

Research Article

Physically Attractive Women's Experiences of Gender Discrimination in Their Professional Careers

Fiziksel Çekici Kadınların Mesleki Kariyerlerinde Cinsiyet Ayrımcılığına Dair Deneyimleri

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Abstract

Because of the “beauty is good” stereotype, people who are physically attractive are linked to favorable traits in social interactions, performance reviews, and job decisions. Contrary to the stereotype that “beauty is good”, women who work in male-dominated sectors and are perceived as physically attractive may occasionally experience the impact of “beauty is beastly”. This study explores how physically attractive female captains who work in the male-dominated maritime business describe their experiences with prejudice. Qualitative interviews with female captains on several ships serve as the study's foundation. The study's conclusions demonstrate how gender stereotypes based on female captains' physical attributes restrict women from being deemed qualified for positions requiring technical proficiency. Furthermore, this study provides important insights into how women respond to perceptions that their work is incompatible with their gender and the strategies they adopt to overcome these perceptions.

Keywords: Women Seafarers, Femininity, Physical Attractiveness, Lack of Fit, Beauty is Beastly

Öz

“Güzellik iyidir” stereotipi nedeniyle, fiziksel olarak çekici olan bireyler sosyal etkileşimlerde, performans değerlendirmelerinde ve iş kararlarında olumlu özelliklerle ilişkilendirilmektedir. “Güzellik iyidir” stereotipinin aksine, erkek egemen sektörlerde çalışan ve fiziksel olarak çekici algılanan kadınlar, zaman zaman “güzellik sevimsizdir” etkisini deneyimleyebilmektedirler. Bu çalışma, erkek egemen denizcilik sektöründe çalışan fiziksel olarak çekici kadın kaptanların önyargılarla ilgili deneyimlerini nasıl anlattıklarını araştırmaktadır. Çeşitli gemilerdeki kadın kaptanlarla yapılan nitel görüşmeler, çalışmanın temelini oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, kadın kaptanların fiziksel özelliklerine dayanan cinsiyet stereotiplerinin, kadınların teknik yeterlilik gerektiren pozisyonlar için nitelikli kabul edilmelerini nasıl engellediğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca bu çalışma, kadınların yaptıkları işle uyumlu görülme algısına nasıl yanıt verdiklerine ve bu algının üstesinden gelmek için benimsedikleri stratejilere dair önemli içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın Denizciler, Kadınlık, Fiziksel Çekicilik, Uyum Eksikliği, Güzellik Sevimsizdir

1. Introduction

The business benefits of physical attractiveness have been increasingly recognized in recent years. It is seen in social research and academic studies that individuals perceived as attractive earn higher salaries and have more promotion opportunities in the organizations they work for (Gong, 2024; Johnson et al., 2018; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006; Wei-Jiong et al., 2020). However, despite these studies, it is not certain that physical attractiveness always brings positive returns, especially for women. It is stated that

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in professions where traditional gender norms are dominant, women who are perceived as attractive may face prejudices about their professional competencies (Johnson et al., 2010). Heilman's (1983) model of lack of fit suggests that if the gender characteristics deemed appropriate for women are not associated with the masculine qualities assumed to be required for occupational positions dominated by men, women will not be suitable for these occupations. The “beauty is beastly” effect, which is put forward in the background of the lack of fit model, states that physically attractive women may be perceived as less competent and unsuitable for professions that are attributed to be more masculine and power-centered (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Thus, when an individual's perceived gender and physical characteristics do not match professional jobs that require technical skills, leadership, or authority, it can raise doubts about their abilities. Discrimination can arise from this perceived mismatch.

Several studies investigating how physical attractiveness is perceived in the world of work provide valuable insights into the effects of appearance-based scrutiny of individuals on career development and professional relationships. The “beauty is good” stereotype, which argues that individuals with physical attractiveness have access to favorable opportunities at work, is supported by the majority of these studies (Demuthova & Demuth, 2023; Hosoda et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1999; Wei-Jiong et al., 2020). However, in male-dominated sectors, evaluations based on physical appearance, along with gender stereotypes, are important in understanding the invisible barriers that may limit women's access to career opportunities (Johnson & Chan, 2019). Therefore, examining how gender stereotypes and physical attractiveness affect societal expectations and attitudes, especially toward attractive women, is essential to understanding how these views affect professional relationships and expectations. Furthermore, the absence of laws that effectively protect female employees from discrimination based on their physical attractiveness or appearance in male-dominated industries makes empirical research that explores the extent and consequences of discrimination in this area even more important.

This study examines in depth the experiences of women working as long-distance captains in the maritime sector due to their physical attractiveness and the prejudice they experience based on the “beauty is beastly” effect. Heilman's (1983) lack of fit model and the “beauty is beastly” effect form the basis of the theoretical framework of the study (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Existing literature consists of quantitative studies focusing on the effects of physical attractiveness on hiring decisions, often focusing on a specific moment of the assessment process and limited interaction settings. This study, however, focuses on the unique contexts in which female captains, perceived as attractive, often serve as the only woman in months of confined living and working conditions in the male-dominated maritime industry. This context offers an environment in which not only professional but also social relations are constantly and seamlessly intertwined, thus providing a new ground for understanding how gender biases based on physical appearance are experienced. While in many land-based professions it is possible to physically and socially separate from work life by returning home at the end of the day, in the maritime sector, such separation is not possible. The findings on how participants cope with prejudices based on physical appearance in a 24/7 professional and social environment shed light on an important gap in the literature that has not been adequately addressed in this context.

This study adopts a phenomenological research design to understand the repercussions of gender and physical appearance-based prejudices and discrimination in the work lives of female captains. By addressing the effects of the intersection of physical attractiveness and gender in occupational contexts, this study provides new empirical insights to the literature in this field. First, it investigates how stereotypes about the physical attractiveness of female captains affect their experiences at work in a male-dominated field such as maritime. It shows how gender norms and occupational role expectations shape these stereotypes. Second, it provides an empirical contribution to the literature on responses to discrimination based on physical appearance by examining the coping mechanisms employed by attractive women in the face of discriminatory attitudes and actions based on physical appearance.

2. Evaluation of Female Physical Attractiveness in Scientific Studies

The effect of subjective assessments of physical appearance and beauty on labor market outcomes has garnered a lot of attention in the social sciences in recent years (Aumeboonsuke, 2018; Johnson & Chan, 2019; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Maheshwari et al., 2024; Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016; Timming

et al., 2021; Usmani, 2020). In scientific studies in this area, the terms "physical beauty" and "physical attractiveness" are frequently employed interchangeably and lack a distinguishing meaning (see Aharoni & Ayalon, 2024; Daffin & Lane, 2021; Hoskin & Moody, 2023; Keyser-Verreault, 2021; Keyser-Verreault, 2023; Treviños-Rodríguez & Díaz-Soloaga, 2023). Physical beauty, according to Aumeboonsuke (2018), is the opinion that a person's physical attributes are attractive or pleasant. Considering this definition, the concepts of physical beauty and attractiveness have an intertwined meaning in the perceptions of individuals, and it can be said that this meaning confirms the studies in the literature.

It is considered that assessments of women's physical attractiveness are widely accepted in scientific circles (Aharoni & Ayalon, 2024; Currie & Little, 2009; Gao et al., 2018; Lee & Lee, 2019). Studies in the social sciences literature emphasize that the perception of physical attractiveness may vary from individual to individual and the subjective nature of this perception and the effects of socio-cultural factors (Mowen & Heitkamp, 2023; Sanders et al., 2023). However, Aumeboonsuke (2018) states in the study that although physical attractiveness is generally perceived as subjective, societies have a common view on who is attractive and who is not, even among different cultures. In line with this view, the findings of experimental studies, especially in the international psychology literature, reveal the universal features of the perception of physical attractiveness and how this perception is associated with cognitive processes based on superficial features. These findings emphasize in detail how brain structure and functioning support the perception of physical attractiveness based on appearance (see Buggio et al., 2012; Dural et al., 2015; Furnham et al., 1998; Hoskin & Moody, 2023; Lynn, 2009; Singh, 2004; Sorokowski et al., 2011; Tovee et al., 1999; Weeden & Sabini, 2005).

