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Appearance Discrimination: Lookism and the Cost to the American Woman

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Appearance Discrimination: Lookism and the Cost to the American Woman

Abstract

Lookism, or ranking an individual based on attractiveness, is a prevalent employment prejudice. Research has shown that looks influence salaries, career growth and even hiring (Warhurst, van den Broek, Hall, & Nickson, 2009). Because it is difficult to prove, there is no legislation that specifically addresses lookism. The current economy gives employers a vast selection of job applicants and candidates for open positions and “beauty premiums” (individuals considered above average with pretty faces) may have a better chance at being hired. According to a Newsweek national survey (2010) of 202 human resource staff which revealed that corporate hiring managers indicated appearances are critical – managers rank employee looks as the third most important feature, even above formal education. Economists have disclose statistics that “handsome men earn 5% more money on average than less good looking men while more attractive women earn 4% more than less good-looking women (Bennett, 2010, p.1). Furthermore, 13% of women and 10% of men would go as far as cosmetic surgery to excel at work if it meant it is career advancement.

Maintaining a prescribed appearance is necessary in an appearance focused society; it is not optional anymore. What are the costs of beauty and how can individuals in diverse economic positions keep up with these costs? What magnitude of debt do men and women incur to maintain a competitive appearance?

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Keywords

Lookism, Appearance Discrimination, Beauty Injustice, Gender Equality

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to our mothers who taught us the beauty is important, but education and knowledge attained will never fade -Alyssa, Rachel & Diana

APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION: LOOKISM AND THE COST TO THE AMERICAN WOMAN

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INTRODUCTION

There can be social injustices due to the way one physically appears at work. During the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues we discussed the concept of lookism as it relates to the conference topic, “Lean Out: Gender, Economics, and Enterprise.” Lookism is a form of discrimination based on the perception of attractiveness (Jones 886). Addressing lookism has been gaining traction in labor and employment journals, other academic press, and popular culture. Lookism has been defined as “the practice of discrimination on the basis of physical appearance in the workplace” (Ghodrati and Muati.1) or as Etoff stated, “beauty prejudice” (1). *The Washington Post Magazine* first used the term, “lookism” in 1978 (Ayto; Pettinger 165), moving away from the more generic term aesthetics, which had been used previously.

Deborah L. Rhode’s 2010 book, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*, explores societal demands of being beautiful, how much beauty costs, and responses and pressures to be attractive in society. Rhode addresses gender, age, sexual orientation, and race as she navigates the world of the white beauty standard. This book created a national conversation about and appearance in Western society. Rhode’s book was reviewed by *The Economist* on May 24, 2010, and ABC national radio in Australia in August of that same year. According to Rhode’s research, unattractive individuals are discriminated against in hiring practices and experience shame and

health issues such as psychological and physical disorders of anorexia, bulimia, depression, or anxiety. These experiences can lead to individuals undergoing risky cosmetic procedures. Rhode argues that appearance bias infringes on individual rights and reinforces beauty stereotypes that are perpetuated by media images and fashion magazines.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of lookism and appearance discrimination primarily towards women who are judged based upon their respective physical appearance, especially in the workforce. In this discussion we focus on dress and how it relates to appearance. Next, we present an overview on ethical aspects on lookism and the workplace. A literature review follows highlighting the financial impacts of lookism including dress and success, appearance management, and the cost of appearance management.

BEAUTY, DRESS, AND APPEARANCE

According to Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher,

Dress is a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids in human interaction in space and time. Dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories (1).

Because dress is a non-verbal communication system, it is interpreted just as text. Dress reveals information about the wearer to the “informed” viewer. Thus, individuals can attempt to manage their appearance to communicate information about themselves to others. For example, someone who is dressed in sweatpants and sneakers will be perceived as someone who exercises or is athletic.

Appearance, however, differs from dress. Appearance includes the “features of the undressed body, such as its shape and color as well as expression through gesture and grimace” (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 9). Appearance and grooming maintenance are acquired from a young age. Many children in the United States are taught that the color pink is feminine and blue is masculine. This happens when a newborn is delivered and is dressed in the respective color to communicate biological

gender. Girls are taught to place bows in their hair, bat their eyelashes, and smile wide with pouty lips. As they age, adolescent girls select certain styles of dress, apply make-up and perfume, and grow long hair. The visual aspects of a woman's appearance will play an important role as she grows older and prepares to enter the professional work force.

