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Current issues in aesthetics and beyond: Revisiting lookism[1]

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Abstract
Lookism is a term used to describe discrimination based on the physical appearance of a person. We suppose that the social impact of lookism is a philosophical issue, because, from this perspective, attractive people have an advantage over others. The first line of our argumentation involves the issue of lookism as a global ethical and aesthetical phenomenon. A person's attractiveness has a significant impact on the social and public status of this individual. The common view in society is that it is good to be more attractive and healthier. This concept generates several ethical questions about human aesthetical identity, health, authenticity, and integrity in society. It seems that this unequal treatment causes discrimination, diminishes self-confidence, and lowers the chance of a job or social enforcement for many human beings. Currently, aesthetic improvements are being made through plastic surgery. There is no place on the human body that we cannot improve with plastic surgery or aesthetic medicine. We should not forget that it may result in the problem of elitism, in dividing people into primary and secondary categories. The second line of our argumentation involves a particular case of lookism: Melanie Gaydos. A woman that is considered to be a model with a unique look.

Keywords: aesthetic authenticity, discrimination, health, lookism, social identity, unique look

Introduction

In this paper, we will follow two primary lines of argumentation. The first is concerned with what lookism is. The second is concerned with the question why it is a global aesthetic phenomenon. In any case, lookism is a relatively new term used to describe an old phenomenon: discrimination based on a person's physical appearance. We suppose that the social and cultural impacts of lookism represent a serious philosophical issue because, according to this concept, attractive people have an advantage over others. Therefore, it is highly probable that the phenomenon we call lookism may cause discrimination against those who are not considered sufficiently attractive by society. Many different theoretical questions arise from this assumption. For example: What are the criteria for measuring beauty? Should human beauty be normalized? Is there a single idea of beauty throughout time? Is it acceptable to perceive the human body as a fashion brand?

The term "lookism" was first used during the 1970s, within the "fat acceptance movement". It was used by The Washington Post newspaper in 1978, which declared that the term was coined by obese people (Fat pride, 1978). Those people created the term to refer to discrimination based on appearance. For instance, William Safire argues that lookism is one of the most penetrating – yet denied – prejudices based on appearance (Safire, 2004, p. 189). Compared to the 20th-century perception of lookism, formed as a critical response to discrimination, 21st-century lookism seems more heterogeneous. In this paper, we will analyze the current form of lookism. There are two fundamental issues in understanding contemporary lookism. The first one is the perception of lookism as aesthetics of corporeality. In this understanding, there are several serious issues that

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needed to be analyzed, such as the extent and form of enhancements and adjustments, or economic discrimination in modern society. The second issue lies in the authenticity and integrity of a human being with a unique appearance.

Modern plastic surgery offers a variety of "improvements" of the human body. We argue that all parts of human body can be modified through plastic surgery. However, the dominant position of plastic surgery in society may lead to several issues, for instance, elitism, segregation of people based on body improvements. Usually, lookism is not even regarded as other discriminatory practices (cultural or sexual discrimination). In this paper, we argue that lookism is now globally widespread and is affecting various aspects of human life, for example, job opportunities, social relations, partner selection.

Lookism and the workplace; contemporary or long-term effects?

Physical attractiveness is associated with positive gratification (feelings) such as pleasure, delight, and enjoyment. On the other hand, unattractiveness is related to negative feelings such as frustration, loss of self-esteem, and disgust. People also judge others based on their appearance, and this judgment can affect the treatment of others. The research paper "What is beautiful, healthy, more intelligent is good" demonstrates that people who are physically attractive benefit from their better appearance. Such a person can have an advantage when choosing a job because they are seen as a healthier, stronger, and smarter person. For instance, sales assistants are often expected to be physically attractive to promote a particular brand image. Some companies regard attractiveness as a necessity for their candidates (Cavico et al., 2012, p. 792). A specific appearance and style, as we will demonstrate in the article, produces many ethical issues because it leads to various discriminatory practices. For instance, companies might only favour young, slim or beautiful applicants and discriminate against those who do not meet the requirements.

Attractiveness should be understood as a global concern because the long-lasting impacts of lookism are present in all societies. Most cultures prefer youth, physical attractiveness, and health over other qualities. Zahra Ghodrati and Toktam Namayendeh Joorabchi argue that we consciously and even unconsciously try to match established criteria of beauty and overall appearance because we want social acceptance from others (Ghodrati & Joorabchi, 2016, p. 86). The norms and standards of human beauty are constantly changing with every generation and culture. Currently, the understanding of these standards and norms is influenced by globalization. The idea of beauty is a crucial standard in every culture but this factor is plastic and changes.

