

LOOKISM: THE NEW FRONTIER OF APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECTS ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of Lookism: The New Frontier of Appearance Discrimination and Implications for Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria. Lookism is prejudice or the discriminatory treatment of people on the basis of looks or discrimination of people who are considered physically unattractive. Though, the problem of discrimination based on people's appearance is not very popular among modern social scientists as well as in mass discourse. Yet lookism often occurs in a variety of settings, including dating, social environments, political settings, and work places. The paper recommends that employers should be fair and non-discriminatory in their hiring and practices. People should stop complimenting others appearance. Moreover, society members should transform its social and cultural values regarding appearance.

Keywords: Lookism, Appearance discrimination, Effects, Socio-Economic Development

Introduction

Lookism is discriminatory treatment toward people considered physically “unattractive”, mainly in the work places but also in dating and other social settings (Wang & Niu, 2022: Stockemer & Praino, 2019: Roma, 2019). In other words, lookism means devaluing people who society considers physically undesirable – and overvaluing those considered “attractive” (Tietje & Cresap, 2005). It is prejudice or discrimination based on physical appearance or physical appearance believed to fall short of societal notions of beauty. Lookism has been called “beauty prejudice” with notion that a pleasing appearance lead to favorable outcomes such as higher wages (pay), promotion in work places or better career options. Lookism which describes physical appearance discrimination or attractiveness bias is a form of prejudice – the valuing of appearance over a person's inner character has become so prevalent in our technological world that “attractive” persons receive greater attention and positive acknowledgement in social media, in the work place and in relationships (Eunjeong & Heemyoung, 2012: Gomez, 2012). Physically attractive individuals are consistently chosen over less attractive persons for job interviews and are more likely to be hired for job position.

Many of us know about the various forms of prejudice and discrimination based on race, gender, religion, age, national origin, disability, and so on but few understand lookism. The problem of discrimination based on people's appearance is not very popular among modern social scientists as well as in mass discourse because beauty standards are too vague, what makes difficult problems formulation. We call perfect body the one which is well treated, wealth, etc. Beauty concepts' criteria vary (Orekh & Bogomiagkova, 2017). Physical appearance such as hairstyles, weight, height, tattoos and facial hair can be sensitive subjects in work place. Studies have shown that physical appearance affects employers' judgment about the quality of an employee (Milazzo & Mattes, 2015: Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2003). Although, the issue of lookism has received less cultural attention than other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism, and typically does not have the legal backings that other forms of discrimination often have, but it is still widespread and largely or significantly affects people's opportunities in terms of romantic relationships, job opportunities, and other facets of life (Rhodes, 2005).

The term lookism was first used in the late 1970s in reference to how people were viewing others who were heavier set (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2012). In modern society, lookism based on employees having the right look or just good looks, is clearly emerging as an employment issue (Corbett, 2007; Gomez, 2012). As social and cultural interest grow, appearance is considered more important than any other standards in judging people. However, a standard of ideal beauties exists in every era, the standard for beauties, in modern times, is getting unified because beauties are overtly emphasized. A socio-cultural standard for outward beauty is perceived as the various mass media, and it also internalized an unrealistic, fascinating image. The outlooks that mass media show are not reflecting realities by wrapped body managements, make-ups, and the like photos are made up by perspectives, mechanical manipulations and objects are constituted from a special stance and images of human body are artificially processed (Eunjeon & Heemyoung, 2012).

Consequently, in modern society, physically attractiveness is significantly linked with positive qualities; in contrast, physical unattractiveness is linked with negative qualities (Corbeth, 2007). Milazzo & Mattes (2015) posits that most people make judgments of others based on their social appearance which influence how they respond to these people. The saying that "what is beautiful is good" stereotypically shows that, overall, those who are physically attractive persons are perceived more positively and physical attractiveness has a strong influence on judgment or a person's competence (Wang & Niu, 2022: Roman, 2012). Moreso, attractive persons have more friends, better social skills, and more active sex lives. Lookiest attitudes is formed without taking into account humans' inherent such as ethnic, genetic, individual differences and ignores the diversity (Eunjeoung & Heemyoung, 2012: Tietje & Cresap, 2005). However, our society recognize this stand as absolute, blindly go after it and, as a result, overtax physically themselves.