The experimental studies in the psychology literature mentioned above show that the generally accepted characteristics that increase women's physical attractiveness are based on universal specific factors such as waist-to-shoulder ratio, waist-to-hip curvature (hourglass figure), body weight, height, leg-to-body ratio, and breast size (see Buggio et al., 2012; Furnham et al., 1998; Hoskin & Moody, 2023; Kowal et al., 2022; Lindsay et al., 2024; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Lynn, 2009; Singh, 2004; Sorokowski et al., 2011; Tovee et al., 1999; Weeden & Sabini, 2005). These studies show that these features are recognized as critical factors determining physical attractiveness for almost everyone and shape the general perception of physical attractiveness. In addition, in the psychology literature, studies have found that the most attractive faces are those in which the distances between facial features and the length and width of the face itself are in line with the averages (Pallet et al., 2010). In addition, high forehead, large eyes, small chin, prominent cheekbones, full lips, small nose, fair skin, and a made-up appearance were identified as features that increase female facial attractiveness (see Baudouin & Tiberghien, 2004; Buggio et al., 2012; Cellerino, 2003; Little et al., 2011; Rhodes et al., 1999). Based on this information, in this study, the characterization of women who are perceived as physically attractive will take into account the other physical attractiveness features mentioned above, rather than facial attractiveness features. Buggio et al. (2012) underline that physical attractiveness traits are more reliably characterized than facial attractiveness traits. This statement explains the reasons for and the importance of the choice made for the study and also provides a strengthened argument with support from the literature. Similarly, Gangestad & Scheyd (2005) state that women with a more feminine physical appearance are considered more physically attractive than women with a more masculine appearance. Hönn & Göz (2007) also state that physical attractiveness is interpreted according to generally accepted criteria. These studies show that these criteria act as shaping factors in influencing the perception of attractiveness.

3. The Relationship Between Perception of Occupational Inadequacy and Physical Attractiveness in Male-Dominated Roles

Physical attractiveness is an important factor that determines how individuals are viewed by society and their careers in various contexts (Hosoda et al., 2003; Marlowe et al., 1996). Physical attractiveness functions as an important indicator used in social evaluations of physical appearance in the eyes of others. It is often linked to beliefs that people have better living conditions, lead fulfilling lives, and have more socially desirable personality traits (Anderson, 1978; Dion et al., 1972). The "beauty is good" stereotype proposed by Dion et al. (1972) forms the basis of this view. Recent empirical studies show that physical attractiveness has a significant impact on positive outcomes in organizational life and that this stereotype extends beyond interpersonal perceptions. This reflects the strong and often decisive

influence of aesthetic values on social structures (see Hale et al., 2023; Hu & Sun, 2024; Kukkonen et al., 2024; Kunst et al., 2022; Nault et al., 2020; Niu, 2024). The stereotype that “beauty is good” may not always be true. In many ways, physical attractiveness can be harmful, especially when it intersects with gender roles. A woman's physical attractiveness can make her gender visible, leading gender stereotypes to come into play more strongly, which can result in more negative evaluations of women working in positions that are attributed to the male gender (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Johnson et al., 2010). In order to understand such assumptions more systematically, theoretical approaches that explain how physical attractiveness is not only limited to individual perceptions but can also produce discrimination when it intersects with gender stereotypes are gaining importance. One of the main theoretical approaches used to explain the preconceived assumptions about women's lack of competence in male-dominated professions is the lack of fit model developed by Heilman (1983). Heilman's (1983) model of lack of fit brings together gender stereotypes, labor market contexts, and appearance-based gender cues to highlight the discrimination women face, particularly in male-dominated roles. Gender stereotypes are beliefs attributed to individuals based on their gender category. For the most part, women are attributed fewer agentic traits, while men are attributed more agentic traits. Traits associated with agentic characteristics, male-type jobs, and leadership responsibilities include aggression, ambition, independence, assertiveness, self-confidence, and analytical skills (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender stereotypes trigger the idea that women lack the agentic traits needed to be successful in occupations perceived as male-specific (Heilman et al., 1989). This idea leads to a mismatch between societal expectations for women and the qualifications required by the professions in question and leads to the perception of women's presence in organizations as “incompatible” and consequently to the formation of discriminatory attitudes. As the perceived inconsistency increases, doubts about women's competence in these occupations also increase, and as a result, the performance expectations of these women become more negative (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). The lack of fit model may be particularly important for understanding the underrepresentation of women in certain occupational fields. Heilman and Stopeck (1985) introduced the “beauty is beastly” effect as an extension of this model and examined how the association of physical attractiveness with femininity affects occupational suitability assessments. The beauty is beastly effect explains that physical attractiveness creates an impression that enhances femininity, which leads to more negative evaluations of women's occupational performance in occupational roles traditionally associated with men (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Many studies support this. According to these studies, physically attractive women are less likely to be hired and promoted in male-dominated industries or management positions than less attractive women and male candidates of all attractiveness levels (see Braun et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2014; Johnson & Chan, 2019; Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016). This is explained by the fact that societal stereotypes of attractive women turn into negative emotional attitudes (prejudices) over time; this process leads to their professionalism being questioned more and their competencies not being taken seriously.

While women have made significant progress in organizational life, their participation in occupations in male-dominated sectors is significantly lower (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). As mentioned earlier, individual characteristics that make gender visible (attractiveness and beauty) can trigger gender bias. In particular, the very small number of women in male-dominated jobs makes gender salient, leading to more stereotypical identification of women; these stereotypes become more visible and effective when combined with the widespread belief that success is largely based on “masculine” competencies (Johnson et al., 2010). As Paustian-Underdahl and Walker (2016) argue, attractiveness erodes women's perceived agency and increases their perceived femininity, feeding into the idea of a lack of suitability for women, especially in male-dominated occupations. Accordingly, attractiveness may be thought to affect stereotypes of occupational suitability differently for men and women, especially in occupations where gender norms operate differently.

The theoretical framework discussed above provides a strong basis for understanding how the intersection of physical attractiveness and gender shapes women's perceptions of professional competence, especially in male-dominated workplaces. However, there are very limited studies in this literature that examine the effects of physical attractiveness on women's organizational representation based on the experiences of women themselves. This study qualitatively examines how such perceptions

affect professional advancement paths by focusing on the experiences of female captains working in the maritime industry, which is characterized by its male-dominated structure.

4. METHOD

4.1. Research Design

In this study, the phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used to thoroughly investigate and interpret phenomena that are aware of but not fully understood (Tekindal & Uğuz, 2020). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that allows individuals to explain their understanding, feelings, perspectives, and perceptions regarding a particular phenomenon and is used to reveal how they experience that phenomenon (Lim, 2024; Tekindal & Uğuz, 2020). In this study, a phenomenological research design was adopted to examine in detail and in depth how female captains, who are perceived as attractive and beautiful, experience the discriminatory behaviors they encounter at work and how these situations are reflected in their professional lives. For this reason, the phenomenological approach preferred in this study enables a deeper understanding of experiences that are often silenced or rendered invisible within normative frameworks by allowing participants' own voices to be heard directly (Lim, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.2. Participants

Maritime shipping has long been defined as a historically male-dominated profession with extremely low representation of women (Kitada, 2017). In fact, according to estimates by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), only 1 to 2 percent of the approximately 1.25 million seafarers working in the maritime sector worldwide are women. This ratio demonstrates the underrepresentation of women in the maritime sector and may also contribute to the emergence of gender-based norms and role expectations in shipboard life (Senbursa, 2025). In maritime transport, particularly captain positions, roles representing authority in the ship hierarchy have generally been associated with men. Currently, resistance to the presence of women in roles requiring physical strength, leadership, and technical expertise, such as ship management, persists. For example, Cordon and colleagues (2020) note that many men still do not consider it appropriate for women to be on ship, especially in physically demanding jobs, and that this leads to questioning women's competence.

