, a newfound sense of self-esteem, or increased level of confidence due to physical appearance changes, some women could also be inspired to feel confident about making other important life decisions. As described earlier in this thesis, for example, one participant went back to school after making appearance changes post-dissolution, while other participants entered healthier relationships as a result of their increased sense of self-confidence. Physical changes, then, can be a catalyst for positive growth. As stated by Maida:

Looking at myself now, and thinking about how I looked every day for 11 years before I let myself change how I needed to naturally... I just feel that I would be

stuck in that mentality that change must not happen, which held me back from a lot of other things as well. I also don't think I would have been able to move on as well as I have without letting myself grow. To really own a change in appearance, something happens inside, too.

By examining females' responses to romantic relationship termination, such as making physical appearance changes, scholars can gain a better understanding of communicative strategies utilized to cope with the negative feelings associated with romantic relationship termination. By also understanding communicative responses and coping strategies, scholars can gain a more holistic picture of the relational process.

Additionally, these implications highlight processes involved in a common situation in the lives of women: they meet a person, enter into a romantic relationship with the person, and later break up. The newly single woman, then, often grapples with sad and negative emotions, a role loss as a significant other, and the resulting identity confusion. More importantly, this study not only shows that this situation is a common one, but it also identifies a common response—making physical appearance changes—that aids some newly single women in finding or creating a sense of identity and coping with negative emotions resulting from the dissolution. Newly single women are not alone in feeling a sense of identity loss and sadness due to a romantic relationship termination, and changing their appearance may be one way that could help them to feel better about who they are, or at the very least, less alone in the fact that they could change their appearance as a response to the romantic relationship termination.

Summary

In summary, this study highlights how women may objectify their external appearance following a romantic relationship termination, which can serve as a distraction from internal emotions they may feel. Focusing on external appearance can also inspire feelings of control and self-worth; increased feelings of esteem can be a result of socially constructed messages that place high value on female physical appearance. Additionally, making physical appearance changes following a romantic relationship termination can inspire women to disengage from their former role as someone's significant other. These appearance changes can act as a visual disassociation from the romantic relationship and can allow single women to begin to create a new single identity. Through physical appearance changes, women may also feel more positive emotions and an increased sense of confidence following the breakup.

Limitations

As with every study, there were limitations to this research that should be considered when interpreting the results. Three issues that limit this study involve the participant pool, participant recollection, and online data collection.

Participant Pool

One limitation of this study is the limited range of demographics of the participants recruited. The researcher attempted to gain a more diverse sample of participants through the use of Facebook.com and Youtube.com, both popular websites available to individuals globally. However, only four participants lived in states other than Michigan, with one participant residing in Ohio, and only three participants located

outside of the Midwest. Additionally, though participants' ages ranged from 18 to 36 years old, most participants were between the ages of 20 and 22.

Because recruitment was mainly from the Midwest and the range of participants' ages was closely clustered, the less diverse demographic nature of participants could skew results. Participants could possess similar thought patterns or responses because of their overall closeness in age range and geographic proximity, potentially reflecting the beliefs and responses of participants in the Midwest or early 20s age group specifically, rather than reflecting a more general view of females.

Additionally, the researcher personally knew five participants prior to their participation in the research study. Though each of the five participants individually expressed interest in participating in the study on her own—participants were recruited online; the researcher did not go to the individuals personally and ask them to participate—the fact the researcher did have some sort of relationship with the participants could have affected the nature of their responses. This effect could be viewed as a benefit or a limitation. As a benefit, participants may have felt comfortable speaking with the researcher because of their pre-existing relationship, which could allow them to open up more about their relationship termination experiences due to an increase in comfort level with the researcher. As a limitation, however, participants may have wanted to limit the descriptions of their emotional feelings or actions because of the pre-existing relationship with the researcher—they were not discussing their feelings with a person they would never have to face in person, for example—and thus may have been more apt to feel judged or vulnerable when providing intimate, personal details to the researcher. As a result, participants may have feared the researcher would pass judgment

on them based upon their responses and may then have edited their responses to be more socially desirable. Social desirability, often a criticism of self-report research, is the notion that people may report feelings or behaviors that are consistent with cultural norms or expectations rather than report what they actually feel or do; this is to appear in a more positive light and consistent with cultural expectations (Vanlear, 1990).

