

The Formation, Evolution, and Impact of Fashion Appearance Stereotypes

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Abstract. Studies suggest that appearance plays an important role in how people are perceived by others. Beauty brings them many troubles, as they often receive a lot of negative comments on social media. Women often receive stares in their everyday lives. This is clearly linked to societal stereotypes about appearance. The stereotype of fashionable individuals genuinely affects the lives and career prospects of those with trendy appearances, impacting their professional and daily lives. This paper primarily examines the development of societal stereotypes related to fashion appearance and explores the underlying reasons for these stereotypes. Drawing from perspectives in sociology and fashion history, the study defines the stereotypes faced by individuals with fashionable appearances within the broader social context. Through case analysis, this research investigates this sociological phenomenon and discusses the tangible impacts of societal stereotypes on individuals with fashionable appearances. It argues that the formation of appearance stereotypes is related to legacies from fashion history. However, it is also largely influenced by modern media and entertainment.

Keywords: Stereotype; fashion; clothing; male gaze.

1. Introduction

According to research, appearance plays an important role in how people are perceived by others—either for better or worse. It is the first thing people use to form an opinion about another person; it is simply human nature. Thus, if one does not know others, he or she consciously or unconsciously judges them based on their looks [1]. In everyday life, women who meet certain beauty standards can be perceived as intimidating or unfriendly, receive uncomfortable stares in public, and experience exclusion from friend groups based on these assumptions [2]. Beauty brings them many troubles, as they often receive a lot of negative comments on social media. For example, Brenttany Sharraine shared that her colleagues spread rumors and ostracized her [3]. This is clearly linked to societal stereotypes about appearance.

Stereotypes are very common in society and can have a significant impact on people's lives and perceptions. A stereotype refers to a generalized and fixed view about a particular thing or group, which is then applied broadly, overlooking individual differences. The stereotype of fashionable appearance involves classifying people based on their trendy looks and attire, leading to fixed views about those with fashionable appearances.

Part of the public holds typical stereotypes about people with fashionable appearances, especially women. These stereotypes are largely negative and stem from the male gaze, influenced by portrayals in media and fashion history, and these character types are projected onto real-life society. The stereotype of fashionable individuals genuinely affects the lives and career prospects of those with trendy appearances, impacting their professional and daily lives, especially in academic settings. In some academic or professional environments, appearance and clothing are associated with personal qualities, and fashionable individuals may be perceived as lacking in work capability. In the Asian educational system, attention to fashion is often linked to lower academic ability. This paper will use case studies to explore the development and formation of appearance stereotypes and their social impact.

2. Development of Fashion Appearance Stereotypes

The origins of fashion can be traced back to France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, each of which has significantly influenced the development of fashion at different times. Among these, France is widely regarded by most scholars as the birthplace of modern fashion. As early as the 17th century, during the reign of Louis XIV, the luxurious attire of French nobility became the model for European aristocrats and the upper class. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Paris emerged as the center of haute couture. Fashion was developed and propagated by those with high social status and financial means.

The general public was introduced to fashion by emulating the elites of high society. It is evident that, compared to the working class, the development of fashion was driven by the upper class, with fashion consumption starting from the top of the social hierarchy. The influence of fashion spread from the upper-class celebrities downward. At that time, fashion was seen as a 'game' for the upper class. Therefore, from a historical perspective, in the early stages of fashion formation, fashion became closely associated with social status and financial capability. The established stereotype of fashion was that those who pursued fashionable appearances were believed to possess considerable financial means.

In the early 20th century, with the advancement of film technology, the presence of individual celebrities was amplified, and the close association between fashion icons and luxury fashion brands (such as through advertisements and brand endorsements) pushed fashion towards commercialization. This development linked fashion with the personal style of celebrities. Gradually, fashion styles came to represent entire groups, further reinforcing the impression that fashion-conscious individuals have strong financial capabilities. Celebrities became the new trendsetters, admired by the masses, leading to the phenomenon of the "celebrity effect." At the same time, media portrayals of fashion-conscious individuals established foundational impressions, with the "dumb blonde" stereotype becoming a classic representation of women in traditional Hollywood roles. Thus, the basic stereotype of fashionable appearance was solidified.

