

APPEARANCE *as* CAPITAL

*The Normative Regulation of Aesthetic Capital
Accumulation and Conversion*

EDITED BY

*Outi Sarpila, Iida Kukkonen
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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables	vii
About the Contributors	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
<i>Outi Sarpila, Iida Kukkonen, Tero Pajunen and Erica Åberg</i>	
 Part I Accumulating a Gendered Form of Capital	
Chapter 1 Physical Appearance as a Form of Capital: Key Problems and Tensions	23
<i>Iida Kukkonen</i>	
Chapter 2 Who Performs Appearance Work, and Who Believes Appearance Works? Gendered Appearance Beliefs and Practices in Finland	39
<i>Iida Kukkonen</i>	
Chapter 3 The Metrosexual Who Never Visited Finland – The Eternal Gender Gap in Appearance-related Consumption	57
<i>Outi Sarpila</i>	
Chapter 4 Seeking Age-appropriate Appearance among Ageing Men	71
<i>Hanna Ojala and Ilkka Pietilä</i>	

Part II Contested Conversions – Everyday (Re)workings of Aesthetic Capital

Chapter 5 Too Smart-looking for a Waiter? – Scripting Appearance Norms at the Theatre of Working Life	87
<i>Tero Pajunen</i>	
Chapter 6 Generating Aesthetic Capital: Prospects from Autobiographical Narratives	103
<i>Tero Pajunen</i>	
Chapter 7 The Ouroboros of Seeking Validation? Exploring the Interconnection of Appearance (Dis)satisfaction and Content Creation on Social Media	117
<i>Erica Åberg and Aki Koivula</i>	
Chapter 8 Sofie's World: Resistance toward the Thin Ideal in Sofie Hagen's Fat Activist Online Content	135
<i>Anna Puhakka</i>	
Chapter 9 Well-beshaved Women Rarely Make History – Exploring the Contestation of the Hairless Beauty Ideal with Case #Januhairy	149
<i>Erica Åberg and Laura Salonen</i>	
Conclusion	165
<i>Outi Sarpila, Iida Kukkonen, Tero Pajunen and Erica Åberg</i>	
Appendices	173
Index	177

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 2.1.	Mean Daily Time (Minutes) Spent in Front of the Mirror by Age Group and Gender.	45
Figure 2.2.	Belief in Appearance as Currency for Men and Women.	46
Figure 2.3.	Mean Daily Time (Minutes) Spent in Front of the Mirror by Belief in Appearance as Currency.	47
Figure 3.1.	‘I take good care of my physical appearance’.	65
Figure 3.2.	Predicted Probabilities of ‘Personal Hygiene and Beauty Care’ Consumption Share of Total Consumption Expenditure.	67
Figure 7.1.	The Likelihood of Creating Content on Social Media According to Appearance Satisfaction.	126
Figure 7.2.	The Relationship between Creating Content and Body Satisfaction According to the Preferred Social Network Site.	127
Figure 7.3.	The Relationship between Creating Content and Body Satisfaction.	128
Figure 9.1.	Wordcloud Form the Comments According to the Themes ‘Positive’ Comments (Left) and ‘Negative’ Comments (Right).	157
Table 2.1.	Linear Regression of Daily Average Time (Min) Spent in Front of the Mirror.	48
Table 3.1.	Survey Data Analysed in This Chapter.	62
Table 3.2.	‘I Take Good Care of My Physical Appearance’.	66
Table 7.1.	Descriptive Statistics of Applied Variables.	125
Table 9.1.	The Names and Quantities of the Themes of the Images.	156

Table 9.2.	The Names and Quantities of the Themes Rising from the Captions.	157
Table 9.3.	The Names and Quantities of the Sub-themes Rising from the Comments.	158
Appendix 1.	Descriptive Statistics of Analytical Sample: Weighted Proportions of Categorical Variables, Weighted Means and Standard Deviations, as Well as Minimum and Maximum Values of Continuous Variables.	173
Appendix 2.	Descriptive Statistics of Analytical Samples: Weighted Proportions of Categorical Variables, Weighted Means and Standard Deviations, as Well as Minimum and Maximum Values of Continuous Variables.	174