International companies and the fashion industry contribute to the way people judge beauty and appearance in the current culture. The extent to which an individual is exposed to a local or international environment defines to what extent he/she is inclined to the cultural values or globally defines norms (Ghodrati & Joorabchi, 2016, p. 86). These differentiations create a new type of discrimination based on the appearance and general looks of an individual (Ghordrati & Joorabchi, 2016, p. 86).

Fashion companies currently follow the trend of hiring attractive people from different cultures and countries. The discrimination factor is entirely centred on the beauty of the individual. Knowledge and professionalism are regarded as secondary qualities.

Height as one of the issues of lookism

Physically attractive people benefit from these stereotypical beliefs and use this type of discrimination to get an advantage over others. More attractive people have more friends, better

social skills, better jobs, and more opportunities in general. These people even have a higher chance of reproduction because they have a more active sex life.

Attractive appearance is also tied to the height of the individual. For instance, women with a height of 170 cm or more are preferred in many career positions. This pattern originates from the world of modelling and is associated with hidden discrimination. For men, the consequences of height are not as significant as for women, but they also suffer from similar discrimination if the men are deemed too short. There are important issues that arise from our argumentation about what society deems as "too short". What is the appropriate height for men? Do men lose social status if they are too short? Are shorter men discriminated in society?

The American philosopher Michael Sandel argues that it is necessary to consider four examples of possible bioengineering of the near future: muscle enhancement, memory enhancement, height enhancement, and sex selection (Sandel, 2007, p. 10). In each case, what began as an attempt to treat a disease (some form of medical therapy) is now moving towards genetic enhancement because, currently, the enhancements are presented as a means to eliminate disorders (Sandel, 2007, p. 10). Sandel suggests that to fix the problem of height, we should use growth hormones. Growth hormones as therapy are currently used routinely, and it is this type of generalization that allows these new types of improvements. However, the problem of height is not solely tied to growth hormone solutions. The issue of height is more complex than it seems.

Michael Sandel continues his argument and claims that paediatricians and medical doctors already struggle with the ethics of enhancement when confronted by parents who want to make their children taller (Sandel, 2007, p. 16). Since the 1980s, human growth hormone has been approved for children with a hormone deficiency that makes them much shorter than average. The treatment can alter the height also of healthy children, so there is a possibility of misuse. Some parents of healthy children who are unhappy with their child's stature, primarily boys, ask for hormone therapy (Sandel, 2007, pp. 16–17). Sandel's arguments prove that the problem of low growth is more frequent for boys than for girls. The issue of height produces many forms of discrimination, for instance, social (social isolation, lack of relationships, partner selection) or economic (job opportunities).

Sandel claims that some critics want to use human growth hormone for cosmetic endocrinology (Sandel, 2007, pp. 17–18). If we agreed with these critics, we could create a space for consumerism in medicine. Consumerism in medicine can be seen in plastic surgery and corrective medicine as these enable people to transform the aesthetics of their bodies according to individual preferences. Sandel adds to his argumentation; health insurance is unlikely to cover it, and the treatments are expensive. Injections are administered up to six times a week, for two to five years, at an annual cost all for a potential height gain of two or three inches (5,08 cm or 7,62 cm). Some people oppose height enhancement because it is collectively self-defeating, as some become taller, and others become shorter, relative to the norm (Sandel, 2007, p. 18).

What is this norm? Is it some current or long-term standard? Is it possible to normalize a human body? Can we tolerate the practices that lead to discrimination? For instance, if we agree with Nick Bostrom and Rebecca Roach about the normality of the human body, we automatically discriminate against those who do not meet these given criteria (Bostrom & Roache, 2008, pp. 120–121). In the future, if we accept some criteria for normality, we should be prepared to address various discriminations and prejudices in job opportunities, education, social activities, or partner selection.

It seems that the major issue is the prejudicial sort of aestheticism that creates a glorification of a specific type of human body; the victims of the current trends are short men and very tall women (Tietje & Cresap, 2005, pp. 32–33). There are other instances when we discriminate against people who are considered to be different, for instance, people from different cultures, religions, or sexuality. These types of discrimination share one aspect; they cannot accept diversity and different perceptions.