Standards of ideal beauty can contribute to lookism. Definitions of ideal beauty include physical features that "delight the senses and please the mind." Scholars have observed that ideal beauty is defined by culture and that it changes over time. It is closely linked to cultural stereotypes that are learned in society (Mahajan 166). Beauty is prescribed by culture, including factors such as body size, facial features, clothing, and other appearance characteristics. For example, in western culture a very thin body is a considered ideal. With increased globalization, research has found a trend in idealizing the European model type of beauty. Subsequently, behavior is modified to meet shifting cultural beauty norms (Faehmel, Farley, and Ma'at 66). Scholars often identify associations between ideal beauty in western culture and its promotion in media. Advertisements and media prompt unhealthy behavior among women, such as eating disorders and extreme plastic surgery. The drive to be beautiful is not irrational. As Frank J. Cavico, Stephen C. Muffler, and Bahaudin G. Mujtaba noted, beauty in western society is seen as a "prized possession" and is synonymous with success and happiness (791).

LOOKISM, ETHICS, AND WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace dress for women became important particularly in the 1980s when women dressed in coordinated suits and suit separates that were the norm in corporate culture. The phrases "dress for success" and "the power suit" were prominently featured in numerous style guides and popular literature. At least some of the impetus to wear a suit was driven by the work of John T. Molloy, who wrote two bestselling books designed to educate both women and men on how to "dress for success." In these books he explained the "rules for successful career attire." He reinforced the prevailing opinion that the business suit was most "appropriate" for business attire. According to Molloy, wearing the wrong

clothes could mean career failure.

Dressing for success was important for women to communicate messages of competence, power, and status. Researchers found that women wearing business suits were associated with positive occupational attributes such as honesty and integrity and were perceived as working for a reputable organization (Easterling, Leslie, and Jones 211; Kwon 33). Other researchers noted that business apparel was associated with favorable managerial attributes including credibility (Johnson, Crustsinger, and Workman 27), high status, positive managerial traits, and being professional (Rafaeli and Pratt 32). Workman and Johnson found people were not only willing to make inferences about people on the basis of their dress but were also willing to make inferences about the company where people worked (164).

Anat Rafaeli, Jane Dutton, Celia V. Harquail, and Stephanie Mackie-Lewis investigated everyday decisions about the dress of female administrative employees and found that individuals can manage their appearances to facilitate performance on a variety of tasks within the workplace (9). Subjects in the study were drawn from a stratified random sample of twenty who were employed at a School of Business in a large Midwestern university. Eleven women held secretarial jobs, six women held administrative positions, and three women held supervisor positions. During in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to describe and explain the clothing they wore to work, discuss comfortable and uncomfortable feelings associated with their dress at work, what their dress communicated about them, and their experiences at the university that influenced their behavior. Researchers drew three different conclusions. First, "Participants used dress to execute their roles in the workplace" (17). Second, participants used dress to perform various functions at work to illustrate organizational membership and to attend organizational events. Finally, participants used dress to show competence in their respective job-related roles. This meant participants used dress to feel appropriate in their roles and to feel effective during interaction with others. Participants spent a lot of time and effort deciding on what is suitable dress and dress attributes according to their

membership with the university, functional area, and position.

As investigated by Anthony C. Little, extensive research in this area of appearance and occupational success includes the visual characteristics such as height, appearance, clothes, and other traits that play an important part in making personal judgments in the workplace. Rafaeli et al. investigated everyday decisions about the dress of female administrative employees (9). Research strongly suggest that many of these physical attributes and facial appearances may be used as a perceived “fit” for the job being offered which could also be stated as “task congruent selection.” Tallness has positive associations attributed to it such as being healthier and more intelligent, especially for men (Jackson and Ervin 434). Individual attractiveness is often attributed to sociability, and masculine facial traits are attributed to dominance and physical strength. Structural features such as facial attractiveness and height may be a telling sign to employers as health, intelligence, sociable, dominance, and physical strength are assets needed in the work environment (Keating et al. 62). However, wearing perfume or a certain style of dress can be manipulated and thus affect perceived attributions by potential employers.