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Introduction

Outi Sarpila, Iida Kukkonen, Tero Pajunen and Erica Åberg

Sara Sieppi is a former Miss Finland and current social media influencer. Despite the fact that Sieppi's posts are in Finnish and Finland is a small linguistic region, Sieppi has nearly 200,000 followers and her company makes a significant profit. In her Instagram account, she performs as an 'ambassador' of different beauty care brands, renting her beautiful looks to companies to enhance the sales of multifarious products and services. Therefore, Sieppi can be considered an example of today's aesthetic labourers, who have turned their physical appearance into cash flow. Young beautiful women around the world are nowadays using social media to exchange their aesthetic capital to economic capital. However, this does not please everyone. In December 2020, Sieppi was used as an example in a political column which tried to justify the monthly salary of the members of the parliament by comparing the salaries to Sieppi's monthly salary. The latter one was according to columnist, earned by presenting 'sponsored underwear and mint lemon chocolate muffins', whereas the former one by hard work (Parkkonen, 2020). The column was widely doomed misogynist and sexist. More generally speaking, it however shows how physical appearance as a form of capital, i.e. aesthetic capital, is normatively regulated and highlights the paradoxes related to the pivotal role of physical appearance in contemporary society.

Expectations to look good are increasing, and many people are under more pressure to look good and attend to their looks. In tandem with this, endeavours towards good looks and taking advantage of it are under strict normative regulation. In addition, this does not seem to apply only to female social media influencers, but people more generally. In fact, the salience of physical appearance as a form of capital is not just a novel trend generated by social media. On the contrary, the pervasiveness of the emphasis on physical appearance has increased steadily for a long period of time, making it an increasingly important, but normatively regulated, form of capital and hence a source of inequality.

Appearance as Capital, 1–19



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The Increasing Importance of Physical Appearance

Several cultural, economic, political and technological changes are contributing to the increasing institutional and individual focus on physical appearance.

First, scholars studying consumer culture have argued for decades that the physical appearance of the body serves as a source of individual pleasure and as a means of self-expression and identity formation. Desired bodily properties are produced through body modification; with the help of appearance-related commodities and services, consumers push their bodies towards the best version of themselves, constantly ready for new transformations (e.g. Bauman, 2007; Featherstone, 1982, 2007; Klesse, 1999). According to Euromonitor (2020), the global retail value of ‘beauty and personal care’ products increased by 28 percent, and ‘clothing and footwear’ by 40 percent, between 2009 and 2019. The power of consumer culture as a fuel for consumption related to appearance has been explained particularly with regards to the visual and performative character of consumer culture (e.g. Featherstone, 1982; Shilling, 2012; Turner, 2008). A central element of performing is the enhancement of the physical appearance, at least to some extent to gratify ‘the audience’. The idea of the performing self is much the same as the concept presented by Goffman (1959). However, consumer culture emphasises ‘onstage performances’ in relation to ‘backstage performances’.

Second, it can be argued that social media increases the amount of ‘onstage performances’ and has changed many individuals’ relationships to physical appearance and self-presentations. Although social media is not just about selfies, it offers constant possibilities for photographing oneself and others (e.g. Featherstone, 2010). People are expected to be ‘camera ready’ everywhere they go, and virtual audiences are always ready to judge the ‘appearance competence’ of any person in a picture or video. Social media users are exposed to a constant flux of physical appearances, and they may be expected to present a variety of physical appearances. While social media has the potential for inclusion and widening the norms of physical appearance, on a global scale, it can also intensify and narrow appearance norms (e.g. Widdows, 2018). According to the logic of consumer capitalism, the majority of bodies that ‘sell’ are still mostly white, thin, young and able. Nevertheless, at an individual level, the possibility of empowerment on social media cannot be neglected (e.g. Barnard, 2016; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015). According to some interpretations, social media self(ie)-expression comes with a (dis)empowerment paradox: taking selfies may feel individually empowering while conforming and reifying existing oppressive and hegemonic beauty norms (Barnard, 2016).