The trend becomes more severe as it is important for humans to artificially reform their bodies with the development of science (Orekh & Bigomiagkova, 2017). This led to commercialization of human bodies grafted with medical technologies. Eunjeong & Heemyoung (2012) suggest that

cosmetic surgeries are in nature purposed to surgically correct and recur ill – looking part of a human body which is due to an injury or an inherent deformity. Modern cosmetic surgeries are not only for the purpose of abnormally making a body more beautiful and young, and thus they are moving the beauty sector. This trend is progressing fast globally. Lookism concentrates on all people and is promoted unconsciously and influence people through the means such as magazines, movies and television that detects how people must look.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The issue of lookism or appearance discrimination raises important controversial moral questions; first, even if it is legal, is it morally right to discriminate people based on physical attractiveness? Second, assuming it is immoral to discriminate against the “unattractive”, should civil rights laws then be ethically amended to incorporate appearance as a protected characteristic? Discrimination against other human being is something that is widely label as wrong. Therefore, two key ethical theories – ethical egoism and ethical relativism is applied to determine if lookism is moral.

Ethical Egoism Theory

Ethical egoism theory dates back to ancient Greece and the sophists and their teachings of relativism and promotion of self-interest posits that a person ought to promote his or her self-interest and the greatest balance of good for himself or herself and that one has a moral obligation to promote one’s self – interest; and so “selfishly” acting is also morally; and concomitantly an action against one’s self - interest is an immoral action; and an action that advances one’s self – interest is a moral action (Graham, 2008). The most notable advocates of ethical egoism were Ayn Rand, Max Stirner, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, David Hume, Lord Macaulay and Friedrich Nietzsche, etc. the main assumption of this theoretical perspective is that people ought to do what is in their own self-interest. In other words, human nature is basically self-interested and that the pursuit of one’s self interest is always be person’s primary goal (Sheref, 2015). Ethical egoist theories posits even our desire to help others comes from selfish motives with hope that they will help us in return. Thus, everyone by implication is an egoist and always tries to do what will bring them satisfaction (Rand, 2009; Smith, 2008). An ethically egoistic person, therefore, will shrewdly discern the “pros” and “cons” of an action, and then perform the action that performs the most personal good. However, the theory warns that one should be an “enlightened” ethical egoist; and think of what will be beneficial to one’s interest in the long run, and accordingly be ready to sacrifice some short-term pain or expense to attain a greater long-term good for oneself. One important issue here is that one’s own “good” must be defined. Ethical egoists agree that people ought to pursue and advance their own good; but they disagree as to the type of good people should be seeking.

People certainly can argue that they have egoistic reasons to discriminate on the basis of appearance. Most employers for instance, preferred to take the “attractive” approach to employment, since preferring good – looking people in hiring pleases their customers and maintains and advances the companies, brand, style, and “look”. The attractive appearance of the

company's employees is an essential component of that brand. Certain tasks that are essential to business are dependent on looks. If appearance is not related to the image and purposes of the business or not connected to the functions of a particular position, then the ethically egoistic employer will hire the best qualified applicant regardless of his or her appearance. Although the employer to discriminate based on appearance, thus, underscores the value of economic efficiency, profitability, and employer autonomy. Imagine, if an employee is not using appearance or attractiveness discrimination as a subterfuge to impermissibly discriminate, and thus risk civil rights lawsuits and the concomitant negative publicity and backlash, one can make an argument that it may be in the employer's self – interest to discriminate based on appearance; and thus pursuant to ethical egoism it is moral for the employer to prefer the “pretty”.

Ethical Relativism Theory

The ethical relativism theory also dates back to ancient Greece and the philosophical school of the sophists and the skeptics which emerged in the 5th Century BC (Matti, 2005). Relativism is the belief that there is no absolute truth, only the truth that a particular individual or culture happen to believe (Rand, 1961). The main argument of this theory is that one thing for instance, moral values, beauty, knowledge, taste or meaning is relative to some particular framework or standpoint (subjective). Most of the leading thinkers who have been accuse of relativism include; Protagoras, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, Ludwign Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and Jacquest Derride etc. Ethical relativists argue that there are no objectives, universal moral rules which one can construct and absolute moral system. In other words, there are no moral rules applicable to all peoples, in all societies, and at all times. There are thus, no universal moral standards by which to judge an action's morality; rather, morality is merely relative to, and holds for, only a particular society at a particular time. Morality, therefore, is a societal based notion; it is nothing more than the morality of a certain group, people, or society at a certain time (Rand, 2009). What a society believes is right is in fact right for that society; the moral beliefs of a society determine what is “right” or “wrong” in that society. Although, different societies may have different conceptions of what is right or wrong. What one believes is right, the other may believe as wrong. Consequently, the same act can be morally right for one society but morally wrong for another. Since pursuant to ethical relativism there are no moral standards which are universally true for all peoples, in all societies, and at all times, and since there is no way to demonstrate that one set of beliefs is true and other false, the only way to demonstrate that one set of beliefs is true and the other false, the only way to determine an action's morality is to determine what the people in a particular society believe is right or wrong at a given time (Smith, 2008). However, ascertaining exactly what a society is a daunting challenge even within a homogeneous society, where there are diverse cultures, sub-cultures, social classes, kinship, and work groups; and in a heterogeneous society there will be many smaller sub-societies that co-exist. All these components of society may reflect different standards, mores, customs, and beliefs, including moral standards and beliefs. Yet cardinal to the doctrine of ethical relativism, one must attempt to find the pertinent