Economic impacts of lookism

Lookism is not only a philosophical and aesthetical issue but also has broader economic consequences because people are willing to invest money in various human body enhancements. Therefore, we argue that economic arguments play a major role in the future of lookism.

There are many economic arguments that we must consider in our analysis of lookism. For example, the difference in income can create discrimination between people who can afford improvements and those who cannot. People also undergo various surgeries and enhancements to increase productivity in the workplace. The number of resources spent on physical aesthetic improvements suggests that people want to improve themselves to be more economically attractive. For instance, people who work in tourism or catering are improving their bodies to be more appealing to customers. The fashion industry is a unique category in this regard because applicants are primarily selected based on their appearance. However, this does not diminish the fact that there is discrimination even within this category. Some examples of these criteria from the fashion industry are bodyweight limits, suppression of bodily characteristics, or height limits. Currently, there is a lack of emphasis on female hips and breasts, which were a symbol of fertility and attractiveness.

In our analysis, we face an additional issue and that is the constantly changing preferences in the proportional and reproductive features of the body. For instance, there is a connection between aesthetics, hygiene, and health. Lenderová et al. demonstrate this fact in the book *The body between medicine and discipline: The beautiful female body, the clean female body, and the growing of beauty with the perspective of medicine in a cross-sectional historical context to the present* (Lenderová et. al., 2014, pp. 168–185). We can observe in the historical context that the effort to look good has a long-lasting effect on the current perception of health and beauty. These two are closely related because they are often understood as synonyms.

New data shows that Americans spent more than $ 2 billion on silicone gel for breast implants and injectables in 2018 (New data shows, 2019). In Europe, the silicone breast implant market was valued at $ 578 million in 2018 (Europe breast implant market, 2019). Countries with the highest number of surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures in 2018 are the USA, Brasil, Mexico, German, India, Italy, South Korea, and Argentina. Statistics demonstrate that the countries with the highest number of surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures in 2018 are: USA – the number of procedures 2.8 mil., Brasil – 1.4 mil., and Mexico – 0.52 million (New statistic reveal, 2018). We conclude that the USA is the country with the most use of plastic surgery and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures. In the year 2018, they reported 4.36 million cosmetic procedures: 1.49 million surgical and 2.87 million nonsurgical (Elflein, 2019).

Physical attractiveness is often associated with a health condition. For instance, a person who is deemed attractive can have healthy self-esteem because others compliment their appearance. We argue that attractiveness impacts on the quality of our health. The issue is that currently many

men are struggling with the effects of heightism, weightism, and this negatively impacts their on mental health (Adomaitis et al., 2017, p. 86). We have to conclude that our society seems to be fixated too much on body image.

How does lookism impact on employment? We argue that many philosophical and ethical issues arise from the impacts of lookism on employment. Many of these issues are tied to social pressure, for instance, segregating people into different categories based on their appearance. The idea of beauty and health is linked to the economic conditions of the individual because people that have better jobs and are paid more can afford to invest more in their improvements (exercising, cosmetic surgeries, or healthier diet). This economic segregation leads to discrimination because those who cannot afford enhancements have lower self-esteem and negative self-image.

We argue that employers appear to discriminate in favour of more attractive people; this means that less attractive people are discriminated against in job opportunities. Experts perceive these consequences of lookism to be the next frontier in the struggle against discrimination in employment (Warhurst et al., 2012, p. 132). The physical appearance of a person heavily influences services. Services continue to increase as an employment choice and physical appearance is becoming more significant than before so the issue of lookism is likely to become more prominent (Warhurst et al., 2006, p. 74).

Lookism creates several ethical dilemmas about human beings, for example, issues with social identity, health, authenticity, integrity, and self-presentation. Furthermore, unequal treatment (discrimination) has a negative impact not only on our self-esteem but also on overall integrity, authenticity, and tolerance in society. We argue that lookism increases social pressure on individuals because they have to undergo beautification to be accepted as valuable members of society.