Christine L. Williams and Catherine Connell investigated attractive sales associates who are employed by national retail to retain certain clientele yet pay low wages. Employees who have careers in the service industry are hired as “aesthetic labor,” which includes one’s demeanor, dress style, speaking voice, and attractiveness. Other aesthetic ideal requirements of hired employees who represent the store’s brand image usually include the middle-class, status, Caucasian, and traditional gender. Employees settle for low wages as they identify with the retail store brand and enjoy employee discounts. However, the authors conclude that aesthetic labor should not be rewarded as many of these employees work for these discounts, thus creating a culture of consumerism for workers. Furthermore, only hiring aesthetic labor intensifies the social inequalities that already exist. Equal opportunity employers that begin to hire on the basis of quality as opposed to appearance could close the gap on job segregation (340).

Louis Tietje and Steven Cresap reviewed theories on beauty and in preferential treatment of attractive people as potentially fair and just (31). Two theories were most prominent, those of Rawls and Nozick. Rawls' Theory of Justice contends that "natural assets are those that are developed by social circumstances;" who your parents are and their appearances are passed genetically through generations. This is not a choice or factor that one can argue with. Nozick argues in his book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, that utilitarianism is flawed because individuals can develop natural assets, creating an unfair advantage in external factors that play into being attractive and may not be deserved. Some of the resources at the disposal of attractive people may not be available to those individuals who are perceived as less attractive.

In sum, dressing for the day is an important part of daily rituals among professional women. Women are aware that they need to dress appropriately to assure success and credibility and that a bias in the workplace exists, particularly for women. Some components of appearance (e.g., smell) are easier to manipulate than others (e.g., height). Although it is difficult to prove, appearance influences workplace interactions often leading to unfair biases. In an effort to combat these biases, women must make the decision to alter their appearances, which has substantial costs in both actual dollars and emotional and physical health.

APPEARANCE MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMICS

Soohyung Lee conducted a compelling study that recognizes that a beauty premium does exist for attractive employees but argues that the return on investing in beauty is not great. Research shows that people who have above-average attractiveness earn more than their below-average attractiveness counterparts. Taller height results in more wages where the tallest 25 % of workers earn 13 % more than the shortest 2 %. Lee also observed that being overweight leads to a reduction in wages. Lee then speaks about the investment people make in beauty in order to see returns in the form of increased wages. As of 2006, \$48 billion was spent on cosmetics in the U.S., which includes skincare, haircare,

makeup, and fragrance. In 2012, the U.S. clothing market was \$225 billion which illustrates a substantial increase could close the gap on job segregation. The weight-loss market in 2014 was about \$310 billion, which includes food-management programs, weight-control supplements and services to track calorie consumption and fitness. However, the cost-benefit analyses that have been studied show that for most people, the benefits of investing in beauty are not worth the costs (Lee).

The premise is that the beauty premium only applies to people with above-average attractiveness. There is no significant difference in wages between people who are simply attractive, average, or below-average looking. So, if investing in beauty can enhance a person from being attractive to above-average attractiveness, then it is financially worthwhile. Lee's study points to statistics in South Korea, where strikingly beautiful men and women make 8-9% more than average looking people. However, being beautiful, as opposed to strikingly beautiful, only earned this group of men and women 3% higher wages. The largest cost-benefit gap lies in cosmetic surgery. According to Lee, the average cost of cosmetic surgery is \$7000. If a person is below-average looking, there is only a 5% chance that cosmetic surgery will make a woman strikingly beautiful and no chance for a man. The chance to become above average (which is less than strikingly beautiful) is 34% for women and 2% for men. So below-average looking women may earn 3% more after cosmetic surgery while men in this group may earn less than 1% more. Therefore, people who spend large sums of money with the intent to attain looks that are above average might only achieve an average or attractive appearance, which is not enough to reap the benefits of a beauty premium.