Third, in recent interpretations, the cultivation of physical appearance has been associated with consumer-oriented wellness culture; physical appearance is seen as the embodiment of individuals’ capabilities to make ‘the right’ lifestyle and self-care choices, including such practices as maintaining ‘proper’ sleeping and eating habits and engaging in physical and mental exercise (e.g., Grénman, 2019; Koskinen, 2020). Social media, with its army of influencers, amplifies trends, including the quest for ‘wellness’. Also outside social media, people are

encouraged to engage in various practices related to fitness, well-being and anti-ageing in order to enhance their physical appearance, productivity and status.

Fourth, individuals' physical appearance has become politicised, thus affecting the norms of proper looks. This also relates to the wellness discourse in a sense that taking care of one's physical appearance is no longer simply considered each individual's choice but a responsibility; as physical appearance is intertwined with health, physical appearance -related practices become increasingly considered necessary for everyone (cf. [Sassatelli, 2010](#); [Smith Maguire, 2008](#)). This can be most clearly seen in discourses of body size. Individuals are nowadays expected to follow official eating and exercise recommendations, and the failure to do so is presumed based on external characteristics ([Lupton, 1995](#); [Shilling, 2007](#); [Smith Maguire, 2008](#)). A responsible citizen does not get fat and strain hard on public health care.

Fifth, the increasing importance of physical appearance and intensification of normative regulation relates to changes in labour market. According to several scholars, the expansion of the service sector and the emergence of new high-skilled and low-skilled performative occupations has, among other things, made good looks an occupational necessity. 'The right looks' play a pivotal role, facilitating individuals' entry into certain occupations ([Smith Maguire, 2008](#); [van den Berg & Arts, 2019](#)). However, the institutionalised requirements to look 'right' do not apply only to those working in traditional services or new service sector occupations but to more or less all workers, regardless of their job titles ([McDowell, 2009](#)). Scholars view this as part of a broader post-Fordist development, where the service sector per se has expanded, but the so-called service logic has also spread throughout the labour market to all sectors and hierarchical levels ([Parviainen et al., 2016](#)). Simultaneously, precarity is becoming normalised in post-Fordist labour markets. As subsistence becomes increasingly uncertain and discontinuous, it necessitates continuous aesthetic adjustment and labour on 'looking right' and keeping up employable appearances ([van den Berg & Arts, 2019](#)). The precarisation of work blurs the lines between work and private life ([van den Berg, 2019](#)), and worker and consumer – proper workers also know how to consume 'properly' to maximise their own and their employers' competitive edge. Working on one's physical appearance may not only become more of an occupational necessity as competition for jobs increases (e.g., [Sarpila & Erola, 2016](#)), but it may also more generally serve as a means of appearing and feeling in control ([Giddens, 1991](#); [Shilling, 2012](#)) and valuable under circumstances that are increasingly precarious for many (e.g., [Hakim, 2018](#)).

Capitalisation of Physical Appearance

The above-mentioned economic, cultural, political and technological changes have made physical appearance increasingly a normatively regulated form of capital and source of inequality. Numerous studies report that physical appearance, which is often conceptualised as attractiveness, is linked to various economic and social rewards including higher income (e.g., [Brunello & d'Hombres,](#)

2007; Cawley, 2004; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Johnston, 2010), better employment opportunities and career advancements (e.g., Hamermesh, 2011; Hosoda et al., 2003), political success (e.g. Berggren et al., 2010), advantages in partner selection (e.g., Mathes & Kozak, 2008; McClintock, 2014) and increased socioeconomic status (Jæger, 2011). However, in economics and sociology, as well as in policymaking, the inequalities considered have been primarily socio-economic factors, while the role physical appearance has been largely neglected in ‘serious’ analyses of inequalities (Kuipers, 2019).

In this book, we develop the understanding of physical appearance as a form of capital and appearance-related inequalities by paying particular attention to normative regulations of the accumulation and conversion of this type of capital. We build on interdisciplinary research in the intersections of cultural sociology, economic sociology, sociology of consumption and everyday life, working life studies, gender studies and media studies.