This study only includes female captains employed on tankers and cargo ships. Passenger ships, yachts, ferries, fishing boats, and naval vessels are not included in the scope of the study because tankers and cargo ships clearly differ from other types of ships in terms of employment conditions, operational discipline, and crew structure. Therefore, including female captains employed on ship other than tankers and cargo ships in the scope of the study carries the risk of obscuring the organizational context on which the study focuses. This study centers on the experiences of female captains who are physically attractive and perceived as beautiful; because these women are positioned in a more vulnerable and sensitive situation in a male-dominated sector, facing gender stereotypes based on their appearance.

A considerable portion of the participants are employed alongside a crew of approximately twenty men and actively work as the only female captain on the ship during voyages lasting several months. Such a striking gender imbalance can create an environment where female captains' professional competence is questioned due to their physical attractiveness, their abilities are underestimated, and they face appearance-based discriminatory attitudes. Therefore, understanding the experiences of female captains perceived as attractive is critical to explaining how appearance-based prejudices and discriminatory behaviors emerge in professions like seafaring, where men are significantly overrepresented. Tankers and cargo ships where participants actively work are notable for their confined living quarters, long shift schedules, and strict hierarchical structure; these conditions directly determine female captains' professional interactions and social relationships. Participants stated that they typically spend approximately eight months of the year at sea and that their sleep is interrupted due to the strict shift system implemented while underway. They noted that this situation leads to intense physical fatigue and emotional exhaustion over time. Furthermore, these captains stated that prolonged social isolation at sea, limited personal space, and male-dominated command structures affect their daily work experiences and their psychological resilience. This situation provides a meaningful and valuable background for understanding the appearance-based discrimination and gender-based interactions experienced by female captains on the ships where they work.

Due to the nature of the maritime industry, it is often not possible to reach multiple female captains at the same time. The low number of female captains employed in this sector created a significant constraint in the sampling process, making it difficult to reach potential participants. Thus, the snowball sampling technique, recognized as an effective method for reaching hard-to-reach groups, was used in this study (Bell et al., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach, chosen by the researcher, reduced the access difficulties arising from the low number of female captains in the maritime sector and enabled the collection of in-depth data in line with the study's objectives. The researcher first reached out to a female captain using her industry-wide social connections and then, with her guidance, contacted other female captains. The researcher compiled a list of 16 female captains, and a preliminary interview was scheduled with the female captains on this list. The researcher conducted the preliminary interviews to determine whether the participants met the study criteria and to clarify the final sample. During the preliminary interviews, participants were asked about their active employment on ships, the types of ships they worked on, their assessment of their physical appearance, and how their peers perceived them. As a result of preliminary interviews, four potential participants were found not to meet the criteria defined for the study and were therefore excluded. During the selection process, the other potential participants were determined to be eligible based on the research criteria (being female, being a Turkish citizen, being actively employed on tankers and cargo ships, being perceived as physically attractive). In this way, the sample was structured to enable a comprehensive assessment of gender-based experiences related to perceptions of physical attractiveness, in line with the study's objective. The female captains included in the study varied in terms of seniority, position (e.g., Chief Officer, Second Officer, Third Officer), and length of service. In participant selection, the socially constructed qualities of the concepts of “attractiveness” and “beauty,” which form the focus of the study, were taken into account. In this context, social evaluation criteria that cause physical characteristics such as height, weight, body proportion, and general appearance to be perceived as “attractive” or “beautiful” by the external environment were considered. The basic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

In the phenomenological approach, priority is given to rich descriptions that enable the reader to make meaningful comparisons with similar situations, rather than to generalization (Tekindal & Uğuz, 2020). In this study, considering the structural characteristics of the sector (female representation, hierarchy, shift schedules, and dynamic voyage arrangements), ship types (tanker/cargo), work-life conditions, the conditions under which the interviews took place (online), and the diversity of the sample, the findings of the study lay the groundwork for transferability to environments with similar operational and demographic conditions.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

S#	Pseudonym	Age ^a	Job
1	Hülya	34	Chief Officer
2	Buket	26	Second Officer
3	İpek	28	Second Officer
4	Özge	33	Chief Officer
5	Merve	28	Second Officer
6	Duygu	26	Third Officer
7	Selen	34	Chief Officer
8	Melek	27	Second Officer
9	Yasemin	26	Third Officer
10	Begüm	33	Chief Officer
11	Zuhal	28	Second Officer
12	Tuğba	31	Chief Officer

Note: ^aRefers to the age of the interviewees during the interview.

4.3. Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained through semi-structured individual interviews. The interview form consisted of open-ended questions designed for participants who described themselves as attractive and beautiful and were perceived as such in their organizations. The questions included in the interview form were developed by the researcher after a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. The interview form was reviewed by two academics working in the field of organizational behavior, and the questions were finalized after expert opinions were obtained. The interview form consisted of questions that prioritized participants' voices and perspectives, allowing them to influence the flow and content of the questions. Open-ended questions were effective in revealing the experiences of discrimination faced by female captains perceived as attractive and beautiful on the ships they worked on (e.g., "How do you think your physical appearance is perceived on the ships you worked on? Have you experienced any discrimination or unfair treatment due to your physical appearance on the ships you worked on?"). Subsequently, questions were asked to understand participants' reactions to such experiences and the coping methods they developed in this context (e.g., "How would you like to be perceived at work? What do you do to be perceived that way?"). The interview structure was carefully designed to be logically consistent with the research questions. In this way, the in-depth and semi-structured interview format allowed participants to freely express their own experiences and perspectives through open-ended questions.

At the beginning of the study, each participant was provided with detailed information about the purpose, scope, and stages of the study, and care was taken to create a friendly environment to make participants feel comfortable. Each participant was given a consent form, informed about the right to anonymity and confidentiality, and provided with the necessary information that they could withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interviews. Throughout the data collection process, value was placed on researcher reflexivity; the researcher was mindful of the possibility that their own preconceptions and personal experiences could influence the data and maintained a careful attitude (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The fact that the researcher was female and Turkish, like the participants, contributed to creating a trusting, sensitive, and tolerant communication environment during the interviews. Furthermore, considering that these shared identity characteristics could pose a risk of subjectivity in the data collection and analysis process, the researcher took great care to interpret participants' statements independently of her own experiences in order to reduce this risk. With this approach, the transparency of the research process and the reliability of the findings were ensured.

The interviews were conducted via an online platform (Zoom) due to the participants' long working hours, heavy workload, and different geographical locations. This approach overcame access difficulties and allowed participants to describe and present their experiences in more detail and at ease within their own circumstances. The time slots when participants felt most comfortable were taken into consideration, and each interview was designed to fit the time slots deemed suitable by the participants. Due to the nature of the maritime industry, participants face highly intense and unpredictable working conditions while at sea. As a result, the researcher established regular communication with participants via the WhatsApp application in order to facilitate the interview process and ensure continuity. This communication helped identify suitable interview times, ensured consistent communication, and played an important role in developing a trust-based research relationship with participants. Furthermore, the online interviews conducted within the scope of this study are widely accepted as a valid and reportable data collection method in qualitative research, enabling the collection of comprehensive data despite participants' location and time constraints. As the interviews progressed, it was determined that the data collected began to reveal similar patterns, and thematic saturation was determined to have been reached by the end of the eleventh interview. It was understood that no new conceptual insights emerged in the subsequent interview. Therefore, after the twelfth interview, the data were considered sufficiently rich, and the data collection process was terminated (Guest et al., 2006). The interview data were systematically collected between March 2025 and April 2025 in line with the objectives of this study. Each interview lasted between 75 and 130 minutes; with the participants' consent, they were recorded digitally and transcribed in full. In the findings section, codes were used instead of names in direct quotations to protect the confidentiality of participants' personal information. Furthermore, this research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University on 26/08/2020-E.50718.

