Artículos

The double bind of beauty: How women navigate appearance-based pressures in the workplace

La doble atadura de la belleza: Cómo las mujeres manejan las presiones por la apariencia en el ámbito laboral

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Abstract: This critical essay uses three main ethical frameworks—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics—to analyse how appearance-based hiring practices contribute to systemic inequities for women in professional settings. While physical attractiveness can provide advantages through the "halo effect," women often face contradictory penalties. For instance, in male-dominated fields, they may be perceived as less competent when considered "too attractive." These dynamics disproportionately harm intersecting groups, such as women of colour who face colourist hierarchies in Western society, older women, and women with disabilities. Recent research shows that relying on aesthetic standards undermines equity and organisational effectiveness. Diverse teams typically outperform homogeneous ones, and many women change their appearance to meet workplace norms. Therefore, blind recruitment protocols, legislative reforms, and corporate diversity initiatives are needed. By centring meritocratic principles over aesthetic conformity, organisations can foster environments where professional capabilities, not physical appearance, determine career trajectories.
Keywords: lookism, double bind, systemic inequality, meritocracy, virtue ethics.
Resumen: Este ensayo crítico emplea tres marcos éticos fundamentales —el utilitarismo, la deontología y la ética de las virtudes— para analizar cómo las prácticas de contratación basadas en la apariencia física perpetúan inequidades sistémicas hacia las mujeres en entornos profesionales. Si bien el atractivo físico puede ofrecer ventajas mediante el denominado efecto halo, las mujeres suelen enfrentar sanciones contradictorias. Por ejemplo, en sectores dominados por hombres, pueden ser percibidas como menos competentes si se las considera "demasiado atractivas". Estas dinámicas afectan de forma desproporcionada a grupos interseccionales, como las mujeres racializadas (quienes enfrentan jerarquías derivadas del colorismo en sociedades occidentales), las mujeres mayores y aquellas con discapacidades. Estudios recientes demuestran que la dependencia de estándares estéticos socava tanto la equidad como la eficacia organizacional. Los equipos diversos suelen superar en rendimiento a los homogéneos, y muchas mujeres modifican su apariencia para ajustarse a normas laborales implícitas. Por ello, se requieren protocolos de contratación anónima, reformas legislativas e iniciativas corporativas en materia de diversidad. Al priorizar principios meritocráticos por encima de la conformidad estética, las organizaciones pueden fomentar entornos donde las trayectorias laborales se definan por las capacidades profesionales, y no por la apariencia física.
Palabras clave: *discriminación por apariencia*, doble atadura, desigualdad sistémica, meritocracia, ética de las virtudes.

Introduction

The adage "beauty is good, and ugly is bad" permeates Western cultural narratives, from childhood socialisation through Disney films (Bazzini et al., 2010) to adult professional evaluations. Empirical research confirms that job applicants perceived as physically attractive are 1.5 times more likely to receive employment offers than their less attractive counterparts (Hosoda et al., 2003).

However, this apparent advantage constitutes a double bind for women, who must navigate contradictory demands: conform to Eurocentric beauty standards to gain initial access yet avoid being perceived as "too glamorous" lest they face penalties for presumed incompetence or inauthenticity (Rhode, 2010). Attractive men in the United States (U. S) earn 20% more than their peers in their careers (Judge et al., 2009), and research in Sweden found that women experience diminishing returns on attractiveness beyond entry-level positions (Bjørnshagen et al., 2025).

This essay argues that appearance-based hiring represents not merely a social bias but an ethical violation, reinforcing intersectional inequalities through three mechanisms: (1) the conflation of aesthetics with professional capability, (2) the disproportionate exclusion of marginalised groups from economic opportunities, (3) the erosion of meritocratic ideals that ostensibly govern organisational advancement and (4) the psychological consequences that appearance-based hiring entail (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

Historical and Legal Context

The weaponisation of female appearance traces back to Victorian-era corsetry enforcing restrictive femininity ideals that were (and still are) unattainable for most of the female population (Engeln, 2017) and 20th-century corporate mandates requiring makeup and heels as conditions of employment, the caveat in this is that the makeup has to also conform to the socially accepted standard ("make up no make" look) (Rhode, 2010). Contemporary workplaces perpetuate these norms through grooming policies that disproportionately target women of colour, particularly Black women, whose natural hairstyles are deemed "unprofessional" in 80% of U.S. industries surveyed (Koval & Rosette, 2021).