Some experts claim that many of these enhancing procedures are ethically dubious. For instance, Harris and Chan argue that we can call these examples ethically dubious: breast or penis augmentation, skin whitening, or the taking of anabolic steroids to increase muscle mass (Harris & Chan, 2007, p. 1). We are not discussing severe modifications of human bodies; these are more akin to the aesthetic or fashion enhancements according to the personal inclinations of individuals such as long hair, eye colour, or physique (Harris & Chan, 2007, pp. 1–2). We argue that enhancement is something that benefits the individual if it does not impact upon their health. The impacts of these improvements are often highly problematic to determine because they manifest themselves after a longer period.

As a result of this analysis, some experts would argue that there is nothing morally wrong with human enhancement. We already accept and actively encourage the use of various enhancing practices in our everyday activities (Harris & Chan, 2007, pp. 1–2). For instance, supplements to improve health such as cures, antibiotics, vaccination to increase immunity, vaccination against serious and fatal diseases belong to this category of accepted practices. We can also argue that prosthetic limbs, reading glasses, or hearing aids are a method of enhancement. Harris and Chan ask an important question. We could argue that some of these constitute medical treatment rather than enhancement, but is this a meaningful question; it is difficult to see the difference between improving reduced function to a normal level and improving it to super-normal (Harris & Chan, 2007, pp. 1–2). The concept of what we think of as normal has changed across time (Harris & Chan, 2007, pp. 1–2). Harris and Chan add that it is through altered environmental and genetic factors.

The trend in human corporeality is changing, as the very nature of trends is rather plastic and malleable. The fashion of the body reflects many subtle deviations, reassessments, and evolutions. Aesthetic enhancements can reach beyond our predispositions, but only if the attractiveness of a person is maintained or does not negatively impact upon their health. However, clashes may occur between enhancing the body and impacts on the health. Eva Carpigo claims that it is necessary to focus on the viewpoint of beauty practitioners who agree in considering aesthetic enhancements as their cathartic objectives to remove inner uneasiness and suffering. Consequently, aesthetic treatments should be recognized as practices of well-being since they aim to enhance the user's psychological and social life (Carpigo, 2016, pp. 1–3).

Anton Leist argues in his paper What Makes Bodies Beautiful that we are on the threshold of a new era in which biological science has an increasing power to design the human body. To this date, medicine has always been geared towards illness. Traditionally, its task has been to alleviate physical suffering caused by disease or to prevent suffering in the first place. Medicine in the future will probably be oriented towards design (Leist, 2003, p. 187). Leist's argument points to a distinct type of consumerism in medicine – plastic surgery. The tendency to achieve the ideal of beauty (reshaping of the human body) is present in plastic medicine and corrective surgeries. The current conception of beauty is motivated by the prevailing trends of aesthetic body treatments. The classic example of this is rhinoplasty because the nose is a dominant feature of the face. According to Leist, the task of design will be to create a body according to particular ideals. These are primarily health and vitality because they are the most important. The first harbingers of this shift are already visible in the fields of sports, medicine, cosmetic surgery, and different types of geriatric medicine (Leist, 2003, pp. 187–188).

Can medicine be only about aesthetics? This question reflects the growing superimposition of beauty and health. In the next part of our analysis, we will examine this idea on the example of Melanie Gaydos.

Special Case: Melanie Gaydos

In the past, models were tall, skinny, and were mostly white. They were beautiful and stunning, but they did not reflect the diversity of the human race. We argue that current trends are changing and the fashion world is developing towards more diverse models. Therefore, outdated ideas are being replaced by fashion models with a unique appearance.

Melanie Gaydos is one of the leading faces of this contemporary trend. She is a 28-year-old model in the USA and has a rare genetic disorder called ectodermal dysplasia. This disorder prevents her teeth, skin, muscles, cartilage, and bones from fully developing. Gaydos has scratched eyes as a result of her eyelashes growing so she is partially blind. In the case of Melanie Gaydos, corrective surgery or standard plastic surgery would help, for instance, save her eyes. However, these procedures often considered a global ethical dilemma.

Melanie Gaydos perceives her body as a fashion brand because it is an original and unique presentation of her identity. There are two lines of reasoning about her perception of the body. In the first one, we must consider the complete acceptance of her body authenticity. Everyone has the right to self-expression and the opportunity to work and create art or fashion. We must recognize that everyone can express ideas about their identity and determine who they are. The ability to determine our lives leads to a fulfilled and happy life.

The second line is the opposition and criticism that is composed of a series of questions. Is it ethically acceptable to put physical appearance above health? Is Gaydos's fashion brand more than healthy eyesight? Is self-expression and authenticity of more importance than a healthy body? Is medical opinion less important than the expression of art or fashion?