4.4. The Researcher's Position and Epoché

In this study, the researcher has taken into account the process of “epoché,” one of the main principles of the phenomenological approach. The researcher shares the same cultural background (Turkish) and gender (female) as the participants but is not involved in the maritime sector. Furthermore, the topics of physical attractiveness, gender roles, and professional suitability, which are the subjects of the study, also fall within the researcher's personal awareness as a woman. This situation could have led to the development of an empathetic scope in understanding the participants' experiences and could also have caused the risk of subjective interpretation that might arise. Therefore, at the beginning of the research process, the researcher noted his own preconceptions, social beliefs about beauty and gender perception, and potential biases, and evaluated these notes continuously and regularly throughout the interviews and analysis. During the data collection process, the researcher took care not to influence participants' narratives by limiting their own interpretations. In addition, care has been taken to ensure that the themes obtained are based solely on participant statements and that subjective inferences are limited. This approach demonstrates that the researcher set methodological boundaries based on her own awareness of her female identity and approached the participants' experiences in an unbiased and sensitive manner. As a result, the process of “epoché” (suspension of judgment), which supports the deepening of validity and reliability in phenomenological studies, was implemented throughout the entire study.

4.5. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted based on a phenomenological approach. The analysis process was developed in an open, systematic, and iterative manner, using the principles of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), from the raw data to the final themes. First, the data obtained with the voice recorder was transcribed into written text by the researcher, and each interview transcript was read independently several times to identify meaningful statements reflecting the participants' experiences.

In the subsequent phase, open coding was applied based on meaningful statements related to physical attractiveness, gender roles, and professional identity. The coding process was conducted manually; statements representing each participant's experience were labeled with short, descriptive tags. While maintaining continuity with the existing literature (Tuckett, 2005) during the coding process, it also allowed for the emergence of new phenomena not previously reported. At this stage, particular attention was paid to all data segments related to the experiences of discriminatory behavior in the workplace by women perceived as attractive and beautiful (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After the coding process, the researcher presented the preliminary code list to an academic expert in the field (specializing in gender studies). This process was carried out to strengthen consistency, credibility, and accuracy in the coding. First, the expert worked on the preliminary code list created by the researcher. Then, the researcher and the expert worked independently on defining the codes and determining the boundaries of the themes, and then compared their code sets. In cases of disagreement, the meaning of the codes was re-examined with the participants' statements; discussions continued until consensus was reached. For example, in one participant's narrative: “The port representative said to me, ‘What is someone so beautiful doing on the bridge?’, and then made me repeat my maneuver in front of the team.” This statement was coded by the researcher as “doubt about professional competence based on physical attractiveness” and by the expert as “sexualization of appearance.” Following discussions, the code “suspicion of competence based on physical attractiveness” was determined to be the final code, as it was considered to most clearly represent the work experience and meaning line, and was recorded in the analytic memo.

Following the coding phase, codes with similar meaning patterns were grouped, and subthemes were designed from these groups. Subthemes were continuously evaluated by comparing them with participant statements, renamed or merged when necessary. For example, the sub-themes “comments on physical appearance” and “role attributions based on physical attractiveness” were developed as two distinct sub-themes. However, it was determined that the narratives under these sub-themes contained similar patterns of meaning and that the codes overlapped significantly. In this regard, the sub-theme “comments on physical appearance” was incorporated into the sub-theme “role attributions based on physical attractiveness” to achieve analytical consistency. During this process, the distinguishability of

the sub-themes and their compatibility with the data summaries were reviewed (Patton, 2014). Subsequently, the sub-themes were clarified in terms of their meaning dimensions, inter-sub-theme relationships, and representativeness of participant experiences; each sub-theme was defined and conceptually classified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the final stage, all participant narratives were compared to identify commonalities in their experiences, resulting in the clarification of a shared essence that comprehensively represents the experiences of female captains. The shared essence consists of role attributions based on physical attractiveness, vocational qualification effort in the shadow of physical appearance, controlling visual representations, and cautious attitudes towards the social approach due to the physical attractiveness of female captains.

Throughout all stages of the analysis process, the researcher kept reflexive memos and recorded the decisions made during this process in chronological order. For example, when coding a participant's statement, "Being the only woman on the ship drew attention and required me to keep my distance," the researcher considered whether their own interpretations reflected the participant's experience and wrote a note about this conscious awareness in their reflexive memos. This approach reflects the transparency and traceability of the process from raw data to themes; it reveals how the findings were interpreted. In this way, the analysis process was carried out in accordance with the methodological rigor and sensitivity expected in phenomenological studies and presented a framework that can be replicated in similar studies. Table 2 reflects the data structure that emerged in the study.

4.6. Credibility of the Study

In this study, reflective practices specified in the phenomenological research approach were adopted to deepen the credibility of qualitative data. During the interview process, the researcher asked explanatory and exploratory questions to understand participants' experiences holistically and clarify the meanings they expressed in context. By asking participants questions such as "Could you elaborate on this issue a little more?" or "Could you explain this with examples from your own experiences?", the researcher enabled participants' emotional, perceptual, and experiential worlds to become more distinct. This approach helped the researcher separate his subjective interpretations from the participants' narratives and ensured that the data was structured in a way that was unique to the participants' perspectives. In addition, the findings revealed during the analysis process were regularly compared with the participants' statements. This process significantly increased the phenomenological scope and credibility of the study.

Although multiple interviews and observations could not be conducted with the participants, this situation is related to the nature of the study. The maritime sector has a considerably closed structure in terms of workload, duty periods, and operational conditions. Female captains work at sea for extended periods away from land, with limited internet access and very little time spent on land. Thus, additional data collection methods such as repeated interviews or on-site observations could not be implemented in the context of this study. Despite these limitations, the researcher developed a relationship based on trust with the participants and took care to strengthen the scope and representativeness of the data by spreading the communication process over a long period of time. This approach aimed to achieve the methodological sensitivity and credibility desired in qualitative research while preserving the contextual reality of the study.

5. FINDINGS

Experiences of attractive female captains in the seafaring workforce

Participants' accounts of their experiences on the ship correspond to four themes: Role attributions based on physical attractiveness (Theme 1), vocational qualification effort in the shadow of physical appearance (Theme 2), controlling visual representations (Theme 3), cautious attitudes towards the social approach (Theme 4).

