

Chapter 3

The Impact of Gendered Lookism During Employment Stages: How Physical Appearance Discrimination Influences Recruitment, Hiring, and Compensation

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ABSTRACT

Lookism is preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive and discrimination against those deemed less physically desirable. Value is attached to certain physical characteristics such as skin tone, weight, facial features, and hair color. Two of the phenomena that exist under the umbrella of lookism are colorism and weightism, both of which create social and workplace inequities. There are studies that explore physical appearance discrimination external to and within workplaces in the United States, and an emerging body of literature regarding lookism abroad exists. Some of this research focuses on women's experiences with lookism in the workplace. Since today's global workforce is composed of women from various countries and cultural backgrounds, and their cultural values impact their career aspirations and career opportunities, organizational and career development professionals must understand the implications of both U.S. and global lookism and employ strategies to address and prevent the related issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Personal and physical appearance discrimination cases have increased in the workplace. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) cases have been filed due to colorism, ageism, and other forms of lookism. Human resource development (HRD) and human resource management (HRM) professionals must deliberately explore and address this workforce diversity issue, not only in the United States but also globally.

The benefits of attractiveness are well-documented and common in many cultures globally. Beauty grants social capital and unearned privilege to those with desired physical features, and these advantages are perpetuated in various social institutions, including families, schools, media, and workplaces. Systems of privilege and discrimination result when people with certain physical features are given preferential treatment, particularly in the workplace. There is a growing body of research on workplace physical appearance discrimination, also termed *lookism*, in the United States, prompting the creation of organizational policies, national legislation, and preventive outreach regarding equitable recruitment, hiring, and retention practices.

Global nations, on the other hand, have not been as pioneering in research efforts or legislative solutions to address lookism. The lack of research, strategies, policies, and outreach hinders the creation of means to address lookism in workplaces abroad. Furthermore, lookism is a genderized phenomenon, so women are especially negatively impacted. Women's career development can be stifled, which may have an adverse effect on their economic security. Organizational and career development professionals around the world have an opportunity and responsibility to address this emerging workforce diversity issue.

This chapter will present literature on lookism and its derivatives, colorism and weightism, as workplace diversity issues in the United States and abroad. The objectives of this chapter are to increase the diversity awareness of organizational and career development professionals regarding workplace lookism and to provide strategies for working with employees, including a focus on women, who have experienced or are at risk of this form of discrimination.

BACKGROUND

Lookism

Lookism, often referred to as physical appearance discrimination, is preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive and discrimination against those deemed less physically desirable. Cultures attach stigmas to certain immutable features, both

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