



Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 June 2015

Received in revised form 29 September 2015

Accepted 2 October 2015

Available online 27 October 2015

Keywords:

Beauty standards

Physical appearance

Cultural capital

Q-methodology

Comparative research

Gender-normativity

ABSTRACT

To what extent do tastes in the field of beauty demarcate symbolic boundaries? This article analyzes social differences in the evaluation of the beauty of female and male faces in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. Combining Q-methodology and open interviews ($N = 150$), it presents a quantifiable comparative measurement of 'beauty tastes', and a qualitative analysis of the underlying 'repertoires of evaluation'. Four types of repertoires were found: aesthetic repertoires; subjectification versus objectification; gender-normative; and racial repertoires. Aesthetic and objectifying evaluations are typically applied to women, whereas evaluative repertoires for men are more subjectified, less aestheticizing, more overtly gendered and racial. Aesthetic repertoires reflect the opposing popular and highbrow logics well-known in cultural sociology. These repertoires resonate with the aesthetics of cultural institutions, notably fashion modeling and pornography. Regression analysis shows that these aesthetic repertoires demarcate boundaries along lines of education, age and urbanity, suggesting that they function as 'emerging cultural capital', applying highbrow logics beyond traditional high art fields. While nationality hardly affects the evaluation of female beauty, significant national differences are found in evaluations of male looks. Long-standing traditions of female depictions have produced more transnational stylistic conventions and repertoires. The evaluation of male facial beauty, on the other hand, appears to be shaped by more nationally specific racial and gender norms and ideologies.

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1. Introduction: physical beauty and cultural capital

Physical appearance is related to status. A beautiful physique enhances one's social worth. As many studies in economy and psychology have shown, attractive people are more successful socially and economically than people with average or unattractive looks (Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Moreover, outward signs of status often come to be seen as beautiful or attractive. For instance, bodily signs of privilege like a slim body or a light skin are widely considered beautiful. Around the world people try to achieve such prestigious looks, often with the help of the ever-growing cosmetic and beauty industries (Jones, 2008; Mears, 2011; Stearns, 2013). Sociologists and media scholars have therefore argued that 'aesthetic capital' – the status derived from a beautiful appearance – is a form of symbolic capital (Anderson, Grunert, Katz, & Lovascio, 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015).

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Beauty standards, however, are not universally shared even within a single society. Studies showing that aesthetic capital ‘pays off’ typically assume that people agree about what is beautiful. However, to benefit from your appearance you need to embody the right kind of beauty. For instance, the beauty standards and bodily styles of the working and lower middle classes diverge considerably from dominant middle class styles (Bettie, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Crane, 2000; Tyler, 2008). Forms of beauty favored by less powerful groups carry social worth in their own surroundings, but may be penalized in society at large. Moreover, some physical styles are a willful denial of mainstream beauty standards. Subcultural styles like punk or gothic, or the arcane and experimental styles of the ‘fashion forward’ are designed to be liked only by a select group of insiders. The appreciation of physical beauty therefore is – at least partly – a matter of taste. Like other tastes, the appreciation of physical beauty requires cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984): cultural knowledge that varies across social groups and that is distributed unevenly across society.

This article investigates how beauty standards vary across people, and how they are related to social background. Following sociological studies on taste and cultural capital, I assume that the evaluation of the physical appearance of women and men is informed by cultural logics that are related to social background characteristics like age, class and nationality. Moreover, I expect such differences to mark symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Physical appearance – which includes both a person’s physique and how this is styled, dressed and adorned – is central to how we judge people not only sexually, but also socially. Looking bad carries strong social and moral connotations. Differences in the valuation of appearance, therefore, may have real social consequences.

This approach builds on the sociology of taste, distinction and symbolic boundaries. In the early twenty-first century, social divides are becoming increasingly complex. Class divisions are shifting, as the vast majority of people in European societies now belong to a large and diverse middle class (Savage et al., 2013). Traditional class distinctions intersect with other divides, like age, gender and ethnicity. Moreover, increasing globalization leads to convergence across national boundaries, but growing divides between locals and cosmopolitans within countries (Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009; Prieur & Savage, 2013). The field of physical appearance is a strategic field to map and analyze how these new social divisions manifest themselves in everyday tastes.

Although the appreciation of physical appearance is a matter of taste, it differs from tastes in, say, music or high arts. First, the evaluation of a persons’ appearance depends on their gender and race, and is therefore related to racial and gender ideologies. Second, it is rooted in everyday life and daily aesthetic practice. While fields like fashion modeling (Mears, 2011) and the cosmetic industry (Jones, 2008) are specialized in the production and dissemination of ‘beauty’, these institutions have not eclipsed everyday practice as much as professionalized artistic fields like music or visual arts. Finally, the appreciation of beauty is marked by a ‘double embodiment’. Like all tastes, the judgment of appearance is based in embodied cultural capital: it is a visceral, almost automatic aesthetic experience. However, many people also aim to embody their own beauty standards through beauty practices such as styling, dressing, grooming or cosmetic surgery. In contrast with other cultural tastes, people do wear their beauty standards on their sleeves (and other parts of their bodies).

This study presents comparative data on the appreciation of the beauty of female and male faces from five European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. This comparison enables me to, first, map ‘repertoires of evaluation’ (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000) of physical appearance both within and across countries, and to unravel the cultural logics underlying these repertoires. Second, a comparative approach sheds light on the mechanisms at play in the shaping of beauty standards. Are symbolic boundaries drawn in similar ways across countries? Or do background factors like class, gender, education, or urbanity have a different impact across national settings?

2. Beauty, capital and subject position: theorizing the evaluation of appearance

The status systems of European societies have transformed considerably over the past decades. Consequently, how people signal their social status and identity has changed as well. Old forms of distinction, like knowledge of high arts, have become less important. Newly emerged means of distinction are both more diverse and less universally shared (Bennett et al., 2009; Lahire, 2006; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005).

Sociologists have identified many new forms of capital: cosmopolitan capital (Weenink, 2008); emerging cultural capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013); multicultural capital (Bryson, 1996); erotic capital (Hakim, 2010); and aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010). Some of these relate to new developments, like increasing globalization (cosmopolitan capital), growing ethnic and cultural diversity (multicultural capital) or the expansion and diversification of the middle classes (emerging cultural capital). Other capital forms refer to resources that are not new at all. Beauty and sexual attractiveness have been sources of power and influence since the beginning of humanity. However, the decreasing universality of status systems in diverse societies may lead to renewed or growing impact of such resources.

This study conceptualizes the evaluation and appreciation of human beauty as a form of distinction. I therefore do not look at the unequal distribution or pay-off of a beautiful appearance (‘aesthetic’ or ‘erotic’ capital), but instead at the variations in its appreciation. I see this as cultural capital: a socially conditioned and convertible form of aesthetic appreciation that carries cultural value (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, one’s preferences for physical beauty serve as a means to distinguish oneself; and as criteria by which to judge others.

This leads to a twofold question. First: what sort of aesthetic judgments do people make about physical appearance? Second: what symbolic boundaries and social divides are marked by such evaluations of beauty? In order to answer these

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