Table 2: Data Structure on the Experiences of Female Captains Perceived as Attractive

Overarching themes	Emergent themes	Exemplar quotes
Experiences of attractive female captains in the seafaring workforce	Theme 1: Role Attributions Based on Physical Attractiveness	<i>If you want to go down to the hold, they say 15 meters, don't go down. I say this is my duty, I have to do this, but they say your fingernails will get spoiled. No, I have gloves, and my nails were cut from the bottom or bitten. (Yasemin)</i> <i>The captain had been on the ship for 2 weeks, I had been on the ship for 3 months. I was chatting with him when he was working the night shift, it was early in the conversation. ... He asked me what is wrong with you, why are you working on the ship? I didn't understand at that moment why he asked me such a thing. I respectfully explained that I loved this profession very much. ... Then he said you need to have a computerized tomography scan of your brain, there must be something wrong with your brain. ... I thought it was going nowhere, so I didn't pursue the subject further. It was one of the strangest conversations I've ever had. (İpek)</i>
	Theme 2: Vocational Qualification Effort in the Shadow of Physical Appearance	<i>I don't like to ask for too much help in doing my job, because I think it makes it open to interpretation and questioning. This time, they might think, this girl can't do it anyway, why is she here? I mean, they think I am weak because I look physically delicate, thin, and tall. Whereas I'm muscular because I do sports, I'm really strong. ... They see me as weak and think that I can't do heavy work. So I try to do it as much as I can without any help. Usually, the 2nd captain tries to give me someone to help me. (Duygu)</i>
	Theme 3: Controlling Visual Representations	<i>I try to live on the ship by minimizing my femininity, for example, I wear baggy clothes. ... My t-shirt is already oversized. ... I never choose clothes that show my body lines. But being colorful gives me joy in this kind of environment. (Melek)</i> <i>Long and well-groomed nails are something that makes me happy, but I always wear short nails on the ship, and I don't even prefer to wear nail polish. (Merve)</i>
	Theme 4: Cautious Attitudes towards the Social Approach	<i>We use the same space as everyone else on the ship ... There is a constant interaction. ... Outside of work I try to keep my distance because after a certain point intimacy can be perceived differently. ... Over time I've become more selective; I think more about who I interact with, how much I interact with them, where I stand. I don't get too involved, and I don't stay away completely. (Zuhal)</i> <i>When I first join the ship, I am distant. I try not to let anyone into the boundary I have created in that process, but I think the biggest reason for this is that I work with men, and this job is prone to misunderstanding. (Özge)</i>

Theme 1: Role attributions based on physical attractiveness

In participant narratives, it is seen that appearance, which is associated with physical attractiveness, brings with it certain role attributions towards female captains. In this context, participants stated that they were subjected to various verbal expressions and attitudes based on their appearance while carrying out their duties. In the relevant narratives, it is noteworthy that the attitudes displayed through the participants' appearance can affect the distribution of tasks, communication styles, or perception of seriousness related to their professional responsibilities. Expectations and assumptions associated with beauty, grooming, or clothing preferences are sometimes protective and sometimes condescending. This sub-theme includes narratives that reveal how physical attractiveness is made meaningful in social and professional attitudes towards female captains:

For example, the senior captains on the ships I work on don't allow me to let my hair down or they don't allow me to wear perfume. ... They see it as a provocation, but they themselves wear perfume. ... Some of them openly say I don't want to work with a woman captain. ... Because they say you are trying to deceive the other captains with your crying appearance. But if I were an ugly woman, there would still be this discrimination, but it would be half and half. (Buket)

Buket's narrative reveals that physical attractiveness functions both as an aesthetic feature and as an element that directly affects the way professional roles are perceived. In particular, appearance-based references to female captains overshadow their professional identities and, combined with sexist assumptions, lead to the questioning of their professional competence. The rules and prejudices in the participant's statement are also directed towards appearance and the norms represented by being a woman. This suggests that women face more intense role constraints when they are present and physically attractive.

The meanings attributed to physical attractiveness can shape perceptions of both appearance and occupational characteristics such as intellectual competence and physical endurance:

There are times on the ship when I think you slip into the perception of the dumb blonde. You don't know, I'll show you, I'll tell you. ... I've learned to manage it now. We're supposed to carry loads that are within human strength, and they tell me, "Don't carry it, what load can you carry?". ... There are some situations, especially in jobs that require attention and analytical intelligence, like maneuvering... For example, we have to intervene manually to ensure that the wire ropes with press oils are wound correctly. At that time, they might say, "Wait, don't get your shirt dirty now." (Merve)

Merve's narrative shows that prejudices based on physical attractiveness are not limited to aesthetics, but are also reflected in the areas of cognitive capacity and physical competence. The introduction of sexist stereotypes such as "stupid blonde" causes the technical skills of the female captain to be underestimated and excluded through a protective language. Expressions such as "don't get your top dirty" imply that the roles deemed appropriate for women are not professional but appearance-based, and point to symbolic exclusion that disrupts the construction of professional identity.

It shows that physical attractiveness causes female captains to be perceived as less serious by deviating from their professional roles, and this may damage the relationship they establish with their professional identities:

Obviously I think I'm beautiful and I often hear that from people around me, especially on the ship. ... There was a captain who always called me sunshine. ... Sometimes people say things like "you're beautiful but you're too much for this ship" or "why are you working here, you could be a model". Maybe they think it's a compliment, but it's not very nice for me. Because I really wanted to do this job. ... I want to do this job, and I don't think it should have anything to do with my appearance. Sometimes it bothers me when my appearance is brought up. (Duygu)

Duygu's narrative shows how physical attractiveness comes to the fore in everyday communication in a way that overshadows women's professional existence. Addresses such as "Sunshine" or expressions such as "you are too much for this ship" ignore the participant's professional identity and reduce her to an aesthetic object. The participant's emphasis on "I want to do this profession" shows that her professional motivation conflicts with judgments about appearance.

Theme 2: Vocational qualification effort in the shadow of physical appearance

In participant narratives, it is noteworthy that physical appearance can have a determining effect on perceptions of the professional competencies of female captains. In particular, the participants stated that their knowledge, experience, and technical competencies sometimes took a backseat in the performance of their duties. In this context, the participants stated that although they fulfill their duties well, perceptions of their appearance take precedence over their professional identity; therefore, they have to make more effort to make their professional competencies visible:

I think I am good at what I do. ... My evaluations are always very high, and I have promotion suggestions for the next position. Unfortunately, I get reactions from people who know about it, like she gets it because she is already beautiful. This is very hurtful for me because I know how much work I put in. ... If a man works one job, I always have to work 5 or 10 to show and prove myself. This is very tiring for me, both psychologically and physically. (Yasemin)

Yasemin's narrative shows that physical attractiveness has the potential to overshadow professional achievements and that this situation causes the labor of women captains to become invisible. The perception of attractiveness and competency-based achievements as an “unfair advantage” caused the participant to feel the need to constantly prove her professional legitimacy. This creates a psychological and physical burden at the individual level and limits women's opportunities for equal consideration.

In cases where physical appearance triggers prejudices about professional competence, participants report having to make extra efforts to prove their competence:

Especially when I first join the ship, they don't know anything about me. Because they judge who this girl is only by appearance. In fact, I get a lot of feedback in this way. But then I get reactions like I didn't expect that you could work so well, that your knowledge could be so good. ... But I tried very hard to make it this way. Because on a ship where there are a lot of men, we need to put more effort and effort both theoretically and practically. Because if I don't do it this way, because of my appearance, I will never fit in this profession, and the negative thoughts will always be there. ... This girl's appearance is not suitable for this place, she probably doesn't know anything. If a man did half of what I do, I am sure he would get much more appreciation. (Buket)

Buket's narrative shows that first impressions based on physical attractiveness lead to disregard of professional competence. Especially in male-dominated environments, it is stated that in order for competence to be recognized, it is necessary to both fulfill tasks and make more effort. This causes women to have to spend more effort than their male counterparts despite working in the same position.

Theme 3: Controlling visual representations

Participant narratives reveal that female captains have a high awareness of their physical appearance and make conscious efforts to regulate their appearance in accordance with the professional environment in which they work. The participants' efforts to control their visual representations stand out as both a personal preference and a conscious behavior shaped to prevent their professional competence from being questioned, to avoid attracting excessive attention, and to maintain their professional seriousness. In closed and male-dominated work environments such as the ship, this awareness to avoid attracting attention, to maintain a professional appearance, and to preserve professional dignity is clearly reflected throughout the narratives. Participants constantly consider how their appearance is perceived while performing their duties:

The clothes I prefer on the ship are something I pay a lot of attention to. I try to dress like a man. I always wear loose clothes, and I don't take too much care of myself. I always prefer a loose tracksuit, a loose t-shirt, or sneakers on my feet. ... Even when I go down to the port, I don't wear clothes that are open, that show the lines of my body, I prefer much more closed clothes than I do in my normal life. Because I don't feel comfortable around men. ... I don't want to be exposed to men's looks, maybe their interest or comments. (Zuhal)

Zuhal's narrative shows that the discomfort of physical appearance becoming a potential object of attention is tried to be managed through clothing choices. In male-dominated environments, female captains keep their bodies away from visibility in order to protect themselves from disturbing looks and

to emphasize their professional identities. This situation reveals that visual representation works as a strategy to protect professional prestige.

