

# 2: Appearance Issues

## Learning objectives

- To identify the characteristics of people who have appearance issues
- To understand the sociological perspectives used to explain appearance deviance
- To see the role that societal reaction plays in shaping the deviant's behavior
- To learn how fashion communities project image standards
- To understand the social and health consequences of appearance deviance issues
- To examine policies proposed to control appearance issues

# Discovery

## Introduction

Appearance norms → culturally acceptable ways of appearing

### Appearance deviance

- violate prevailing cultural standards
- lead to labeling, stigmatization, and exclusion
- Give rise to deviant communities and subcultures, as a result of stigmatization

### Types of appearance deviance

1. Dressing different, intended deviance (punk clothes, tattoos, piercings)
2. Having a different body, unintended difference (obesity, anorexia, etc)

## Appearance Norms

Appearance norms have a large effect on women → aging is seen negatively  
→ cosmetic industry allows women to attain “normalcy” (i.e. youthful image)

The image of the **ideal** women has become more slim, delicate, and feminine.  
The image of the **ideal** man has become more muscular, brute, and masculine  
→ few can meet these cultural ideals, accounting for **increased dissatisfaction**

### Merton's anomie

- A gap between cultural ideals and real-world possibilities can have two results
  1. Acceptance of the norms and an effort to reproduce them
    - a. Conformity → achieving norms
    - b. Ritualism → failing to achieve norms
  2. Rejections of the norms, substituting in own values

- a. Innovation → live by new appearance rules (surgery, cosmetics)
- b. Rebellion → establish new appearance norms

Deviant body image or dress is more likely to be used for comedy in TV series, but more likely to be used for empathy in movies

## Social Meaning

### Goffman's *Asylums*

- The first step a total institution takes to resocialize an inmate is to separate them from old identities by changing his/her appearance
- Hairstyle is often normalized too
- Process known as **degradation ceremony**

### Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*

- In novel, clothing stands in for all symbols of self
- Clothing and personal items used to declare and confirm personal identity
- Symbols become social reality

Clothing links our personal identity to a shared social identity

Clothes define our place, role, and position in the social order

Clothing can also be seen as a disguise, to protect our bodies, personal identities, or seduce mates

Pockets are funny. A man must have pockets on his clothing, and a woman should not. A man who wears pants with no pockets, or a woman who wears pants with many pockets, is making a strong statement about their personal identity.

### Bourdieu's *Distinction: A social Critique of Judgment and Taste*

- Relations of dominance are maintained through exercise and display of “taste”
- **“Taste”** reflects social class, family experience, and education
- “Taste” is earmarked for particular groups
- **Habitus** is someone's unconscious preferences/mannerisms in relation to their social class, family experience, education (Bourdieu calls this “social space”)
  - Instinctive reflex, muscle memory

School uniforms can limit self-expression, and bring up questions about freedom and equality. However, in the absence of school uniforms, children tend to dress like one another anyways, to fit in with peers

Clothing may be used to gain admission into a desired peer group

## Fashion Industry

Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*

- Rich people use fashion as “conspicuous consumption” (visible) to distinguish themselves from inferiors
- Wastefulness (of always buying expensive trendy clothing) makes fashions “status markers”
- New fashions are created when old fashions are diffused to the common society
- The top of the hierarchy **Innovates**, and then preceding levels of the hierarchy **Imitate**

**Social imitation** is a means of amassing **Social Capital** (Status) and **Cultural Capital** (Education, style of speech, style of dress)

In the Congo, “la sape” was a practice of dressing elegantly to gain power over the European colonizers. (Really, it was just imitating the dress of the colonizers). It was a form of gaining social and cultural capital

Europe's Sumptuary Laws

- Controlled which type of clothing different classes of people could wear
- Prevented low status people from presenting themselves above their station

Simmel

- All items are individual, expressions of the self
- **Ironically** all items are social, expression of the group someone wishes to belong to
- Fashion is a process of **negotiation** between expression of the self and expression of the group
- **Instability** of fashion comes from the distinction of high class from low class, and the imitation of low class to high class people

## Communities and Subcultures

**Appearance communities** are created through powerful need for social cohesion

**Deviant Appearance communities** are committed to achieving beauty in unconventional ways

Examples:

- High fashion community: attempt to set new trend and standard
- Tattooing and body piercing: not interested in becoming mainstream

Tattoos and piercings

- Originated in European aristocracy
- Have now become affordable and widespread
- Are a way to show membership to a group
- Allow people to self-marginalize
- Increasingly becoming trendy and artistic

The shift from tattoos being elitist, to lower-class, to glamorous and hip, demonstrates how deviant acts can lose their stigma

Punk style

- A protest-oriented form of dressing (rebellious, related to punk music)
- Began as fashion innovation
- Changed into mainstream youth clothing
- Has largely receded into the outbound fashion industry
- Seen as rude, aggressively poor, openly-opposed to middle class dress
- A collection of related subcultures and styles

The punk phenomenon showed us that cultural, social, and political ideas could be associated with particular styles of dress and appearance