The idea of physical appearance as form of capital stems particularly from recent sociological discussion on physical appearance and beauty and the role they play in formation of social divisions. During the past decade, sociologists have developed Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on capital further, incorporating physical appearance as an independent form of capital, or more specifically, as aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015), erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) or physical capital (Shilling, 2004). Physical appearance as a form of capital can be understood as a combination of different resources or assets related to physical appearance including facial beauty and body shape, size and physique, as well as styles of grooming and clothing (Anderson et al., 2010). In this book, the idea of physical appearance as a form of capital is based on an assumption that physical appearance is, at least partly, an inherited quality, which does not fully conform to other social hierarchies (e.g. Edmonds & Mears, 2017). Furthermore, we assume that physical appearance as capital is convertible into other forms of capitals and that the value of these appearance-related assets varies from one field to another.

The perspective differs from the general approach adopted in the majority of other disciplines. Traditionally, beauty is considered a good thing, the consequences of which are mainly positive and the evaluation of which is based on shared ideals of beauty (for a review, see Anderson et al., 2010; Maestripieri et al., 2017). Thus, there seems to be a somewhat shared understanding of the logic of good looks, although the explanatory mechanisms differ. In economics, the principal mechanism through which beauty confers benefits is related to preferences: employers, customers and co-workers alike prefer beautiful people (Hamermesh, 2011). In social psychology, on the other hand, beauty is considered advantageous because people associate it with other desirable traits. This mechanism is often referred to as the physical attractiveness stereotype or ‘what is beautiful is good’ stereotype (e.g. Eagly et al., 1991; Langlois et al., 2000). Furthermore, evolutionary psychologists propose that it is the central role of physical appearance as a criterion for mate selection that accounts for the economic and social outcomes of beauty (Buss et al., 1990), whereas in sociology, Webster and Driskell (1983) regard physical attractiveness as similar to status

characteristic as gender and race, and propose a mechanism they call ‘beauty as status’. This approach, combined with Bourdieusian tradition, has recently been developed further in studies that consider physical appearance as a form of capital (Anderson et al., 2010). Feminists and theorists of aesthetic labour, who situate (dis)advantages of beauty in gendered status hierarchies (Elias et al., 2017; Wolf, 1990/2002), as well as more intersectional feminists, who highlight beauty as a site of struggle over class, race, colour, ethnicity, sexuality and able-bodiedness (e.g. Jha, 2016) have also made valuable contributions to these discussions.

In addition, certain recent studies in sociology and social psychology and organisational studies have questioned the universal logic related to beauty and its positive outcomes, particularly with regard to economic outcomes for women. Kuipers (2015) suggests that beauty standards are not universally shared, but instead multiple taste repertoires exist. Furthermore, men are less easily evaluated by strictly aesthetic standards than are women (Kuipers, 2015). In addition, strict social norms regulate the accumulation of economic advantage from one’s physical appearance, particularly for women (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2010). Indeed, it seems that the value of physical appearance in social exchange is not universal, but malleable, relational and contextual: always shaped in multiple, intersecting power relations. Furthermore, it is not just beauty or attractiveness that matters, but the logic of physical appearance in generating inequalities seems to be more complex than previously thought (see also van der Laan & Kuipers, 2016, p. 66).

To gain a better understanding of physical appearance -related inequality, it is crucial to pay particular attention to norms that regulate the accumulation and conversion of physical appearance as a capital. Norms are a core concept for sociologists, as they are relevant for understanding two fundamental issues of sociological thinking: order and inequality (e.g., Horne & Mollborn, 2020). Norms are ‘the grammar of society’ (Bicchieri, 2006). They guide people’s actions by telling them what behaviour is normal, desirable or avoidable in particular contexts. They provide a map of how to value the social world. Yet norms are not predetermined and objectively ‘out there’ but are enacted, challenged and interpreted by people; hence, they are in a constant flux (Horne & Mollborn, 2020; Xenitidou & Edmonds, 2014). Norms actualise through action, usually in the form of sanctions that may appear as penalisation or praise (Coleman, 1990). They, thus, operate and appear at both individual and collective levels (if that distinction is to be made in the first place).