Participants develop a strong awareness that their physical appearance may be misinterpreted in the work environment and make strategic choices to keep their appearance in the background in order to avoid such perceptions:

There are always thoughts like she's dressed tight, she's dressed flamboyantly, she's trying to show herself, she's trying to sail the ship in another way. There are thoughts that she prefers another way rather than her job. Ships are environments suitable for this. As a character, I never like these thoughts. That's why I don't leave myself open to this kind of comment. That's why this is the issue I pay the most attention to. ... I'm always uncomfortable with my physical appearance, and wearing tight flashy clothes makes me 2 times as uncomfortable. So I try to cover myself more. (Selen)

Selen deliberately downplays her appearance in order to avoid the interpretation of her physical attractiveness in the ship environment in a way that would overshadow her professional competence. This shows that women may have to limit their visibility in order to maintain their professional legitimacy.

Theme 4: Cautious attitudes towards the social approach

Participants' narratives emphasize the attention and selectivity that develop over time regarding the quality of social interactions. In a closed working environment such as a ship, where women captains live together all the time, they shared their experiences that communication with positive intentions can sometimes be perceived in different ways. Accordingly, it was observed that the participants behaved more carefully and moderately in social relations and consciously regulated their visibility and level of communication in social settings. A common pattern emerged in the narratives that this arrangement aims to avoid comments or prejudices that may be encountered in institutional and social contexts.

Having to rethink the meaning of physical attractiveness in social relationships, participants tended to protect themselves from possible misunderstandings by adopting more distant and boundary-setting forms of communication over time:

For example, being distant and being able to set boundaries for people have developed over time. When I was in my internship, I was a smiling person who was warmer to everyone. By the way, I also like to talk, especially if they are people from different cultures. I want to meet them and chat with them. But over time, I realized that this can be misunderstood a lot. ... There are people who want to take it to other places just because I smile or because I am warm-blooded, people who approach me with other intentions, or people who think that I am weak. So I protected myself in this way by being distant. (Duygu)

Duygu experienced that physical attractiveness can be misinterpreted when combined with warm and open forms of communication. Over time, this made it necessary for her to learn to be more distant and set boundaries in social relationships. This suggests that attractive women reorganize their communication styles to reduce their visibility.

The visibility created by constant interaction in the shipboard environment led attractive female captains to develop a more cautious attitude in their social relationships. This shows that they reshaped their communication practices over time:

When I first started my job, I was more relaxed. I didn't think too much about how I would be perceived. But as time passed, I started to notice some looks, some insinuations. Maybe nothing is said directly, but you feel it. ... Inevitably, you start to behave more carefully. You try to create a space for yourself. For example, you take care not to approach everyone in the same way, and not to be around too much during free time. Because even if you mean well, sometimes you can be misunderstood. ... I'm now weighing up more how much I talk to whom, how I react, how I react. (Melek)

Melek's narrative reveals that attractive female captains feel the need to act more strategically in their social interactions over time. The fact that even simple expressions or gestures in everyday relationships can be interpreted in different ways causes women to act more distant, controlled, and selective in order

to protect themselves. This can be considered a form of self-protection that aims to protect professional boundaries and avoid misunderstandings.

6. Discussion

This study reveals how the intersection of physical attractiveness and gender affects perceptions of female captains' professional competence and how these perceptions affect their professional position in male-dominated industries such as maritime. Heilman and Saruwatari's (1979) "beauty is beastly" effect and Heilman's (1983) model of lack of fit are the theoretical basis of the literature on women's inadequacy in male-dominated roles due to their physical attractiveness. This study deepens this literature by both validating these approaches and showing how these prejudices are embodied in women's experiences.

The findings reveal that women who are perceived as physically attractive are more likely to be perceived as unsuitable for the job in male-dominated professions where physical appearance is unimportant beyond being a woman. This finding falls under the theme of role attributions based on physical attractiveness, indicating that there is a widespread perception that female captains are not competent in tasks requiring technical ability or leadership. More precisely, the association of the sea captain profession with masculine traits attributed to men perpetuates existing stereotypes, leading to perceptions that attractive women are not suitable for the position. This finding seems to support the "beauty is beastly" effect and Heilman's model of lack of fit (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985).

Another finding of the study shows that physical attractiveness overshadows views on the professional competence of female captains. The participants stated that even if they fulfilled their responsibilities on ship well, social judgments about their appearance reduced and trivialized the visibility of their professional identity. This situation was included in the study under the theme of vocational qualification effort in the shadow of physical appearance, indicating that female captains, who are perceived as attractive, constantly strive to prove themselves in order to bring their professional competence to the forefront. The association of physical attractiveness with femininity makes it difficult for female captains to be perceived as competent in technical fields (Hosoda et al., 2003). This provides a crucial insight into how gender norms and physical attractiveness combine to sensitize women's professional roles.

Participants' narratives show that they consciously regulate and control their physical appearance so that physical attractiveness does not overshadow their professional identity. This preference is explained as part of the female captains' efforts to prioritize their professional competencies. Rather than individual preferences, the participants' controlling visual representations makes sense as strategic behaviors developed to avoid attracting attention in a male-dominated work environment and to make their professional competencies constantly visible. These efforts reveal how women manage their visibility, especially in closed environments such as ships. In this context, the fact that physical attractiveness becomes a burden for women is seen as part of their broader struggle for representation in male-dominated occupational fields in order to be accepted and to exist on equal terms (Kitada, 2013).

Participants' narratives show that social relations are carefully managed in a closed working environment of constant interaction. The female captains share their experiences that sometimes communication with positive intentions can be misinterpreted. Therefore, they have developed cautious attitudes towards the social approach. Beyond individual preference, these attitudes can be considered as part of an effort to prevent possible misunderstandings, external interpretations, or gender-based prejudices. Approaches such as limiting their visibility in social settings and maintaining a controlled level of communication appear to be conscious boundary-drawing practices that serve the purpose of protecting their professional reputation and strengthening their professional position in the work environment.

7. Practical Implications

Contrary to the common belief that physical attractiveness is often seen as an advantage, this study reveals that physical attractiveness creates a perception that enhances femininity, which can become a burden for women working in jobs attributed to the male gender. Despite women's progress in the workforce, their representation in male-dominated professions is still extremely limited, making it

necessary to draw attention to the structural causes of this situation (Johnson et al., 2010). Although organizations try to develop inclusive policies in line with demographic changes and the need for a qualified workforce, appearance-based biases can have devastating effects that overshadow productivity, especially for physically attractive women (Johnson et al., 2010; Johnson & Chan, 2019). In this context, the findings of this study show that there is a need to increase awareness of how implicit assumptions about physical appearance operate within organizations and offer some practical recommendations for organizations in this regard.

Particularly in the Turkish context, it is observed that in professions such as mechanical engineering, long-distance transportation (truck driving), public transportation (metro, bus, tram), firefighting, military officer and police, which were associated with male dominance in the past, the visibility of female employees has increased in recent years and this change has been more accepted by the society. This transformation shows that norms regarding gender roles can be restructured over time, and perceptions of occupational suitability can stretch with social awareness. In this context, organizations can sustainably increase women's representation in occupations traditionally attributed to men by implementing inclusive recruitment policies and developing communication and visibility strategies that contribute to promoting social acceptance.

