Should Clothing-Based Discrimination Be Considered a Form of Lookism?

The use of clothing as nonverbal communication has been going on for as long as humans have been wearing clothes. Scientists wear lab coats, doctors wear scrubs, businessmen wear suits, and superheroes wear capes. Every outfit has a meaning, and it serves to tell people who you are, or what your job is. Even if you do not realize it, the way that you dress gives hints as to what type of person you are. Thourlby suggests that people dress a certain way for ten reasons: economic level, education level, trustworthiness, social position, level of sophistication, economic background, social background, educational background, level of success, and moral character (Thourlby, 1978). Most of the time we make assumptions about people based on their clothing without even realizing it. For example, if we see someone wearing tennis shoes and athletic clothing then we are going to assume that they are on their way to workout at a gym. Or, if we seem someone in a tux and tie, then we are going to assume that they are going on a fancy date, or maybe even to a wedding. While these assumptions seem harmless, it is easy for our judgments to be swayed by negative stereotypes. For example, when you see a woman wearing a hijab or a man wearing a thobe, you assume that they are Muslims. There is no harm in assuming this, however, the harm comes from the negative stereotypes associated with their clothing and religion. After realizing they are Muslim, some people's next thoughts are more than likely going to be that they are bad people, or worse, they will associate them with terrorists. Sadly, this happens quite a lot, and not just to religious groups. Based on someone's clothing, people will automatically assume things that might not be true that are sometimes

harmful. Many people get harassed, fired, hated, and discriminated against because of the clothing they choose to wear. In this literature review I will discuss clothing-discrimination that plays into the negative stereotypes of gender, race, and wealth.

When getting ready for an interview you make sure you get a good night's rest, you eat a healthy breakfast, and you practice some interview questions. These are all things that you can control. However, more times than not, if you and another person are equally qualified for a job then the boss is more likely to hire the person that is more attractive. This is referred to as lookism. Lookism is a form of discrimination that is based on physical features such as race, gender, weight, and overall attractiveness (Adomaitis et al., 2017). The term lookism was first used in 1978, but the negative effects of it have been around for much longer than that (Adomaitis et al., 2017). Many people do not consider clothing-discrimination to be a part of lookism since clothing is a feature that can be easily changed (Fauquet-Alekhine, 2016). However, just like gender, religion, and race, the clothes we wear represent who we are as a person. Clothes are worn to communicate to the world what kind of person we want to be seen as. In some cases, like wealth, people do not always get to choose the clothes they wear. If someone cannot afford fancy clothes, why should they be discriminated against? Likewise, if someone does not feel comfortable wearing masculine clothing, why should they be discriminated against for wearing feminine clothing? The answer is simple, they should not be. Just like lookism, clothing-based discrimination places prejudice on people for what they look like.

From a very young age, children are taught how to pick out their clothes, style their hair, and present themselves in their day to day lives. There are a set of gender-

norm stereotypes pushed on them that they are expected to follow. Girls are told to wear pretty dresses with princesses and flowers while boys are taught to wear darker colors with bulldozers and dinosaurs on them. As they get older, they begin to adopt their own styles that represent who they really are as a person. Most of them stick to the gender-norms that they were taught to follow, but some of them realize that that is not who they really are. Since the 1960s and 1970s, gender stereotypes have been challenged as the feminism movement has been on the rise (Akdemir, 2018). Gender-norms were slowly dismantled as women began wearing trousers or dress suits while some men even took the leap of wearing skirts or corsets. People were finally comfortable in their own skin as they were able to communicate who they really were with their clothing. New terms such as genderfluid and transgender emerged and the line between masculine and feminine blurred (Akdemir, 2018). Many people did not mind this new trend; however, many saw it as wrong. It soon became clear that the people who did not follow the gender-norms of society would not be accepted into it. Laws were passed that banned transgender people from playing sports, enlisting in the military, and even going to the bathroom as the gender they identified as. They were forced to resort back to pretending to be someone they did not feel comfortable being. Clothing makes it easy to present yourself as a certain gender. If you identify as what society tells you to be, then this is not a problem for you. But for the people who do not succumb to the negative gender stereotypes, they are faced with threats, harassment, and discrimination every day.

Racial stereotypes have been a problem for a long time and have, just recently, become an even bigger problem. Authors Livingston and Gurung took it upon

themselves to see if clothing type had any effect on racial discrimination. In their experiment, they had several people view African American models who either dressed stereotype congruent or stereotype incongruent and asked the participants to rate the models based on whether they appear to be hard-working, trustworthy, intelligent, lazy, warm, or aggressive (Livingston & Gurung, 2019). The results of the experiment show that the models wearing stereotype congruent clothing (sweatpants, baggy shirts, and hats on backwards) were faced with more racial prejudice and rated highly threatening and aggressive compared to the stereotype incongruent group (dressed in light button up shirts and a tie) who were rated more intelligent and trustworthy (Livingston & Gurung, 2019). The results of this study show that clothing can affect the perception of African American men and women. The participants were only shown a picture of the models but made negative judgments about them based on the clothes they were wearing. Wearing stereotype incongruent clothing would benefit African Americans by avoiding the discrimination that comes along with the stereotype congruent clothing. However, in doing this, they would not be able to represent themselves through clothing like everyone else does. People of different races should not have to face discrimination just because the clothing they wear does not fit the white-beauty stereotype that is pushed by society (Adomaitis et al., 2017).

As discussed earlier, clothing is used to express something about the wearer. Sometimes, however, people are not able to afford the clothing that they want or need to express themselves properly. Sadly, many people are denied jobs and opportunities every day because they do not own the fancy clothes that many companies require to work there. Even if two people with the exact experience are applying for a job, the

company will pick the one that is better dressed. In a study done by Stuart and Fuller, photographs of a businessman were taken in seven different outfits ranging from a low price to high price for the clothing. Participants were then asked to make assumptions about where the man worked and what kind of person he was. The results showed that the better dressed businessman was assumed to work for a larger company, have a college education, and be a good salesman (Stuart & Fuller, 1991). The businessman that was wearing less expensive clothes was assumed to work for a small company, have a high school education, and be a poor salesman (Stuart & Fuller, 1991). This just goes to show that the way you dress represents the type of work people expect you to do. This is not very fair when it comes to people who cannot afford better clothes. To get a job, you are expected to dress for the job you want and present yourself as best as you can. However, if you do not have the money to buy the clothes for an interview, then you cannot get the job to earn money to buy the clothes! It is just an endless loop over and over that people find themselves stuck in every day. It is situations like this that show just how negative the effects of clothing-discrimination really are.

While the literature reviewed provides an overview of the knowledge obtained about clothing-based discrimination and its resemblance to lookism, more research could be done to further prove this theory. A survey could be conducted about people who have had negative experiences due to the clothing they wear and determine if it is discrimination or not. If results allow it, then clothing-based discrimination should be considered a form of lookism.

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