At the level of the individual, norms appear as expectations of how others would evaluate behaviours (Hechter & Opp, 2001; Horne & Mollborn, 2020). They may appear as different emotions, like shame, admiration or disgust, which guide one’s own behaviour and affect how one sanctions others. Thinking of physical appearance, norms also function as a moral obligation to, for example, aspire to having a fit body (e.g. Dworkin & Wachs, 2009) or invest in ‘healthy ageing’ (e.g. Lenneis & Pfister, 2017). Thus, the power of norms is internalised rather than always imposed by an identifiable other (see also Foucault, 1977). However, norms vary in their scale as well. Some norms are more long-standing, while others change. Certain norms may apply only in certain groups, while

others may apply across a whole society or even the globe. While norms are the bread and butter of sociology, norms are often used as sociological explanations of actions and phenomena instead of taken as a subject of study. Yet, we argue, it is worth studying the forms and content of appearance norms and asking how they are created, applied, maintained, interpreted, negotiated and challenged in different contexts, by and for different people.

This Book's Approach

In this book, we ask in what kind of ways, to whom and in what types of context it is possible to accumulate and convert capital based on physical appearance. We call this capital aesthetic capital. We examine how norms of accumulating and converting aesthetic capital intertwine with gender, age and other forms of capital and play a role in shaping inequalities. The majority of the data analysed come from Finland. At the end of this introductory part, we present 'case Finland' and explain why Finland offers an interesting case to study physical appearance and inequalities. In addition, some chapters in this book use social media data, which is not bounded in any certain nation state context. The data include surveys, individual and group interviews and life stories, as well as visual and textual social media data. In this book, we employ a wide range of methodologies. We argue that the diversity of approaches and methodologies is beneficial for understanding the emergence, manifestation and reverberations of the social norms that regulate aesthetic capital.

This book examines the capitalisation of physical appearance and related normative regulations from two perspectives, accumulation and convertibility, and is divided into two main sections based on these perspectives. The first section deals with the logics of beauty and body work as, first and foremost, gendered ways to 'enhance' one's physical appearance -related assets. The second explores the social rules around the convertibility of these assets into social and economic resources.

Accumulating a Gendered Form of Capital

As does any form of capital, appearance-related capital accumulates. In an increasingly visual consumer culture, individuals are invited to engage in various aesthetic practices to accumulate, enhance and maintain their aesthetic assets. These practices range from mundane rituals such as washing, teeth cleansing, make-up application and hair removal and shaping to projects such as dieting and working out and interventions like aesthetic surgery or bodily implants. Social scientists have referred to the plethora of different aesthetic practices using various terms such as body modification (Featherstone, 1999) and dress work (van den Berg & Vonk, 2020), as well as beauty work, body work and appearance work (for reviews, see Gimlin, 2007; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Mears, 2014). As the terminology suggests, many scholars have viewed these practices primarily as work rather than leisure. In the literature, a key distinction is often made between

work performed on one's own body and work performed on the bodies of others (Gimlin, 2007; Mears, 2014). Further distinctions include the extent to which a practice happens slowly or whether it transforms the body directly, for instance, through cutting or inscribing (Featherstone, 1999). Gimlin argued in 2007 that sociology has in the past particularly ignored both the relevance of body work to experiences of working life and the more mundane forms of body work (Gimlin, 2007). Since then, the social sciences have seen a surge in interest in the importance of aesthetic labour: the labour of looking good and right at and for work (e.g., Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Mears, 2011; van den Berg & Arts, 2019; Williams & Connell, 2010). However, mundane forms of appearance work outside the labour market context remains a neglected field of study (although see Elias et al., 2017). As the research presented in the first section of this book show, mundane appearance work matters in social life beyond the labour market and is a highly gendered form of work.

