



## Developing a Method to Study to Examine Lookism on Social Media

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*Introduction:* “Lookism” is a term to describe appearance discrimination or “the practice of discrimination on the basis of physical appearance in the workplace” (Ghodrati, Joorabchi, & Muati, 2015, p.1). In popular literature, it has been called “beauty prejudice” (Etcoff, 1999, p. 1). The notion that a pleasing appearance results in favorable outcomes (e.g., higher wages, promotions) from others is not necessarily new, as literature on physical attractiveness is rather extensive. The Washington Post Magazine first used the term “lookism” in 1978 (e.g., Ayto, 1999), however, the term “lookism” was first recognized as a form of discrimination by authors of the Oxford English Dictionary and American Heritage Dictionary in 2000 (Ghodrati et al.)

*Literature Review:* Lookism can be influenced by a number of appearance cues, such as visible demographic traits (e.g. race, gender, age), body size, and clothing. The influence of appearance on others has been noted, particularly race, gender, and age. The United States has a variety of races, ethnicities, age groups, and cultural backgrounds where researchers found racial discrimination, persistent anti-foreigner racism, and racial/ethnic taunting of Asian American college students (Cheng, et al., 2017). Steele (2016) investigated colorism as a pressing issue in U.S. society. Children's media was examined. Lookism related to skin tones was found. Bullies were depicted with a deep blue skin tone, which signified their skin's blackness. The correlation between wealth, education and ethnicity revealed patterns of prejudice against African Americans with darker skin tones.

Social media is the primary promoter of lookism, particularly among youth. It repeats images of beauty standards whereby the viewer becomes obsessed with achieving these standards and influences the adoption of beauty biases (Yoobin & Minyoung, 2022; Mason, 2021). Rhodes (2010) discussed cultural injustices of being unattractive in a society appearance obsessed with the potential for “looks” to influence hiring practices, such as better career options and higher pay. Those who feel unattractive in an appearance laden society could suffer certain mental health issues potentially causing anxiety, anorexia, and depression. In addition, lookism can emerge in social media because there are fewer social barriers to communicating with strangers online (Mason, 2021).

Related theoretical frameworks to this topic include Stone’s (1962) concept of Symbolic Interaction called whereby individuals use dress to state their identities to others. Stone noted an

individual is recognized as having an identity when the identity is claimed by the individual, often using dress, and when others attributed the identity to the individual.

*Significance and Purpose:* Research is needed for clarity to combat the issue of lookism and ethnicity, particularly as it is expressed on social media. Scholars in the apparel and textile field are positioned to make significant scholarly impact on this topic. The *purpose of the research* is to assess a method to examine lookism that may exist on social media. Assessing lookism on social media can provide awareness of the issue and prompt future longitudinal studies demonstrating any increases or changes in the issue. The objectives of this paper were to: 1) provide a method of analysis of social media as it pertains to lookism; 2) present preliminary findings from a pilot using the developed method

*Methods:* A qualitative content analysis of social media images were used to address the research question. Social media aspects examined included: i) dress ii) hair style, iii) position, iv) context, v) definitions of lookism, vi) facial feature, and vii) number of likes. The content analysis was completed twice by two separate researchers to establish interrater reliability. The interrater reliability was above 90%. The initial sample included images selected from a personal Instagram account. The sample included ten images with a Caucasian model and ten models of other ethnicities (e.g. African American, Asian, etc.). The data were analyzed for repeated themes. Each theme was coded and reanalyzed to develop the themes.

*Results:* After analyzing the initial 20 photographs, the process was evaluated. The main issue focused on selecting photographs to analyze. Therefore, the researchers examined social media pages and found analyzing the social media sites (Instagram) of fashion companies was a professional, focused source of images. These sites had a consistent set of images for systematic selection. Other parameters in selecting images included recent photographs, reachable through “#Company Name,” and a large pool of photographs of individuals wearing the clothing from the business that allowed for random selection of images.

The preliminary analysis of the 20 images demonstrated some patterns that may be insightful to understand lookism and social media. Ten photographs were Caucasian and 10 were “other.” The “other” group had five black models, two Hispanic, two Asian, and one Middle Eastern. There were five females and five males in each group. The photographs with the most likes tended to feature women in tight fitting, revealing clothing or men. The female had the most likes among the Caucasian group (n=8,148 likes). She was dressed in a tight-fitting t-shirt that revealed her stomach. However, she was wearing loose-fitting, casual pants. Another photograph that was liked (n=166 likes) more often in the Caucasian group featured a woman with a heavy coat, jeans, and a hat. The photograph with an African American was the most liked (n=1665 likes) female in the other category. She was wearing a tight-fitting, low cut, short dress. Her clothing was very body revealing when compared to the clothing worn by the photographs with the most likes in the Caucasian group. Interesting cultural dress was liked (n=775 likes) among the female pictures in the “other” group.

The photographs featuring males (Caucasian and other group) tended to wear business casual outfits. The photograph with the next most likes (n=3042 likes) in the “other” category was an Asian man dressed in an oxford shirt and dress pants. He had short hair, neat hair. He was dressed more professionally than the Caucasian male pictured in the photograph with the most likes among other Caucasian males (n=1147 likes).

*Discussion, Conclusions, and Suggestions for Further Research:* Lookism has been particularly common recently. Social media has been influential in perpetuating lookism, particularly among the young (e.g., Yoobin & Minyoung, 2022). Researching lookism in social media can uncover biases that may exist in society related to diverse demographic groups (e.g. age, disability, gender, ethnicity, etc.). This pilot study examined a method to research social media and lookism. After examining 20 images on social media, the content analysis was helpful in determining potential lookism that might exist. The researchers propose defining the specific parameters of image selection. In addition, the number of likes might be influenced by when the images were posted. Therefore, relatively new (posted within the last month) should be selected. Future research can examine lookism among social media of different fashion companies (e.g., fast fashion brands). The preliminary results demonstrated some biases by gender. Males tended to be presented professionally, while non-white females were presented in a sexual manner. Further study can examine presentation of females, males, and ethnicity in photographs on social media. The research is important theoretically, contributing to Symbolic Interaction Theory. It also has the potential to address and bring awareness to the issue of lookism and identify the appearances (e.g. females and revealing clothing) that might result in lookism.

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