Participant Recollection

A second limitation of this study involves the reliance on participant recollection. As this study was qualitative in nature and focused on participants' responses regarding past romantic relationship terminations, the researcher relied on the participant's own recollection of their responses to generate themes. This dependence on recall is a limitation because some participants had a difficult time recalling details, emotional responses, or identifying what their thought process was at that time, especially if a significant length of time had passed since the termination, as is exemplified by participant Mary:

Researcher: ...Tell me more about your thought process in deciding to cut your hair. What made you say "Yup, going to cut the hair short now"?

Mary: It feels ages ago, but I will try my hardest to think of my thought process.

Participants would often state semi-disqualifying statements, such as "I think this is what I was thinking" or "I'm not sure, but..." when attempting to recall why they responded a particular way following the breakup. For example, participant Alex attempted to recall how she felt after cutting her hair post-dissolution:

CMRsrchr: ...Looking back, do you think the haircut made you feel any different?

Alex: [L]ike, now that i think about it, it could have been that i

wanted to ended things, and cutting my hair off was me telling myself i was gonna cut things off with him

CMRsrchr: Absolutely

Alex: ^^ is what it might have been, but i dont remember feeling any certain way before or after

Due to participants' limited abilities to recall and explain their thought processes to the researcher, data could be skewed by uncertainty about the details that were pertinent to the study. Data quality could be compromised by a lack of clarity or accuracy in participants' answers, affecting the accuracy of themes generated by the researcher.

Online recruitment and data collection

For this project, the researcher collected all data through interviews using free online chat programs with participants. Due to the personal and emotional nature of the topics discussed, utilizing online participant recruitment and data collection provided several benefits, as well as limitations.

Benefits. As identified earlier, romantic relationship termination is a unique and often painful experience. Emotions, a lost sense of identity, and the nature of the terminated relationship could all be difficult topics for participants to revisit and discuss in detail. Because interviews were conducted online through text-based chat, the lack of face-to-face contact and ability for participants to describe their experiences behind a computer screen allowed for a sense of increased comfort for participants. In fact, when asked how they felt about being interviewed online, all participants stated they felt more comfortable chatting online rather than directly with the researcher in person or preferred online interviews; no participants expressed a strong dislike about online interviews. Participants' preferred online interviews for a number of reasons. First, participants stated

they felt less judged by the researcher because they were not face-to-face. For example, as stated by Lexi:

Lexi: it was alot easier to open up
im usally pretty open about talking about my ex bcuz i have realized how ridiculous it was now.. but its still easier online than face to face

Researcher: absolutely. why do you think it was easier?

Lexi: bcuz you dont know me and we proly wont meet or see

each other ever lol

so i can tell you what you need and never have to worry about you judging me really i guess

lol

Several participants cited convenience as another benefit to online interviewing. Participants could schedule an online interview time based on what time was best for them, and they also did not have to drive to a meeting location to meet with the researcher. One participant, Lynn, stated she probably would not have participated in the study if the interviews were not conducted online. Additionally, online interviews allowed the researcher to recruit a more diverse sample of participants in the sense that the researcher was able to talk to participants located throughout Michigan, as well as other states, such as Wyoming and Pennsylvania. If the researcher had chosen to conduct interviews face-to-face, the researcher probably would have been more limited to recruiting participants located in close geographical proximity.

Online interviews also allowed participants the convenience and comfort of responding from a setting of their own choosing and from behind their own computer screens. As stated in prior research, people make more intimate self-disclosures in CMC in comparison to face-to-face interactions due to unique characteristics of CMC, such as anonymity and the absence of nonverbal cues (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Valkenburg &

Peter, 2009). Therefore, a more private, comfortable environment that allows a person to maintain anonymity may help participants to feel more at ease with being honest in their responses. Additionally, the online interviews also allowed more time for participants to collect their thoughts, express themselves clearly, and edit their responses before sending them. By having more time to think about the question and their responses, participants may have felt more comfortable, and as a result, may have been more honest in their responses and comfortable revealing sensitive information because they could reflect on their self-presentation, another identified benefit of CMC interviewing (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998; Walther, 1996). As described by participants Marie and Jessie:

Marie: It was very easy to tell you things that I may not have felt as comfortable sharing with you face to face. I am very much so an open book, but this took the awkwardness out of it for sure

Jessie: i liked it [online interviewing] because it made me feel more comfortable and less pressured
it gave me time to really think my answers through
and answer you more completely and thoroughly
it was more convenient

For this study, participants did not seem to express a particular feeling of difficulty or frustration from a lack of nonverbal cues. As found in prior research by Walter (1996), a lack of nonverbal cues can allow CMC interactions to be more personal than face-to-face, and thus allow for increased comfort for participants. A lack of nonverbal cues also may inspire increased cognitive focus on what is being said within the interaction; one is less likely to be distracted by the need to partake in backchanneling physical cues such as shaking one's head or maintaining eye contact and thus, an individual focuses more on the verbal aspect of the interaction (Walter, 1996).

Participants may also feel more comfortable with the lack of nonverbal cues because they have more control in presenting themselves in a positive light; without actual nonverbal exposure, individuals form impressions of each other mainly based on language, an aspect more easily controllable than nonverbal cues (Walter, 1996). As participant Brooklyn explained, she felt she gained a sense of the researcher's personality despite this lack of nonverbal cues:

Brooklyn: although i dont see your face, i still get a sense of your personality which i like a lot
i feel comfortable talking to you

Brooklyn: ... you related my experiences to your own, and your word choices, like "absolutely," were confirming and made me feel comfortable disclosing information. at times it was like a regular chat between friends

Overall, the anonymous nature of and convenience of online interviews appealed to participants. Utilizing online interviews as a data collection method allowed participants to be more open and feel less judged by the researcher when discussing highly personal topics. Despite its benefits, however, online recruitment and interviewing did have drawbacks.

Limitations. There were several limitations the researcher faced when recruiting participants and collecting data online. One limitation involved the participant recruitment process; several individuals expressed initial interest in the study, but then "disappeared" online, never to be heard from again. For example, when recruiting participants, the researcher received several e-mails from individuals expressing interest in participating in the study. Yet when the researcher e-mailed these interested potential participants to gain informed consent and schedule interview times, some did not respond. This part of the process proved frustrating for the researcher, as it was difficult

to initially gauge who was truly interested and committed to participating in the study. This problem could potentially have been avoided had the interviews been face-to-face, as participants may have been less likely to walk away from the researcher.

A second limitation of online recruitment and data collection involved various technological difficulties that arose. During several interviews, either the researcher or the participant would experience some sort of problem or error with the chat program, Broadband connection, or computer. For example, when the researcher interviewed Barbara, the chat program would not send Barbara's responses to the researcher, which resulted in Barbara having to finish the interview via e-mail. In several instances, especially when the interview was conducted over the Facebook Chat program, participants would respond to the researcher's questions, though it would appear to the researcher they did not respond. At times, the chat program showed the researcher was not online, so participants would not know whether to respond to the researcher's question. For example, this exchange occurred when the researcher interviewed participant Jessie:

Researcher: You there Jessie? I don't see your messages if you are
Jessie: yep i'm here
my chat said you are offline.

This process of "Are you there? Hello?" and "Yes, I'm here. Oh, okay, I see you" often interrupted the natural flow of the interview conversation, which could have affected the nature of participant responses. Rather than building rapport and a conversational tone consistent with the aims of qualitative research, potential moments of awkwardness during the interview due to such computer or connection malfunctions

could have broken the concentration of the participant when describing a particularly emotional response or situation; it could be awkward for a participant, for example, to be in the middle of describing how sad she was about the breakup, only to have to follow up with “Yes, I’m here,” or to re-type a response due to a computer malfunction.

Another limitation of online interviews involved participants’ commitment to completing the interview. Although the online data collection allowed for the most convenient interview scheduling for participants, participants also were more likely to discontinue the online interview to do something else, resulting in incomplete or less thorough responses. For example, this exchange occurred when interviewing participant Kate:

Researcher: How do you think you would have felt if you hadn't changed your appearance?

Kate: I think I would have felt the same
Sorry to cut this short, but I have family to pick up at the airport.