To counter gender-based stereotypes of physically attractive women, organizations need to establish mechanisms that enable women to be evaluated on the basis of evidence-based indicators for the tasks for which they are responsible. Transparent decision-making processes, multi-person evaluation mechanisms, and structured interviews can contribute to reducing the impact of appearance-based biases in roles where attractiveness is associated with femininity and perceptions of professional competence take a back seat. Such methods can support the recognition of women's professional identities by controlling the primacy of physical attractiveness over professional competence.

Many stereotypes of physically attractive women working in male-dominated fields are constructed by societal expectations. To reduce the impact of such stereotypes, organizations should develop strategies that encourage fair and inclusive attitudes among their employees (Heilman et al., 2015; Heilman & Caleo, 2018). Especially in cases where physical attractiveness may overshadow the perception of professional competence, creating constructive communication environments that will enable decision-makers and team members in the organization to be aware of such perceptions can contribute to the norming of ethical and fair behaviors. In this context, open discussion of appearance-based prejudices at the organizational level may encourage individuals to develop more conscious and responsible attitudes independent of societal expectations.

8. Limitations and Future Research

As with most studies, this study has some limitations that need to be taken into account. Although the fact that the participants were working under similar professional conditions enabled the study to provide in-depth insights, the extent to which the findings are applicable to women working in other male-dominated sectors should be carefully considered. Therefore, conducting future qualitative studies with women working in different male-dominated sectors will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how social perceptions of physical attractiveness differ across sectoral contexts.

In this study, participants were interviewed only once, direct observation could not be conducted, and participant confirmation could not be obtained. However, the working conditions of female captains working in the maritime sector, who represent the study's sample group, considerably limit such methodological applications. Participants spend months at sea during their work periods, with limited or no internet access in some locations. Furthermore, the time they spend on land is quite limited. This situation has prevented the scheduling of recurring meetings or on-site observations in a practical manner.

Finally, the phenomenological approach adopted in this study was appropriate as an ethically sensitive method for understanding the subjective and contextual aspects of discrimination based on physical attractiveness. The detailed consideration of participant narratives enabled an in-depth understanding of the forms of discrimination perceived by attractive female captains face in their professional lives. However, the cross-sectional nature of the phenomenological approach, with its focus on the immediate and limited time frame, makes it difficult to trace the transformation of such experiences over time.

Therefore, future studies that adopt qualitative approaches that take into account the temporal dimension, such as narrative methods, and examine how gender and physical appearance-based prejudices show continuity or transformation in professional life will make meaningful contributions to the literature.

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Araştırma Makalesi

Physically Attractive Women's Experiences of Gender Discrimination in Their Professional Careers

Fiziksel Çekici Kadınların Mesleki Kariyerlerinde Cinsiyet Ayrımcılığına Dair Deneyimleri

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışma, denizcilik sektöründe uzun yol kaptanlığı yapan kadınların, fiziksel çekicilikleri temelinde maruz kaldıkları “güzellik sevimsizdir” etkisine (beauty is beastly effect) dayalı ayrımcılık deneyimlerini derinlemesine incelemekte; kuramsal çerçevesini ise Heilman’ın (1983) uyum eksikliği modeli ile bu modele dayalı olarak geliştirilen “güzellik sevimsizdir” etkisi (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985) oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın odağında yer alan bu ayrımcılık biçimini daha iyi kavramsallaştırmak için fiziksel çekicilik kavramının literatürde nasıl ele alındığına dikkat çekmek gerekmektedir. Sosyal bilimler alanında yapılan bilimsel çalışmalar, fiziksel güzellik ve fiziksel çekicilik kavramları arasında net bir ayrım yapılmadığını ve bu kavramların sıklıkla birbirinin yerine kullanıldığını göstermektedir (bkz. Aharoni & Ayalon, 2024; Daffin & Lane, 2021; Hoskin & Moody, 2023; Keyser-Verreault, 2021; Keyser-Verreault, 2023; Treviños-Rodríguez & Díaz-Soloaga, 2023). Uluslararası psikoloji literatüründe yürütülen deneysel araştırma bulguları, kadınların fiziksel çekiciliğini artıran ve genel olarak evrensel olarak kabul gören özellikleri bel-omuz oranı, bel-kalça kıvrımlılığı (kum saati görüntüsü), vücut ağırlığı, boy uzunluğu, bacak-vücut oranı ve göğüs ölçüsü gibi evrensel spesifik faktörlere dayanarak göstermektedir (bkz. Buggio vd., 2012; Furnham vd., 1998; Hoskin & Moody, 2023; Kowal vd., 2022; Lindsay vd., 2024; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Lynn, 2009; Singh, 2004; Sorokowski vd., 2011; Tovee vd., 1999; Weeden & Sabini, 2005). Bu deneysel çalışmalar, bahsi geçen özelliklerin hemen hemen herkes için fiziksel çekiciliği belirleyen kritik faktörler olarak kabul edildiğini ve genel fiziksel çekicilik algısını şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir. Aumeboonsuke (2018) çalışması, fiziksel çekiciliğin genel olarak öznel olarak algılsa da toplumların farklı kültürler arasında dahi bile kimin çekici kimin çekici olmadığı konusunda ortak bir görüşün olduğunu belirtmektedir. Buggio ve diğerlerinin (2012) çalışması, fiziksel çekicilik özelliklerin yüz çekicilik özelliklerine göre daha güvenilir bir şekilde karakterize edildiğinin altını çizmektedir. Hönn & Göz (2007) da fiziksel olarak çekicilik özelliklerin ortak standartlara göre değerlendirildiğini belirtmektedirler. Yukarıda sunulan literatür temelli ifadeler ışığında, bu çalışmada odaklanılan fiziksel çekicilik, literatür destekli ve kavramsal olarak sınırları belirlenmiş bir çerçevede ele alınmaktadır.

Fiziksel olarak çekici değerlendirilen bireyler, çoğu zaman olumlu kişilik özelliklerine sahip, başarılı ve tatmin edici bir yaşam sürdürdükleri varsayımıyla algılanmaktadırlar (Anderson, 1978; Dion vd., 1972). Bu algısal eğilim, Dion ve arkadaşları (1972) tarafından tanımlanan “güzel olan iyidir” stereotipine dayanmaktadır. Ancak bu tür olumlu atıflar, her bağlamda geçerli olmayabilir; zira fiziksel çekicilik, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleriyle kesiştiğinde bireyler için dezavantaj yaratan sonuçlar da doğurabilmektedir. Bu tür dezavantajları özellikle kadınların erkek egemen mesleklerde yetersiz görülmesine ilişkin önyargılar bağlamında ele alan temel kuramsal yaklaşımlardan biri, Heilman’ın (1983) geliştirdiği uyum eksikliği modelidir. Heilman’ın (1983) uyum eksikliği modeli, toplumsal cinsiyet stereotiplerini, işgücü piyasası bağlamlarını ve görünüşe dayalı cinsiyet ipuçlarını bir araya getirerek, kadınların özellikle erkek egemen rollerde karşılaştığı ayrımcılığın altını çizmektedir. Bu modelin bir uzantısı olarak,

Heilman & Stopeck (1985), fiziksel çekiciliğin kadınlıkla ilişkilendirilme biçiminin mesleki uygunluk algılarını nasıl etkilediğini inceleyerek “güzelliğin sevimsiz” etkisi kavramını ortaya koymuşlardır. Güzelliğin sevimsiz etkisi, fiziksel çekiciliğin kadınlığı artıran bir algı yarattığını ve bunun da erkek cinsiyetine atfedilen işlerde çalışan kadınların mesleki yeterliliklerinin daha olumsuz değerlendirilmesine neden olduğunu öne sürmektedir (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).