Agents of change are people who change the way a culture views particular subcommunities, subcultures, and deviant behavior

Fashion models

- May be seen as conformist, but are actually very deviant
- Excessive devotion to the “ideal” body and face
- A factor in widespread development of anorexia and bulimia

## Unintended Deviance: Anorexia, Bulimia, Obesity

Unintended deviance is related to class

- Middle & upper class women → anorexics
- Poor, less educated → obesity

Eating disorders like anorexia are rooted in the 13th century. Some religious people were even anorexic on purpose (holy anorexics)

- Became unpopular the 1970s and 1980s

Negative sentiments and traumatic events may contribute to eating disorders

## Anorexia Nervosa

- Most common eating disorder

### Symptoms

- Relentless pursuit of thinness
- Refusal to preserve normal body weight
- 15% or more loss of body weight
- Body image disturbances
- Amenorrhea (end of menstruation)
- Constant preoccupation with food

Anorexia linked to psychological disorders

- Depressed
- Irritable
- Withdrawn

## Bulimia Nervosa

- Regurgitation of food after eating it
- 50% of anorexics develop bulimia

**Binging:** consuming high calories in short period of time

**Purging:** throwing it up

## Obesity

- Body weight at least 20% above statistical norm
- Obesity rates higher in men

It can reduce length and quality of life

- It is associated with diabetes, back pain, smoking and drinking
- Obese people often abuse their bodies in other ways (not enough sleep, not enough exercise)

A dieting industry devoted to weight loss has developed

- Most customers are women

- Majority of dieting women cite their appearance as their main reason for losing weight

Obese people are treated as deviants

- Teasing and exclusion
- Heightened psychological stress and low self-esteem
- Social isolation
- Hardship related to employment, intimacy, and familial relations

Social aspects → lead to obesity

- Poor nutritional practices
- Children from low income families
- Childhood sexual abuse

# Theories

## Theories About Appearance Issues

- Deviants are reactive against figures of authority, or against conformity itself
- Negative sentiments and traumatic events may contribute to eating disorders
- Childhood conflict and traumas increase the risk of both developing depression and eating disorders

## Functionalist Theory

- Bodily beauty as a cultural goal leads to anomie, because beauty is largely innate
  - People have an inborn preference for symmetrical features
  - People born without symmetrical features cannot change this

Rebellious adaptations to appearance norms require community

- First a community must give membership to a deviant appearance subculture
- Second, the community must enforce behavioral norms within the community

## Symbolic Interactionist Theory

- Values we learn either oppose or support deviant behavior
  - Girls with eating disorders are more likely to have mothers with eating disorders
- Many children grow up with unhealthy views on the social value of food
- **Means of transmission** → how people learn to conform and deviate
- **Secondary deviation** → what happens to people after they deviate

## Appearance and Stigmatization

- Goffman: The presentation of Self in Everyday Life
  - People are motivated to seem normal
  - Credibility is risked by **discrediting** or **discreditable features**
  - Deviant appearance is a threat to successful self-presentation
- A failing, flaw, or handicap is discrediting
- Secret deformities and flaws are discrediting
- The discredited people try to hide their shame and “pass for normal”
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- **Totemic objects** → symbolize group
- People identify themselves with a culture by marking themselves
- The meaning of a tattoo says less than the fact they are shared with other tattoo wearers

## Critical Theories

- Unequal power determines who has the right to declare what is normal and abnormal
- Consumerist society is geared towards making people feel discontent
- People with less power use deviance to rebel

Critical theories → conflict and change Functionalist → societal structures impact Symbolic interactionism → about meaning behind objects
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## Feminist Approaches

- Appearance industries encourage women to strive for unachievable features
  - By failing to meet these standards, women feel like failures
- **Male gaze** → the ideal representations of a women from a male point of view
- The more a women is subjected to the male gaze, the more she feels:
  - The need to compete with other women
  - The need to equate “looking good” with “feeling good”

## Consequences

# Consequences of Appearance Issues

## Social Consequences

Veblen → conspicuous consumption by the leisure class, **conspicuous waste**

- Does not contribute to human life
- Financial implications on both individuals and society
- **Depredation** of personal incomes and planetary resources

## Health Consequences

Eating disorders

- The health impact of eating disorders extends far beyond the cost of healthcare services
  - Mental tax → more vulnerable to depression, alcohol dependence, anxiety
  - Social and economic wellbeing of sufferers, family members, friends, and employers

Tattooing and Body Piercing

- Can be unhygienic
  - Hepatitis, tetanus, HIV, skin infections
- Removal of tattoos also causes health risks

## Social Policy Implications

In a capitalist society...

- we **do not** see legislation to limit the harmful social and economic consequences of appearance conformity/deviance
- We **sometimes** see legislation to limit the health consequences of appearance conformity/deviance

## Economic Consequences

Beauty industry built on appearance conformity/deviance

- Cosmetic industry profiting from desire to look young and healthy
- Plastic surgery is the most extreme form of pursuing beauty
- Dieting industry remains immensely profitable
- Fashion industry is one of the less invasive and most expensive ways to pursue beauty