In other instances, participants informed the researcher they did not have a lot of time because they had prior engagements scheduled soon after the interview (e.g., going to work), which gave the interview a “rushed” feeling. Some participants were also late for the interview, which also cut into the researcher’s available time to interview the participant. Being at the mercy of participants’ availability or commitment to completing the interview could affect the quality of participant responses, especially if they were trying to provide quick answers because they were nervous they would be late for work, for example. The researcher must recognize that if the interviews had taken place face-to-face rather than through computer mediated communication channels, this limitation

probably could have been avoided. Participants may have felt uncomfortable in abruptly walking out of a face-to-face interview, whereas with an CMC interview, a participant can simply exit the chat box conversation and walk away from the computer without having to face the researcher.

A final limitation in regards to online data collection is issues with response time. Because interviews were not conducted face-to-face and participants had to type their responses, participants could thus think about how they wanted to craft their response. Though the extra time to think about their responses was identified as a benefit by participants, responses could be potentially less natural and organic in comparison to responses participants might have given had the interviews been face-to-face. Data, then, could be skewed, for participants' responses may have been more prone to alterations for the sake of social desirability since they had more time to craft that particular impression they wanted to give off.

Participants also would often take a significant amount of time to type out their responses. As a result, several of the rapport-building questions, as well as questions about participants' beliefs about general female physical appearance and single status, were not covered as originally planned by the researcher. The choice to eliminate these questions during interviews was a choice the researcher made during the data collection process to ensure that topics more directly related to the research questions were covered for the purposes of this study. Greater effort at rapport building in the beginning of the interview, however, could have elicited deeper responses by participants due to an increased level in comfort resulting from a development of rapport.

Future Areas of Study

As stated earlier within this thesis, the aftermath of romantic relationship termination is an area of little research. Additionally, connecting the concepts of nonverbal communication as a strategic response to romantic relationship termination has also not been heavily focused on by communication scholars. Because these areas have not been explored in great depth, connecting and exploring these issues in detail through this project also brings light to several areas where additional investigation could be conducted.

For example, through this thesis project, the researcher noticed several participants changed their appearance following the termination of a romantic relationship with a person the participant identified as their “first love.” Future research focusing specifically on what types of relationships prompt more physical appearance changes (Do females also change their appearance after less significant and more fling-like relationships?) could give a more thorough understanding of the reasons females change their appearance and what types of relationships constitute these changes.

A second type of future study would explore female physical appearance changes post-dissolution from a quantitative perspective. Though this research project utilized qualitative methods, utilizing quantitative methods could also reveal more specific data and gain a new sense of understanding of the more quantifiable aspects of female choices when making physical appearance changes post-dissolution. For example, distributing a survey that allows females to identify the types and number of physical changes made post-dissolution can provide generalizable information on the most common physical changes made following a termination; surveying larger numbers of female participants

could provide information as to how they change their appearance. Additionally, the researcher examined nonverbal responses and connected these responses to concepts of identity for this research project; however, research examining females' attachment style and examining a potential relationship between types of attachment style and physical appearance changes made could highlight possible connections between types of responses made following a romantic relationship termination and attachment style.

Another area of possible research could examine gender differences in regards to physical appearance changes made following relationship termination. While this study focused on a female perspective, gaining a male perspective to learn whether and how they potentially change their physical appearance following romantic relationship terminations could allow for comparisons of the genders' responses to romantic relationship termination, expanding gender-focused communication studies.

A final area of future research that could expand this research project is studying if, how, and why people may change their appearance following other significant events in their lives. For example, in this study, one participant explained how she changed her appearance by getting a tattoo on her eighteenth birthday; another participant described how she cut her hair short right before she went to college. Though this study examined how females change their appearance following romantic relationship terminations specifically, these participants gave examples as to how people may utilize their appearance as a response to other life-changing events, such as turning 18 or going to college. By examining how individuals turn to their appearance during such significant events, researchers could potentially make new connections as to how and why appearance is utilized as a means to communicate particular messages during such events