3. Impacts and Challenges of Stereotypes

Many times, people judge others' personal abilities based on their appearance and clothing, whether in academics or professional competence at work. When Dr. Yalda Safai was in medical school, she faced a lot of opposition for deciding to participate in beauty pageants in her spare time. People believed that this behavior reflected poorly on Safai's professionalism as a doctor and her serious academic attitude. In response, she joined hundreds of doctors, researchers, and medical students, posting photos of herself in a swimsuit on social media, ignoring a now-retracted article titled "Prevalence of unprofessional social media content among young vascular surgeons" [4]. This article will be further elaborated on in the second half of the study.

In some cases, stereotypes link a student's character to their appearance and clothing. In the article "Pretty Privilege in Education: More Than a Body, More Than a Blonde," the author shares her personal experience. As a teacher-student who dressed modestly and performed well in her daily activities, she was still removed from the B.Ed. program based on the assumption that her social media images were promiscuous because she was wearing a bikini (Longstreet-capstone). The author's academic life was affected by the baseless assumptions brought on by stereotypes. The professor's opinion had no strong evidence and was solely based on the author's photos posted on social media platforms. The author believes that this behavior was rooted in the male gaze and appearance-based stereotypes. It is easy to see the negative impact of such stereotypes. So much so that it has been argued that with the rise of media culture and the post-industrial shift to service occupations, beauty and physical appearance have become social resources that are convertible into other resources, and as such play a role in social reproduction [5].

Apart from academic and professional life, people's appearance and clothing are often linked to their moral character and personality traits. For instance, people may perceive those with fashionable

appearances as unfriendly or very cold. Examples like this are not uncommon. People's appearance and clothing truly impact their lives, and most of the negative attention stemming from stereotypes is directed at women.

4. Causes of Fashion Appearance Stereotypes

4.1. Hollywood and Media Representation

In classic Hollywood films, the “dumb blonde” has long been a staple screen image. This stereotype portrays beautiful blonde women who are obsessed with their fashionable appearance and perfect figures but are depicted as lacking intelligence. As a result, they are seen as more reliant on their looks and primarily serve to appeal to men. Although there is no concrete evidence that blondes have lower IQs than those with other hair colors [6], Hollywood has crafted many such iconic characters, and the term “dumb blonde” often carries a negative connotation.

Classic films such as *Platinum Blonde* (1931) and *Bombshell* (1933) are examples of this trope. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), the main character Lorelei embodies another aspect of the Hollywood blonde stereotype by expressing “exchange value”—their beauty and sexuality become highly valuable commodities, allowing women to gain economic power by exchanging their ‘assets’ with men for material objects and money [7]. This clearly illustrates how early Hollywood's classic images of women were scrutinized from a male perspective.

A prime example of this stereotype can be observed in the 2001 film *Legally Blonde*. The protagonist, Elle Woods, is a typical blonde with beautiful golden hair, a passion for fashion and appearance, and an affluent background. She initially seems unintelligent and somewhat ignorant, preferring looks over studying and reading. In fact, her decision to apply to Harvard Law School was motivated by a desire to win back her ex-boyfriend, who believed Elle was not “serious” enough. He told Elle magazine, “I’m going to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn.” Elle’s character perfectly embodies the “dumb blonde” stereotype, as seen even in the film’s title.

However, by the film’s end, she proves her abilities and intelligence, being accepted into Harvard Law School and achieving success. The skepticism shown by Elle’s classmates about her academic capabilities and seriousness highlights the pervasive “dumb blonde” stereotype and the unfair treatment it brings. This classic Hollywood image has partially carried over into real society, where fashionable blonde girls often receive negative judgments.

Research shows that blonde women do not have lower IQs—in fact, the opposite might be true, as they often have excellent business acumen [8]. Data indicates that blonde women, on average, have a higher IQ than brunettes, redheads, and those with black hair, debunking the “dumb blonde” stereotype. The proportion of low-IQ individuals is lower among blondes, while the proportion of high-IQ individuals is higher, making them more likely to be classified as geniuses. The study also found that blonde men have higher IQs as well, though the differences between hair colors in men are less pronounced than in women [8]. The public often defines fashionable girls in reality based on movie images, forming stereotypes about those who pursue fashion and beauty. The pursuit of a fashionable appearance has become associated with descriptors like “dumb” and “naive.”