Melanie Gaydos has already answered these questions for herself. For instance, she claims that eye-saving surgery is not an option because her appearance is the decision to self-express. An ethical dilemma arises in this decision because she primarily perceives her body as a fashion brand. Many critics would argue that an individual should not favour appearance over health. We believe that Gaydos accepts the health risks of her decisions because she believes that the expression of individual choice is a basic right of every human being. It is an expression of authenticity for an individual. However, the health risks can be grave and the consequences irreversible. Therefore, we have to be very careful in favouring appearance over health.

Melanie Gaydos is a unique case in the fashion industry because health disadvantages are used as a subject of aesthetic body appeal. There are other models with physical disabilities, but the case of Melanie Gaydos is significant because she used her disability as a fashion brand. She turned a disadvantage into an advantage in the world of fashion.

However, we must conclude that there are ethical issues in enhancements (improvements) of the body. For example, individual decision can often be influenced by social pressure. Some critics may argue that decisions made under social pressure are not a display of free will. Ultimately, an individual's demonstration of authenticity is not authentic because discriminatory practices of contemporary society influence it. Sophie Mitra argues that there is a difference between disabled models that ignore prevention and are unlikely to be conducive to the human development of all; they do not cover many people with temporary difficulties or late-life onsets who may not self-identify as having a disability and are not connected to disabled people's organizations. They also ignore the potential well-being enhancements that health care and prevention may bring about (Mitra, 2018, p. 158). Mitra's argumentation can be used for the case of Melanie Gaydos because she wants to maintain physical integrity at the expense of reduced health. She is aware of her health handicap, but her modelling career has a higher value than health.

Conclusion

To summarize our first thematic line, we argue that it is possible to find a specific justification of lookism in the field of services and businesses, where an attractive appearance is a condition. More than others, fashion trends and current aesthetic ideals heavily determine this justification. Our culture also influences our understanding of beauty and how we perceive the human body. We conclude that, under different circumstances, the ideal of beauty often changes. The contemporary understanding of appearance and beauty seems to be more flexible and plastic than in previous times. Fashion trends also begin to include more diversity and accept a wider variety of models.

In the second thematic line, we have analyzed ethical issues and the consequences of preferring appearance over health. Concretely, we have examined the issue of discrimination arising from lookism. People who are enhanced could have an advantage over others, because, as we have demonstrated, some sectors in society prefer individuals with improved appearance. Of course, social and cultural influences heavily impact upon the contemporary understanding of beauty. The current ideal of beauty is much wider and more diverse than it was in the past, and in the future, most probably, it will expand even more.

We argue that current trends are becoming more individualized. This development signifies that, in the world of fashion, individuality and authenticity are two of the accepted factors. Models are now being created through various medical procedures, and therefore, they can adjust the ideal and develop this concept of beauty further. We argue that some people believe that the personal idea of beauty is more significant than their health. Melanie Gaydos is an example of a model that was able to use her disability and health problems as a fashion brand. In her case, however, she is not a victim of lookism, because she was using her disadvantage as an advantage. Here, a question arises: Is it possible to perceive disability as a fashion brand?

It seems that we must perceive this issue from an aesthetic perspective, because it belongs to the fashion world. If we use an ethical perspective, we should be obliged to prefer the health of a person above the individual idea of beauty. Yet the width and plasticity of fashion trends impact upon the ideal of body beauty and concurrently corrects it and Alexis Shotwell reminds us that we do not want to harp too much on philosophy; the "well-being beauty brand"; it is a little as though the writing of their marketing copy is writing directly for us (Shotwell, 2016, p. 3).

We conclude that in this situation, the ideal path would be to fully accept individuality and authenticity with an emphasis on maintaining or improving health. Enhancement could be acceptable only if it helps to maintain or increase the quality of life and the health of a person. We can assume that utilitarianism can also be useful with respect to the concept of lookism. More good for more people, and in this case, the good can be taken to be synonymous with beauty. There are countries, such as Brazil, that has this type of open approach to human aesthetic improvements. They call it the "right to beauty" and the state participates in the financing plastic and aesthetic surgeries. It increases the availability of those procedures to the general population. However, the people have to undergo certain medical checks first. They believe that prevention and treatment are more effective. Of course, only a healthy person can undergo aesthetic enhancement.

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