or occasions in addition to romantic relationship termination. These areas of future study could help expand our understanding of these understudied areas of communication.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to discover females' motives and outcomes for changing their physical appearance following a romantic relationship termination. Through thematic analysis, this study revealed the value and complexity often surrounding a female's decision to change her appearance post-dissolution; a haircut is not always just a haircut, for example, but often a way for females to compensate for a lost sense of identity or gain a sense of control and self-worth. Consistent with prior research, this study shows how a person's sense of identity can be affected once the role of significant other is gone; however, this study adds a deeper perspective by focusing on females' responses and identifying how nonverbal communication is utilized as a coping mechanism following a romantic relationship termination. Additionally, social construction and objectification theory were employed to better understand how socially constructed messages contribute to how and why women may feel an increased sense of self-worth and confidence following physical appearance changes made post-dissolution. Other novel information was revealed, including the notion that women's physical appearance changes inspired them to have a more positive attitude post-dissolution and make other life changes in addition to physical appearance changes. This study also highlighted how many females made physical changes in order to reflect their newfound independence, control, and well-being; as a result, females often felt a new sense of independence as a newly single woman. Making physical appearance changes post-

dissolution, then, can often be an external response that affects internal emotions in a positive way and potentially help with the coping process post-dissolution.

Overall, this project contained certain limitations that may have influenced this study's analysis, including those involving the participant pool, participant recollection, and online recruitment and data collection. Despite this project's limitations, however, this study has connected different topics of communication research in a new way, also resulting in raising and uncovering several areas for future study. Future research should focus on correcting this study's limitations by expanding the study to a larger female demographic. Additionally, future research studies highlighting if, how, and why males make physical appearance changes post-dissolution can expand gender communication research and offer a holistic view of this area. Finally, studying this subject quantitatively can offer a different perspective as to how physical appearance changes are made following romantic relationship termination. Furthering our understanding of how individuals respond and cope with their new single relationship status could possibly identify new coping mechanisms for single people, show individuals they are not alone in their negative feelings, and potentially offer counselors tools to help single people cope with the often negative feelings associated with romantic relationship termination.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT OPPORTUNITY

To: Central Michigan University Communication and Dramatic Arts Faculty

From: Lindsay M. Henry

Re: Research Participation Opportunity

Dear CDA Faculty,

I am currently seeking adult females to participate in online interviews regarding physical appearance and romantic relationship stages. This research provides an opportunity for students to become actively involved in the communication field, as well as become familiar with the research process. Additionally, participation in this study may serve as an opportunity for students to earn extra credit, if you are willing to offer it. I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider offering this opportunity to your class by sharing the following announcement:

You are invited to participate in an online interview regarding physical appearance and romantic relationship breakups. You must be a female, at least 18 years old, and have experienced a romantic relationship breakup involving a relationship you consider emotionally significant. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, the interview should take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Your interview responses will be kept confidential. If you are interested in participating, please contact me at centralmichiganresearcher@gmail.com for further instruction.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lindsay M. Henry
Graduate Student, Communication

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY (SENT VIA E-MAIL)

Study Title: Female Physical Appearance and Romantic Relationship Termination

Research Investigators: Lindsay M. Henry, Dr. Lesley A. Withers

Contact Information for Investigators:

Lindsay M. Henry
Communication and Dramatic Arts
Central Michigan University
333 Moore Hall
Mount Pleasant, MI 48859
Phone: (989) 774-3177
centralmichiganresearcher@gmail.com

Dr. Lesley A. Withers
Communication and Dramatic Arts
Central Michigan University
350 Moore Hall
Mount Pleasant, MI 48859
Phone: (989) 774-6673
Fax: (989) 774-2498
withella@cmich.edu

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research study on female physical appearance and romantic relationship termination. The data collected in these interviews will be used in a thesis project. The researcher, Lindsay M. Henry, is a graduate student at Central Michigan University under the supervision of Dr. Lesley Withers. You must be female and 18 years or older to participate in this study. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Lindsay Henry or Dr. Lesley Withers.

What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this study is to examine physical appearance and romantic relationship termination. This research is being conducted to fulfill the requirements for the Master of Arts program in Communication at Central Michigan University.