“society” and then try to ascertain that society’s moral beliefs; but when one does ascertain the societal beliefs standards and practices regarding morality, one simply has to conform and adopt, and one will be acting morally, at least according to the ethical theory (Graham, 2004).

In relation to lookism, appearance norms, especially “attractiveness”, are clearly based on, measured by, and often dictated to, by societal beliefs and norms. Accordingly, pursuant to ethical relativism, what a particular society deems to be “attractive” is the appearance standard or norm for that society. James (2008) claims that “beauty indisputably plays a significant role in our society, and although beauty is subjectively in the eye of the beholder, there is a common objective standard of what people generally find attractive” (p.636). “Beauty and sexuality are artificial cultural construct (Steinle, 2006, p.289). However, they are constantly evolving and inherently subjective. Though, these societal norms have effects. Judgment about appearance reflect which members of society are valued and entitled to control, and this in turn determines social and economic opportunities and outcomes. In particular, societal norms regarding appearance can produce disparate treatment and disparate burdens on certain people. In most societies, all preferred physical attractiveness. For women, demands and expectations seemed to be greater than for men. In addition, cultural norms often provide the basis for, as well as interact with, the law. Since attractiveness, appearance, and appearance discrimination are based on societal and cultural values. Appearance – based decisions in employment also tend to reflect and to reinforce prevailing societal beliefs as to attractiveness. Many people may have qualms about the fairness of favoring beautiful individuals without believing that such a preference is morally wrong, or wrong enough to invoke legal regulation. As a result, appearance discrimination is one form of discrimination regarding which society is “morally ambivalent. However, it is difficult to define “society” in a heterogeneous culture, nevertheless, one can categorically conclude that the prevailing societal norms are unduly influenced by the media that attractiveness is “good”, and thus the employer in preferring the “pretty” would be acting in conformity with societal norms and thus also acting morally pursuant to ethical relativism.

Causes of Lookism and Appearance Discrimination

Lookism is a concept that described appearance discrimination or the practice of discrimination on the basis of physical appearance. Like other forms of discrimination, lookism is also cause by different factors. These factors include:

1. **Society’s Stereotypes of Physical Attractiveness:** Lookism may result when individuals are compared to stereotypes which reflect society’s conceptions of what is considered physically attractive, either to their detriment or advantage. Value is attached to certain physical characteristics such as beauty, skin tone, height, weight, facial features, and hair colour/textures.
2. **Technological innovations:** Structural causes of lookism are technological innovations in the visual media which is rapidly growing in the later modern society

- 3. Extensions of capitalism markets and rapid growth of beauty industry:** Extensions of capitalism markets are targeting the young, rapid growth of beauty industry and beauty techniques in the consumer society. Cho-Chung & Kim (2022) hinted that “advances in medical and technological innovations have led to the availability of numerous medical services, including a variety of cosmetic surgeries that are gaining popularity, from minimal and non-invasive procedures to major plastic surgeries” (p.1).

Lookism as the New Frontier of Appearance Discrimination and Its Effects on Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

Sims (2015) refers to lookism as the preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive and discrimination against those deemed less physically desirable. Lookism can be defined as physical appearance discrimination or attractiveness bias. Lookism negatively impacted on individuals and society. Some of these adverse effects of lookism include:

- 4. Preferential treatment and inequality:** A lot of sociological literature abound that physical attractiveness is socially constructed, and in general it is positively linked with quality of social experiences (Warhurst et al, 2012: Eunjeong & Heemyoung, 2012: Gomez, 2012). Lookism is associated with preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive (Sims, 2015). Studies show that people who are not physically attractive are disadvantaged in society, particularly in labour, education, and marriage markets (Roman, 2019: Stockemer & Praino, 2019). Value is attached to certain physical characteristics such as beauty, skin tone, weight, height, facial features, and hair colour of which create social and work place inequalities. In the labour market, workers whose appearance is socially preferred achieved greater occupational success. Thus, Sims (2015) posits that:

The benefits of attractiveness are well-documented and common in many cultures. Beauty grants social capital and unearned privilege to those with desired physical features, and these advantages are perpetuated in various social institutions, including families, schools, media, and work places. Systems of privilege and discrimination result when people with certain physical features are given preferential treatment, particularly in the work place (p.1).