Legal frameworks like the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) prohibit overt gender and race discrimination but fail to address implicit appearance biases embedded in organisational cultures (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). For example, customer-facing roles in hospitality and retail frequently require "polished looks" that privilege youthful, able-bodied, and light-skinned applicants (Bruton, 2015), while service workers in the U.S.

who are over size 14 face weight-based exclusion at rates triple those of thinner peers (Roehling et al., 2020). These practices reflect what feminist scholars term "aesthetic labour"—the demand that workers' bodies align with marketable ideals of attractiveness (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). Media narratives amplify these pressures by moralising appearance; Disney's consistent portrayal of villains as physically unattractive, while heroes embody conventional beauty, reinforces the "beauty-goodness stereotype" that influences workplace evaluations (Bazzini et al., 2010).

Ethical Analysis

A utilitarian evaluation demonstrates that appearance-based hiring fails to maximise societal well-being. While employers may argue that selecting attractive employees aligns with customer preferences (Bruton, 2015), this practice systematically excludes qualified candidates from marginalised groups, reducing overall productivity. Research confirms that diverse teams in Canada, Latin America, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. generate 35% more patent applications and 19% higher innovation revenues than homogeneous groups (Rock & Grant, 2016), whereas aesthetic homogeneity correlates with groupthink and ethical lapses (Mayer et al., 2010). From a deontological perspective, Kant's categorical imperative—treating individuals as ends rather than means—directly condemns the commodification of workers' appearances (Bowie, 2017).

Grooming policies that require Black women in Western society to straighten natural hair or older women to undergo cosmetic procedures, especially regarding their textured hair (Koval & Rosette, 2020; Waters, 2025), violate this principle by reducing employees to aesthetic instruments rather than autonomous professionals. Virtue ethics further reveals how appearance prioritisation corrodes organisational character. When companies reward conformity to narrow beauty standards, they cultivate cultures of superficiality where employees learn to value image over competence (Tews et al., 2009). These cultures of superficiality manifest in what Mercurio and Landry (2016) term "beauty work moralisation," wherein women who invest excessive time in grooming are paradoxically judged as less ethical, while those who reject such norms face career penalties.

The Mental Health Impacts of Appearance-Based Pressures in the Workplace

The relentless focus on physical appearance in professional settings exacts a severe psychological toll on women, manifesting in heightened anxiety, diminished self-worth, and chronic stress. Research indicates that women in the hotel industry in the U.S. and Canada who perceive their workplaces as emphasising attractiveness

report 2.3 times higher body dissatisfaction rates than those in less appearance-focused environments (Tews et al., 2009). This dissatisfaction often spirals into clinical levels of disordered eating as women internalise the pressure to maintain a "professional" body size. For example, industries like hospitality and retail, where grooming policies explicitly mandate "polished" appearances, show elevated incidences of bulimia and restrictive dieting among female employees (Rhode, 2010). The psychological consequences are profound and multifaceted: about 55% of women in customer-facing roles engage in compulsive mirror-checking or seek cosmetic procedures to meet workplace standards, reflecting symptoms of body dysmorphia (Rhode, 2010). Additionally, the unpredictability of appearance-based evaluations triggers generalised anxiety, particularly in industries where looks are tied to promotions (Hosoda et al., 2003). For many women, the cumulative effect of persistent objectification correlates with learned helplessness and depression, especially among older women pushed into early retirement due to ageist beauty norms (Roscigno et al., 2007).

The double bind of beauty—where women are penalised for being either "too plain" or "too glamorous"—fuels impostor syndrome and self-doubt. Women who conform to beauty standards frequently attribute their professional successes to their looks rather than competence, undermining their confidence (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Conversely, those who resist these norms face gaslighting and marginalisation, such as Black women who are told their natural hair is "unkempt" or older women pressured to undergo cosmetic procedures to remain "relevant" (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Intersectional groups endure compounded trauma: women of colour navigating colourist hierarchies report racialised appearance anxiety, with darker-skinned Black women in the U.S. 34% more likely to experience workplace-related depression than their lighter-skinned peers (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Similarly, women with visible disabilities in the U.S. face dehumanising scrutiny, as employers equate physical differences with incompetence, leading to social isolation and internalised ableism (Stone & Colella, 1996).