What will I do in this study? If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in an interview related to your romantic relationship breakups and physical appearance choices with researcher Lindsay Henry via your preferred online chat program. You will select and inform the researcher via e-mail of the online chat service you prefer use for interviews. The list of chat programs include: AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Facebook Chat, iChat, Google Talk (GChat), Skype, Yahoo! Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, and Other, which represents any unlisted chat program. Once completed, the interview chat log will be printed and analyzed. The only people with access to these transcripts will be the researcher and her project advisor.

How long will it take? The interview should take 45 – 60 minutes.

Are there any risks for participating in this study? There will be little risk involved in this study should you choose to participate. You may feel uncomfortable when recalling your past romantic relationships. If this interview should cause any emotional discomfort

during or after the interview, please contact your local mental health clinic. The following counseling services can provide information on mental health clinics in the Mt. Pleasant, Mich., area: Central Michigan University's Counseling Services (989) 774-3381 or Listening Ear (989) 772-2918.

What are the benefits to participating in this study? Your participation in this study will allow you to discuss your relationship termination experience. The findings from this study may shed new light on this understudied area of communication.

Will anyone know what I do or say in this study (Confidentiality)? These interviews will be completely confidential. While participants are required to give their name in the original e-mail correspondence to digitally "sign" their consent, the interviews will be confidential. You will be able to select a pseudonym to use throughout the interview process. The transcripts will be printed immediately following the completion of the interview. Furthermore, your screen name will be deleted from the transcripts. The only individuals with access to these transcripts will be Lindsay Henry and Dr. Lesley Withers. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. At any time, you may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study without fear of penalty. You may decline to answer any specific question and should feel free to ask any questions.

Will I receive any compensation for participation? Is there a different way for me to receive the compensation of this study? Those who choose to participate in the interview process will be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift card; the primary investigator will send the winner the gift card electronically to the winner's e-mail address. Additionally, if you are a student in a CMU communication class, your instructor may offer extra-credit in return for participation in this study. In classes in which extra credit is offered for participation in this study, those students not participating in this study will have an alternate opportunity for extra credit at the discretion of the instructor.

Who can I contact for information about this study? You may contact Lindsay M. Henry at (989) 774-3177 or Dr. Lesley A. Withers at (989) 774-6673 with any questions you have about this study. Please print a copy of this informed consent form in case you have questions later.

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled or without any effect on your relationship to the institution involved in this research project.

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which this study is being conducted, you may report (anonymously, if you so choose) any complaints to the CMU Institutional Review Board by calling (989) 774-6777, or addressing a letter to the Institutional Review Board, 251 Foust Hall Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI 48859.

Digitally “signing” this form by typing your name in the text box below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.

In my judgment, the subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate in this research study. I have presented this subject with the procedure(s) above and the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the consent document and is competent to give legally effective and informed consent.

Lindsay M. Henry
Investigator’s printed name

April 28, 2011
Date

Lesley A. Withers
Investigator’s printed name

April 28, 2011
Date

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Warm-up Questions

1. How old are you?
2. How would you describe your current relationship status?
3. How do you feel about your current relationship status?
4. How many serious romantic relationships have you been in the last year?
5. Tell me about a romantic relationship termination you experienced in the last year where you considered the relationship emotionally significant.
 - a. How long had you been in the relationship?
 - b. Who initiated the breakup?
 - c. What was the reason for the breakup?
 - d. How did you feel after you and your partner broke up?
 - i. About the relationship?
 - ii. About being single?
 - iii. About your partner?
 - iv. About yourself?

Female Physical Appearance

6. How would you describe your personal style or look?
 - a. How much effort do you put into your appearance?
 - b. How does your physical appearance reflect your personality?
7. What, if any, preferences did your ex-partner (s) have for how you looked?
 - a. Did your ex-partner's preferences affect your own physical appearance

choices while in the romantic relationship? If so, how?

- b. Did your partner's preferences affect your own physical appearance choices following the romantic relationship breakup? If so, how?