Data from the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reveal surging trends in cosmetic procedures. American spending on surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures is over \$12 billion a year (1). Of that amount, over \$7 billion is spent on surgical procedures, more than \$2.6 billion on injectables such as Botox and lip fillers, and nearly \$2 billion on skin rejuvenation. Of all the surgical and nonsurgical procedures, 17.9% are performed on younger Americans aged 19-34,

41.5% on middle-aged Americans aged 35-50, and 29.9% on older Americans between the ages of 51-64. These statistics point to the fact that nearly 90% of Americans undergoing such procedures are working age and almost 60% are in their early to mid-career years. Furthermore, 91% of the cosmetic procedures are performed on women and 9% on men. Since 1997, the number of women undergoing cosmetic procedures increased 471% while the number of men undergoing cosmetic procedures increased 273% (1).

The YWCA presents an economic dilemma where the amount of money women

...spend on cosmetics, beauty, and cosmetic surgery is surging, but at the same time, research shows that women who do not keep up with certain beauty measures suffer in their personal careers and this effects them financially. Between 1997 and 2007 cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures have increased almost 500%. Surveys show that the majority of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 support cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery among minority women has also seen a sharp increase in recent years. These statistics support lookism, as employers tend to discriminate potential employees based on appearances and attractiveness. The YWCA research points out that below average looking employees earned 9% less than their above average looking counterparts. The study also highlights that by simply investing the cost of a monthly manicure-pedicure of \$50 into a retirement account annually rather than the beauty treatment, the retirement account would accumulate an additional \$10,000 in just ten years (“Beauty at Any Cost: The Consequences of America’s Beauty Obsession”).

In their study, Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle examine the economics of lookism. The authors assumed that in some occupations, attractiveness increases worker productivity, especially in positions that interact with customers. Productivity in other occupations is not impacted by a worker’s attractiveness, but an attractive person may still choose that field due to other characteristics that enhance that person’s

productivity. Based on this premise, the authors constructed a model equation to see whether a pay difference exists based on looks (1174).

Two surveys were conducted in the U.S. and Canada that provided information on respondents' looks and labor-market factors. The interviewer met each respondent, aged 18-64, and rated their appearance as either strikingly beautiful, above average for age, average for age, below average for age, or homely. The survey collected information on the respondent's age, gender, income, education, and industry. Participants who reported severely poor health status were excluded from the study, as physical disabilities should not be used to rate physical appearance. The results of the surveys showed that earnings of above-average looking/handsome men increased 5% while earnings of below average/homely men were reduced by 9%. Above-average looking women earned 4% more while below-average looking women earned 5% less. These results demonstrated that the beauty premium for above/average and strikingly beautiful men and women was not as large as the wage penalty for below-average looking employees (1186).

In their study, Catherine Cox and William Glick analyzed the impact of cosmetic use on resume evaluations. Female volunteers of average attractiveness were photographed wearing interview appropriate clothing. The women were photographed three times – without makeup, with moderate makeup, and with heavy makeup. Business administration students rated the photographs on a scale of 1-7 based on physical attractiveness, femininity, sexiness, and use of makeup. Students then played the role of personnel officers where they received a job description for the candidate (secretary or accountant) along with a resume with a photograph and had to rate the expected performance of each candidate. Results of the study revealed that use of makeup enhanced attractiveness, femininity, and sexiness. Expected performance for women applying for the accountant position was generally equal for all three levels of makeup. However, expected performance for women applying for the secretary job was negatively impacted when heavy makeup was used. Too much makeup created the

perception of low competence (51). This study suggests that existing research of the relationship between beauty and wages might need to be further evaluated and to achieve accurate results, studies may need to stratify samples by job categories.