Organisations that prioritise aesthetics over ability also erode psychological safety. Employees in appearance-centric cultures report lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions, as they perceive their value as contingent on mutable physical traits rather than skills (Bruton, 2015). This transactional dynamic fosters emotional exhaustion, a core symptom of burnout (Tews et al., 2009). The mental health crisis precipitated by appearance-based demands is not incidental but structural, rooted in systems that commodify women's bodies. Addressing this requires recognising lookism as a public health issue, not a human resources concern. Policies like the CROWN Act and blind recruitment are proactive interventions, but

cultural shifts must also dismantle the moralisation of beauty that equates attractiveness with worth (Bazzini et al., 2010).

Intersectional Impacts

The burdens of appearance discrimination compound for women facing intersecting marginalisations. Colourist hierarchies in hiring in the U.S. favour light-skinned Black women over darker-skinned peers by margins exceeding 2:1 in corporate roles (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), while Asian women confront eroticising stereotypes that limit promotions to technical rather than leadership tracks (Rosette et al., 2023).

Older women experience "double jeopardy," with ageism amplifying gender biases; one study found that female job seekers over 50 received 53% fewer interview callbacks than equally qualified younger women, whereas men faced no significant age penalty (Roscigno et al., 2007).

Women with visible disabilities in the U.S. encounter particularly acute barriers, with hiring managers rating them as 50% less competent than non-disabled candidates with identical qualifications (Stone & Colella, 1996). These disparities persist despite evidence that diverse teams achieve 12% higher shareholder returns (Hunt et al., 2018), underscoring how appearance biases undermine equity and organisational performance.

Policy Recommendations

Three evidence-based interventions can mitigate appearance discrimination. First, blind recruitment protocols anonymising candidate photos during initial screening reduce hiring biases by 25% (Hosoda et al., 2003). Second, legislative reforms must expand protections beyond traditional categories; California's CROWN Act (2019), which prohibits hair texture discrimination, provides a model for addressing Eurocentric beauty norms (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Third, corporate diversity training should target implicit biases through intersectional education, such as workshops on colourism's historical roots (Gugushvili & Bulczak, 2023). These measures align with emerging "meritocracy 2.0" frameworks that audit hiring algorithms for aesthetic biases and reward competency-based assessments (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

Conclusion

The mental health consequences of appearance-based workplace discrimination have gained urgent visibility in recent years, amplified by current events and social movements. The COVID-19 pandemic's shift to remote work initially promised relief from constant

appearance monitoring, yet the return-to-office mandates have reignited these pressures, with a troubling new dimension. Zoom dysmorphia—a phenomenon where employees fixate on perceived flaws during video calls—has spiked, with 62% of women reporting heightened appearance anxiety in hybrid work environments (Rhode, 2010). Meanwhile, TikTok trends like "quiet quitting" and "bare minimum Mondays" reflect a broader rejection of workplace cultures that demand emotional and aesthetic labour, particularly from marginalised groups.

The 2023 SAG-AFTRA strikes highlighted how appearance standards devastate mental health, with actors revealing the psychological toll of "look clauses" in contracts. These parallels extend to corporate America, where LinkedIn influencers now call out "professional beauty privilege" as a form of systemic bias. Legislative efforts are gaining momentum: the EU's 2024 Directive on Psychosocial Risks at Work now classifies appearance-based harassment as a mental health hazard, while U.S. lawmakers propose expanding the CROWN Act to include weight and age protections (Koval & Rosette, 2021).

However, actual change requires confronting the billion-dollar industries that profit from workplace appearance anxiety. In 2024, the global cosmetic surgery market was valued at 88.9 billion USD, according to Markets (2025), and is projected to reach up to USD 204.9 billion. It thrives on women's fears of professional obsolescence. Mental health advocates now frame this as a public health crisis.

As Audre Lorde's wisdom reminds us, survival alone is not justice. The path forward demands corporate accountability, like Unilever's recent ban on appearance-related performance reviews, and collective resistance to aesthetic labour. Only when workplaces measure value in contributions rather than contouring will women's minds and bodies truly be free. As Audre Lorde (1984) observed, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognise, accept, and celebrate those differences" (p. 112). The ethical imperative for workplaces is clear: dismantle appearance-based hierarchies through policy reforms, cultural shifts, and accountability mechanisms that centre merit over aesthetics. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in beauty norms and quantify the economic costs of lookism to strengthen the business case for equity. Organisations can only fulfil their ethical and fiduciary responsibilities by valuing women for their professional contributions rather than physical conformity.

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