The first section of this book, thus, situates physical appearance -related capital as a gendered form of capital in Finland from the perspective of appearance work as capital accumulation. In Chapter 1 of the book, Iida Kukkonen reviews the contributions of sociological research on appearance-related capital for the study of physical appearance and inequality. She highlights the Bourdieusian origins of the sociological conceptualisation of capital and shows how Bourdieusian thinking has, particularly in the past decade, inspired scholars to think about appearance-related inequalities. Crucially, however, the scholarship is highly variable in the extent to which it is faithful to Bourdieu's scholarship on culture and in the extent to which it incorporates (socio-)economics or extends or develops Bourdieusian thinking to consider feminist issues such as gendered labour and capital. Kukkonen teases out the tensions between capital as, on the one hand, a societal concept laden with economic value, and concomitantly, societal economic inequality, and as, on the other hand, a field-specific concept that is always implied in contextual and unequal power relationships, including those related to ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender, age and so forth. The chapter suggests the accumulation and conversion of appearance-related capital intertwine in shaping inequalities.

Chapter 2, also authored by Kukkonen, illustrates how appearance-related practices are not just driven by gendered norms but also by gendered beliefs about appearance as capital. While Finnish men and women equally hold the belief that appearances matter for success, the belief in appearance as capital does not seem to incite men to look into the mirror. And Finnish women who believe appearances matter for success engage in accumulating aesthetic capital more than women who do not.

Chapter 3, written by Outi Sarpila, further illustrates the gendered dimensions of aesthetic capital in the Finnish context by engaging with the figure of the metrosexual and by putting aesthetic consumption in a temporal context. The concept of the metrosexual arose in media culture to celebrate men who recognise their bodies and looks as capital worthy of investment and who take a step to engage in the pleasures offered by a consumerist appearance society. This trope, much adored and highlighted by the media, advertisement and commerce, is

nowhere to be seen in the attitudinal and official statistics Sarpila delves into. In the light of these data, commercial masculinity appears an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon that is completely detached from the everyday lives of Finnish men. Despite all the talk of ‘new masculinities’, appearance-related capital accumulation still appears highly gendered in the Finnish context.

The problematic genderedness of appearance in society is further highlighted in Chapter 4, in which Hanna Ojala and Ilkka Pietilä interview elderly Finnish men regarding their appearance-related consumption. Their study shows how the contradictory norms regarding ‘successful aging’ and gendered norms of appearance work are brought together in the appearance-related practices of ageing men in Finland. They highlight how appearance work is not just aimed at gendered distinctions but also concerns class and, importantly, age. While elderly Finnish men may not buy into the idea of appearance as capital, they nevertheless employ appearance-related consumption as a way of fighting the marginalisation and invisibility that comes with old age.

Contested Conversions – Everyday (Re)workings of Aesthetic Capital

Like other forms of capital, aesthetic capital is convertible. Economics-inspired social scientific research on the outcomes of physical appearance commonly approaches conversions of aesthetic capital as ‘beauty perks and penalties’. The assumption is that possessing aesthetic capital brings perks to individuals, while a lack of it brings penalties (see [Anderson et al., 2010](#)). This line of literature has largely focused on mapping the socio-economic outcomes of appearance (see, e.g., [Hamermesh, 2011](#); [Hosoda et al., 2003](#); [Jæger, 2011](#)), while also acknowledging that aesthetic capital is convertible to forms of capital beyond economic capital. While this research on socio-economic outcomes has focused on the overall quantitative regularities in the conversion of aesthetic capital to economic capital, other social scientists have investigated how the conversion of aesthetic capital happens on a particular social field, such as the modelling industry ([Mears, 2011](#)), the global party circuit ([Mears, 2020](#)) or beauty pageants ([Balogun, 2020](#)). This line of research has often used qualitative methods, including ethnography, to uncover a field’s specific logics of valuation and exchange and to understand how these are navigated and negotiated in contexts where power is unevenly distributed. The second part of this book draws on both lines of scholarship and stresses the role of social norms for understanding capital conversion. This section considers both the workings and reworkings of aesthetic capital: how aesthetic capital structures and affects online and offline lives and what kind of struggles are involved in the evaluation and conversion of aesthetic capital. The chapters focus on mundane norms and mundane acts of resistance in everyday lives offline (Chapters 5 and 6) as well as on social media (Chapters 7, 8 and 9).

Working life is a crucial arena for capital conversion because labour is a field in which appearances may be, quite straightforwardly, economically rewarded or punished. In Chapter 5, Tero Pajunen brings out a Goffmanian lens and focuses it on Finnish working life, to look at how appearance norms are scripted in various