James Andreoni and Ragan Petrie attempted to explain why beauty premiums and male-female wage gaps exist by conducting economic experiments. Their study was in the form of a public goods game where groups of subjects were given tokens that they can invest in either private or public goods. Four groups of five subjects played the game, which was repeated for 40 rounds and there were a total of 140 participants. Each subject was given 20 tokens. The private good paid \$0.02 per token invested by the subject and the public good paid \$0.01 per token invested by the entire group. Thus, investing in a private good would only earn the individual subject money while investing in the public good would earn money for the entire group. The game was played on a computer and subjects could see photos of the group members displayed on the computer screen. In one round of the game, only total group contributions were revealed to the subjects. In another round, both the total group contributions as well as individual subject contributions were revealed. The goal of this methodology was to emulate an employment setting where stereotyping based on looks and gender could be observed as well as the impact of such stereotypes on expectations of cooperation and contributions (73-77).

The second part of the experiment involved an independent group of people who were not involved in the game to rate the 140 photos of the subjects based on either physical attractiveness or helpfulness. The raters rated each photo based on a scale of 1-9, either for attractiveness or for helpfulness. The results showed that women were considered to be more attractive and more helpful than men. Photos of the female subjects were given an average rating of 4.87 for attractiveness and 5.12 for helpfulness. Photos of the male subjects were given an average rating of 3.78 for attractiveness and 4.30 for helpfulness. The results were used to distribute the photos into three buckets: attractive, middle-attractive, and unattractive. This information suggested that people deemed to be

attractive were considered to be helpful-looking. Thirty-nine percent of attractive people were rated helpful-looking, 16% of middle-attractive people were rated helpful-looking and 6% of unattractive people were rated helpful-looking (77-79).

The results also showed that people do discriminate based on beauty. When group members did not see individual subject performance/ contributions, attractive people were given the benefit of the doubt and group members contributed more to public goods. This shows that cooperation increased when there were beautiful people in the group, thereby increasing the earnings of attractive people. Nevertheless, when individual subject performance/contributions were revealed, people were less cooperative, or contributed less to public goods. Therefore, although people expect attractive people to be more cooperative, this beauty premium disappears if it is clear that they are not as cooperative, or their performance lags (80-84).

Such expectations lead to stereotypes that are prevalent in employment as explained by a *Newsweek* national survey. Fifty-seven percent of hiring managers said it would be increasingly difficult for qualified but unattractive candidates to find a job; 61% said a woman would benefit from wearing clothing that shows off the figure; and of the nine most important traits of a candidate, looks were voted as third most important (Bennett). This survey parallels the results of Andreoni and Petrie's work, finding that hiring managers are persuaded by certain stereotypes associated with attractive people thereby offering them a beauty premium. Once these people are hired and performance can be observed, the premium may disappear.

Given the potential financial impact of investing in appearance and dress, it is important to understand as well the gender pricing of clothes and beauty products. In an effort to assess the gender pricing of goods in New York City, the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) conducted a study entitled "Beauty at Any Cost: From Cradle to Cane: The Cost of Being a Female Consumer". The DCA analyzed price differences of 35 comparable product categories with distinct male-oriented and female-oriented versions. The study analyzed almost 800 products of 91 brands

sold in 24 New York City retailers and found that on average women pay 7% more than men for similar products. The DCA was diligent in selecting men's and women's versions of a product with similar construction, textile, appearance, construction and branding. As a result, instead of an incremental analysis, the study was able to demonstrate the unavoidable higher price of women's products when a woman cannot choose among alternatives. For instance, the study did not compare the cost of a generic product to a brand name but instead focused on comparing the costs of women and men's versions of a product within the same brand.

Of the five industries analyzed, the DCA found that the cost of women's products was 7% more for toys and accessories, 4% more for children's clothing, 8% more for adult clothing, 13% more for personal care products and 8% more for senior /home health care products. Of the 794 products analyzed, female-oriented versions were priced higher 42% of the time while male-oriented versions were priced higher 18% of the time. The remaining 40% of instances showed equal pricing. The study analyzed the pricing of products by taking the average cost of individual men's and women's products. Price comparisons were made on a unit basis for the full price of the products, disregarding any promotions or discounts. The median prices for each product type were also determined and it was found that the median price was parallel to the average price.