There is therefore, a growing body of evidences on work place physical appearance discrimination or lookism in modern society.

- 5. Employment prejudice:** Lookism, or ranking of persons based on attractiveness, is a prevalent employment prejudice (Ozirus, 2021: Warkhurst et al, 2012). In an appearance focused society, looks influence salaries, career growth and even hiring (Roman, 2019: Hosoda et al, 2003). This may be partly because lookism is very difficult to prove, and there is no legislation that specifically addresses lookism. Thus, Desir (2010) claim that

Lookism works to advantage people perceived as attractive through preferential treatment, disadvantaging those perceived as unattractive through the denial of opportunities in tandem. Lookism is especially injurious in the labour industry, as it creates a sort of undistributed, and arguably in-distributable, aesthetic capital.

Consequently, it creates demeritorious value and deficiencies that significantly affect the success of individuals in the work place (p.632).

Physical appearances therefore affect employer's judgement about the quality of an employee. No wonder, the timeless adage "don't judge a book by its cover" resonate to discourage people from forming cursory judgment from appearances alone. Since "covers" can be deceiving, and they rarely relay the full story. Such a virtuous maxim derives its momentum from fundamental concepts of equality; people ideally operate in a meritocracy where they are neither limited nor unjustly enriched in valuable opportunities by right of their aesthetic or perceived attractiveness.

6. **Deprivation:** The society in modern times, regards appearances of people as a basis for an important judgment, therefore, our lifestyles and values have changed depending on social and economic changes of structure in society. No people's personalities and abilities but their appearances become an object of evaluation (Eunjeong & Heemyoung, 2012). The perception that a person with a small and pretty face and a slim body not only draws attention but also receives better evaluation in the circumstances of getting a job, taking an interview, and getting married than others. However, a person who has abilities but is not good in appearance cannot receive right evaluation is common in our society (Wang & Niu, 2012: Roman, 2019: Desir, 2010).

It is well established that those who have beautiful appearances would be satisfied with themselves, live actively, exert their abilities, and have self-confidence, while those who have unbeautiful appearances would be socially intimidated and not receive good treatments from others in their social lives.

7. **Suicidal Ideation:** Studies indicates that lookism or appearance discrimination impact on health reports (Cavisco et al, 2012: Corbett, 2007). Eunjeong & Heemyoung (2012) suggest that those who experience discrimination due to their appearance were more likely to have suicidal ideation than those who did not. Higher prevalence of appearance discrimination is therefore, observed among those who have experience or intend to experience cosmetic surgery than those who did not (Cho-Chung & Kim, 2022: Eunjeong & Heemyoung, 2012).
8. **Greater risk of being a victim of crime:** On the other hand, more attractive persons are at greater risk of being a victim of crime due to being involved in more social interaction, increasing their risk of exposure. Eunjeong & Heemyoung (2012), Orekh & Bogomiagkova (2017) and Corbett (2007) in their separate studies found that greater physical attractiveness can lead individuals to be at greater risk of sexual abuse, regardless of gender.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shed light on practices that contribute to the underdevelopment of the society. The study's findings suggest that perceived appearance discrimination or lookism is associated with numerous adverse implications on socio economic development as well as preferential treatment and social inequality, employment prejudice, and preferences in marriage

industry etc. Therefore, considering the disastrous adverse on the effects of lookism, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Employers and managers of industries should be fair and non-discriminatory in hiring and promotional practices.
2. Legislation should be initiated specifically to address issues of physical appearance or attractive preferences.
3. Members of the public should stop discussing the strategies they use to manage their appearance.
4. Diversity education and training should be provided in the work place.
5. Diversity management should be practiced in workplace.
6. Society should transform its social and cultural values regarding appearance. Culture must change along with the social attitudes
7. Organization and career development professionals should address this emerging work force diversity issues.

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Lookism: The New Frontier of Appearance Discrimination and its Effects on Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria: ABANYAM, N. L., GARBA, M. J., KWENA, T. A. & FUNGO W. F.

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