In modern times, many social media influences continue to perpetuate and develop this stereotype, such as Paris Hilton. People are fascinated by the idea of a beautiful, wealthy, and dumb girl. Paris Hilton is well aware of this and has fully embraced the image in reality shows and interviews. She has crafted herself into the quintessential “dumb blonde,” gaining massive popularity on social media. Although Paris Hilton possesses strong marketing skills, her behaviors on social media have contributed to deepening the stereotype on women.

4.2. The Male Gaze

The Journal of Vascular Surgery once published an article titled “Prevalence of unprofessional social media content among young vascular surgeons.” However, this article has since been retracted. The study’s authors were three men who tracked the social media activities of 480 vascular surgeons

who graduated between 2016 and 2018. The authors categorized these online activities into two types: “clearly unprofessional conduct” and “potentially unprofessional conduct.” In the latter category, they included “inappropriate attire,” which was defined as “pictures in underwear, provocative Halloween costumes, and provocative posing in bikinis/swimwear.” When Dr. Yalda Safai responded to this study, she stated, “Let’s not kid ourselves. When they were talking about pictures in swimwear and bikinis, they were clearly talking about women. They didn’t have to spell it out. We all know they were talking about women. Nobody will ever criticize a male in his trunks on the beach in a photo” [9].

This issue stems from an outdated, male-dominated society. In traditional patriarchal societies, men typically hold dominant positions in social, economic, and political spheres. This power imbalance is reflected in cultural representations and visual arts, where women are objectified as the objects of male desire. The male gaze is reinforced within this social structure, as it maintains men’s control and dominance over women. Patriarchal societies assign active and dominant gender roles to men, while women are positioned as passive and submissive objects. This division of roles further strengthens the male gaze, linking women’s value to their appearance and sexual attractiveness rather than their personality or abilities.

Such examples of the male gaze are also evident in film and literature. Women in 1950s comedies were placed on display, a spectacle of the idealized female image. As sexual projections of the male spectator (both within the film and in the audience), they were either infantilized, domesticated, or sold to the highest bidder. In post-war comedies, visions of material and social success were literally mapped onto women’s bodies. Mulvey states that “the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses” [5]. This suggests that the primary audience for visual works is male, and their needs are prioritized.

The development of the film industry, especially in Hollywood, further solidified the concept of the male gaze. In classic Hollywood films, female characters are often objectified, becoming accessories or romantic interests for the male hero. Traditional art forms also depict women as objects of the gaze. Women have long been portrayed as beautiful and seductive objects for male viewers to admire. For example, female figures often appear in exposed poses, showcasing their bodily beauty. Male artists usually create these works from a male perspective, and this form of representation has gradually evolved into the cultural phenomenon of the male gaze

4.3. Traditional Asian Educational Values

In Asian educational culture, the pursuit of appearance and fashionable dressing is often seen as frivolous and superficial, becoming a negative example in many contexts. This perception is deeply ingrained, where prioritizing one’s appearance and fashionable dressing is frequently associated with a lack of academic focus, knowledge, and even moral character. As a result, fashionable individuals are sometimes unfairly judged or stigmatized, reinforcing stereotypes that equate attention to personal style with intellectual or ethical shortcomings. This mindset significantly affects society’s attitude toward fashionable individuals, deepens stereotypes and limits the acceptance of diversity in self-expression.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed analysis and dissection of appearance stereotypes from perspectives such as fashion history and sociology. The formation of appearance stereotypes is related to legacies from fashion history. However, it is largely influenced by modern media and entertainment. Media and streaming platforms have constructed and continuously reinforced stereotypes about fashionable appearances in more detail.

Moreover, most perspectives on stereotypes are from the viewpoint of the male gaze. There is also a contribution to the formation of appearance stereotypes in Asian education. It must be

acknowledged that the influence of stereotypes has grown and developed unconsciously. It affects people's lives and their perceptions of themselves and society.

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