The DCA had conducted an earlier study in 1992 to analyze price bias against women. The study found that, among other points, women paid 25% more for the same haircut as men and 27% more for laundering services. The study prompted New York City Council to pass a law in 1998 enabling the DCA to issue violations to any retail service establishment that engages in price bias for services based on gender. Lack of a similar law regarding gender based price bias for goods inspired the DCA to conduct the recent study in 2015. The DCA notes that while price differences in individual products may be small, the cumulative effect of a gender premium can amount to a heavy financial burden on women. Although the DCA did not calculate the impact of the burden, a 1994 study by the State of California determined that women

paid a premium of \$1,351 per year for the same services as men (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs). Invested at a 4% rate of return, \$1,351 will yield \$16,368 over the course of ten years and \$76,095 over 30 years. This is a significant amount of savings, exacerbated by the fact that women earn about 80 cents for every dollar earned by men (Catherine Costello and Ariane Hegewisch).

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

On October 20, 2016, one-day prior to the start of the Seneca Falls Dialogues, a *New York Times* article entitled, “Is It Time for Wonder Woman to Hang Up Her Bathing Suit?” stated that Wonder Woman was being “named an honorary ambassador for the empowerment of women and girls and for gender equality.” The article details Wonder Woman’s positive attributes, including that she is “self-sufficient and strong and fights for equality and justice.” Wonder Woman was not created out of a male character or sidekick as Batgirl or Catwoman was for their male superhero counterparts. However, the article also touched upon the conversation of “the outfit issue” (Friedman D8). Vanessa Friedman describes Wonder Woman’s strapless, stars and stripes bathing suit, thigh-high boots, and of course, her well-endowed cleavage -- ...but why? Has there ever been a discussion about Spiderman, Superman, or Batman in their respective leotard-type outfits and the prominence of their male genitalia? The issue of gender-equality, dress, and beauty runs deep into a national conversation even when discussing DC Entertainment Comic heroines--we mean heroine--Wonder Woman. The United Nations thought it was important to look past the superficial and beyond the clothes. It was determined that Wonder Woman’s actions and what she represents was of much more importance. Thus, it is difficult to separate the clothing from the woman. The heroine seems to be deeply scrutinized due to her dress and beauty much like American women today. After a class discussion on this very topic, students agreed in a consensus stating that it was important to judge Wonder Women by her actions, courage, and good deeds, not her dress. Wonder Woman’s outfit was one of functionality just as her male counter heroes. We also came to

the conclusion that it probably cost more to dress Wonder Woman in the same way, as her pink razor was more expensive.

Do the ideals of beauty translate into success? If success means improved wages, then from the scope of the literature review and research, we can conclude that dress does relate to success and opportunities, and communicates who one is in society. Researchers from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, gender studies, economics, human ecology, and fashion have performed extensive studies on appearance and appearance discrimination. Dress and appearances are used to convey status and aptitude in the workplace. Hiring managers have an evident bias towards aesthetically pleasing individuals, and research has shown a connection between looks and wages. Although there is still insufficient research stratifying subjects by job category, education level, and location, existing literature clearly indicates a desire to “look good” and invest significant sums of money in managing appearance. There is sufficient evidence to show that women incur greater costs than men to achieve a desired look, partly due to gender pricing and partly because women spend more on beauty products and cosmetic procedures. However, many more men today are equally scrutinized about appearance including, heightism, weightism and other aspects of dress and appearance. Our society seems to be fixated on body image perfection and images due to digital enhanced photography and HD technology.

With the bias of appearance permeating our society, an interesting and important area of research is the legal framework of lookism in the workplace. As look-based discrimination is more difficult to prove than prejudices such as sexism and racism, researching labor laws to find protections against appearance bias would benefit the countless men and women who are financially penalized simply because they do not reflect a certain standard of appearance. The ethical issues highlighted in this article summarize the issues with lookism with regards to legal matters. Having appearance standards can help promote and contribute to a company but can perpetuate sexism, racism, and other appearance related “isms.” At the same time, expecting employees,

particularly females, to maintain these stands can be draining on them both emotionally and financially. The end result is a series of questions on the topic, such as fairness, ethical behavior, and appropriateness. Perhaps it is a balancing act of appearing well within a given context, but not at an unfair cost when compared to others. However, this is much easier said than practiced and continued awareness of this issue is warranted.

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