Bu çalışmada, fiziksel olarak çekici algılanan kadın kaptanların işyerinde karşılaştıkları ayrımcı davranışları nasıl deneyimlediklerini ve bu durumların mesleki yaşamlarına nasıl yansıdığını derinlemesine incelemek amacıyla fenomenolojik bir araştırma deseni benimsenmiştir (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ticari deniz taşımacılığında özellikle kaptan pozisyonları, gemi hiyerarşisinde otoriteyi temsil eden roller olarak genellikle erkeklerle ilişkilendirilmiştir. Dolayısıyla bu sektörde uzun süredir kadınların temsiliyetinin son derece düşük olduğu, tarihsel olarak erkek egemen bir meslek alanı olarak tanımlanmaktadır (Kitada, 2017). Çalışmada özellikle fiziksel olarak çekici algılanan kadın kaptanlara odaklanılmasının nedeni, bu kadınların hem erkek egemen bir sektörde çalışıyor olmaları hem de görünüşlerinden kaynaklanan toplumsal cinsiyet temelli önyargılara daha yoğun biçimde maruz kalabilmeleridir. Katılımcılar, çoğunlukla bir kadının görev yaptığı ve 20-21 erkek mürettebatla aylar süren deniz yolculuklarında çalışmaktadır. Bu kadar yoğun bir cinsiyet dengesizliği içinde fiziksel çekicilik, kadınların mesleki yeterliliklerinin sorgulanmasına ve dış görünüme dayalı ayrımcı davranışların ortaya çıkmasına neden olabilmektedir. Dolayısıyla, denizcilik gibi aşırı erkek egemen ortamlarda, çekici olarak algılanan kadınların özgün deneyimlerini anlamak; görünüşe dayalı ayrımcılığın nasıl işlediğine dair önemli ipuçları sunmaktadır.

Kadın kaptanların, görev yaptıkları gemilerde çoğunlukla tek kadın olmaları, potansiyel katılımcılara ulaşmayı güçleştirmiştir. Bu nedenle, çalışmada nitel araştırmalarda yaygın olarak başvurulan kartopu örnekleme yöntemi tercih edilmiştir (Bell vd., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). İlk olarak, yazarın sektörel sosyal bağlantıları aracılığıyla bir kadın kaptana ulaşılmış; ardından bu ilk katılımcının yönlendirmeleriyle diğer kadın kaptanlara erişilmiştir. Çalışmanın verileri, ticari deniz taşımacılığı alanında görev yapan ve fiziksel olarak çekici algılanan toplam 12 kadın kaptanın deneyimlerine dayanmaktadır. Çalışmanın verileri, yarı-yapılandırılmış bireysel görüşmeler aracılığıyla elde edilmiştir. Kendini çekici ve güzel olarak tanımlayan ve çalıştıkları örgütlerde de bu şekilde algılanan katılımcılara yönelik hazırlanan açık uçlu sorular görüşme formunu oluşturmuştur. Görüşme formunda yer alan sorular, araştırmacı tarafından ilgili literatür kapsamlı bir şekilde incelenerek oluşturulmuştur. Görüşme formu, örgütsel davranış alanında görev yapan iki akademisyen tarafından incelenmiş, uzman görüşleri alınarak sorular son haline getirilmiştir. Çalışmanın verilerini çözümlemek için tematik analiz tercih edilmiştir (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Verilerin analiz sürecinde, araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilen kod yapısı, toplumsal cinsiyet alanında uzman bir akademisyenle birlikte gözden geçirilmiştir. Kodlama sürecine ilişkin yapılan görüşmeler, temalar arasındaki tutarlılığın ve yorumların güvenilirliğinin artırılmasına katkı sağlamıştır.

Katılımcıların gemideki deneyimlerine ilişkin anlatıları dört temaya karşılık gelmektedir: Fiziksel çekiciliğe dayalı rol atıfları (Tema 1), fiziksel görünümün gölgesinde mesleki yeterlilik çabası (Tema 2), görsel temsillerin kontrolü (Tema 3), sosyal yaklaşıma yönelik ihtiyatlı tutumlar (Tema 4). Bulgular, deniz kaptanlığı mesleğinin toplumsal olarak erkeksi yeterliliklerle ilişkilendirmesinin, çekici kadınların bu role uygun olmadığına dair stereotipleri pekiştirdiğini göstermektedir. Bu durum, çekiciliğin profesyonel yeterlilikle çeliştiğini öne süren güzellik sevimsizdir etkisiyle ve Heilman’ın uygunluk eksikliği modeliyle örtüşmektedir (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Kadın katılımcılar, teknik yeterlilik sergilemelerine rağmen, dış görünüşlerine yönelik toplumsal algıların mesleki kimliklerinin önüne geçebildiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Çekiciliğin kadınlıkla ilişkilendirilmesi, teknik uzmanlık gerektiren görevlerde yeterli görülmelerini zorlaştırmakta ve profesyonel kabul süreçlerini karmaşıktırmaktadır (Hosoda vd., 2003). Katılımcı anlatıları, bu algıları dengelemek amacıyla fiziksel temsiliyetlerini stratejik biçimde yönettiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle gemi gibi kapalı ve gözlem altında olunan ortamlarda, kadınlar hem görünürlüklerini hem de temsil biçimlerini dikkatle düzenlemektedirler. Bu çaba, fiziksel çekiciliğin bir ayrıcalık değil, tersine bir yük olarak deneyimlendiği bağlamlarda, kadın kaptanların erkek egemen yapılarda yer bulma ve mesleki varlıklarını sürdürme mücadelelerinin bir parçası olarak değerlendirilebilir (Kitada, 2013). Ayrıca katılımcılar, dostane biçimde başlayan sosyal etkileşimlerin yanlış anlaşılabilmesine dair önceki

deneyimlerinden hareketle, sosyal yakınlığa karşı mesafeli ve koruyucu bir yaklaşım geliştirdiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Bu tür temkinli tutumlar, toplumsal cinsiyet temelli önyargıların ve dışsal yorumların önüne geçme çabasının bir göstergesi olarak değerlendirilebilir.

Örgütler, erkeklere atfedilen mesleklerde kadın temsiliyetini artırmak için kapsayıcı işe alım politikaları geliştirebilir ve toplumsal kabulü destekleyecek iletişim ile görünürlük stratejileri benimseyebilir. Özellikle fiziksel çekiciliğin kadınlıkla ilişkilendirilmesinin mesleki yeterlilik algılarını gölgeleyebileceği pozisyonlarda, karar süreçlerinin şeffaflaştırılması, çok aktörlü değerlendirme mekanizmalarının tercih edilmesi ve yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin uygulanması, görünüme dayalı önyargıların etkisini azaltmada etkili olabilir. Bununla birlikte, karar vericiler ve ekip üyeleri için fiziksel görünüme ilişkin örtük varsayımların fark edilmesini sağlayacak yapıcı iletişim ortamlarının oluşturulması, etik ve adil davranış standartlarının örgütsel normlar haline gelmesine katkı sağlayabilir. Gelecekte yürütülecek nitel araştırmaların, farklı erkek egemen sektörlerde çalışan kadınları odağına alması, fiziksel çekicilikle ilgili toplumsal algıların sektörel bağlamlara göre nasıl çeşitlendiğini daha derinlikli biçimde ortaya koyabilir. Ayrıca, anlatısal yöntemler gibi zamansal süreci dikkate alan nitel yaklaşımların benimsenmesi, mesleki yaşamda toplumsal cinsiyet ve fiziksel görünüme dayalı önyargıların zaman içindeki süreklilik ya da dönüşüm biçimlerini anlamada literatüre önemli katkılar sunabilir.