Changes Following Relationship Termination

- 8. After breaking up, did you change anything about the way you looked? If so, what did you change? (If no physical changes were made, skip to question 10).
 - a. How soon did you make the physical change(s) following the breakup?
 - b. Why did you make these changes following the breakup?
 - i. Compare how you felt before you changed your physical appearance to how you felt after you changed your physical appearance.
 - ii. How do you think you would have felt if you had not changed your appearance following the breakup?
 - iii. Why did you decide to make the physical change (s) specifically as opposed to other possible changes you could have made?
 - iv. Have you kept/maintained these changes as part of your physical appearance now?
 - v. What did your new physical appearance change (s) following a breakup communicate?
 - 1. To your ex-partner?
 - 2. To yourself?
 - 3. To others?
 - c. Have you made physical appearance changes following other romantic

relationship breakups?

9. What, if any, other immediate changes in your life have you made following a breakup?
 - i. Why did you make the type (s) of change (s) in particular?
 - ii. How does making these changes in your life affect you?
 - iii. How did the changes you made affect your ex-partner?

Closing

10. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your romantic relationship termination and physical appearance?
11. Do you have any questions for me?

Interview Process

12. Were there any confusing questions that were difficult to understand?
13. Were there any questions you would have liked me to ask?
14. How do you feel about being interviewed over the Internet versus face-to-face?
15. Do you have any recommendations for further interviews?

APPENDIX D

REQUEST TO SEND CONSENT FORM TO STUDENTS (VIA E-MAIL)

To: Central Michigan University Communication and Dramatic Arts Faculty

From: Lindsay M. Henry

Re: Research Participation Consent

Dear CDA Faculty,

Thank you for your agreement to announce the opportunity for students to participate in this research study regarding physical appearance and romantic relationship stages. I have attached to this e-mail the online consent form that interested participants must read and reply to in order to participate in this study. I encourage you to forward this document electronically to your students after announcing the study in your classes. Sending the consent form electronically to students will also serve as a reminder to students about the study and offer easy access to the consent form.

Additionally, if you are offering extra credit to students who participate in this study, those students who participate in the interview process will receive a confirmation e-mail from me as proof of their participation. Upon receiving the confirmation e-mail, students will be encouraged to print and show you the confirmation e-mail in order to receive extra credit. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lindsay M. Henry
Graduate Student
Communication

APPENDIX E

REQUIRED INFORMATION FOR INTERVIEW (SENT VIA E-MAIL)

To: Research Study Participant

From: Lindsay M. Henry

Re: Required Information for Interview

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your agreement to participate in this study regarding romantic relationships and physical appearance changes. Please read the following and respond via e-mail with your interview preferences:

1. Please review the list of free online chat programs and indicate which chat program by marking an "X" next to the program you prefer to use for the interview:

- AOL Instant Messenger (AIM)
- Facebook Chat
- Apple iChat
- Google Talk (GChat)
- Skype
- Yahoo! Messenger
- Windows Live Messenger
- Other (If you select this option, please indicate the name of your preferred program: _____).

2. Please include the days and times you are available for the interview. The interview will probably take between 45 minutes and one hour to complete.

Days and times I am available for the interview:

3. Please include the e-mail addresses of any persons you believe fit the criteria and would be interested in participating in this study:

E-mail addresses of potential study participants:

4. Please indicate a first name other than your own that will serve as a pseudonym to protect your privacy in this study: _____

Upon receiving your reply, I will respond to you via e-mail to confirm a date and time for the interview, as well as exchange screen name information for your preferred program. I will then send you the initial chat message via your preferred program at the

scheduled time. To ensure your comfort and privacy, I will not add your screen name to my contact list. If the preferred chat program requires that we must add our screen names to our contact lists in order to communicate, I will delete you from my contact list immediately following the completion of the interview.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask. Again, your participation in this study is voluntary; you may quit at any time without fear of penalty.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Lindsay M. Henry

APPENDIX F

CONFIRMATION OF PARTICIPANT COMPLETION

To: Study Participant

From: Lindsay M. Henry

Re: Research Study Confirmation of Completion

Dear Participant,

This e-mail is to confirm your participation in Lindsay M. Henry's research study, "Female Physical Appearance and Romantic Relationship Termination." As previously stated, your e-mail address will be placed in a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift card. The winner will be randomly selected and informed via e-mail once all research data are collected. If you win, the electronic gift card will be sent to your e-mail address.

If you are a student whose instructor offered extra credit for your participation in this study, please print this confirmation form and show to your instructor to receive the extra credit points.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Lindsay M. Henry
Graduate Student
Communication

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