

# The Effects of Social and Environmental Condition on the Way People Perceive their Body Image and Appearance: Through the Lens of Gender Difference and Mass Media Influence

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**ABSTRACT:** This research investigates factors explaining the way people perceive their body and appearance and uncovers the intricate interplay of lookism and its underlying factors. Using data from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), 917 people whose age 29 or lower were used. For analysis, an independent sample *t*-test, and two multiple regression analyses were conducted. The results revealed that there is a gender disparity in the way people place their importance on appearance or body image and women are more likely to be discriminated by their appearance than men. Also, in one regression analysis that predicted people's self-perceived appearance, people's BMI, general health condition, stress or negative emotion they experience are shown to affect how people evaluate their appearance. In the second regression analysis that predicted how people evaluate their body image, the results showed that BMI and general health condition affect the way people evaluate their body image. In both of these regression analyses, mass media's derisive portrayal of men or explain affect how people perceive appearance and body image. Therefore, policymakers and alike must use the finding to devise plans and policies that would foster a healthy self-image.

**KEYWORDS:** body image, appearance, discrimination, social factor, mass media influence

## Introduction

The desire to beautify one's appearance is natural. Often, such desire is pressured onto people in our society, thus generating an array of side effects that are left untreated. Lim (2007) argues that a society where its members perceive their appearance as resources that would change their destiny and the quality of life is the one full of prejudice and discrimination. Unfortunately, this is the most befitting description of Korean society today. Media presents contents that glorify beauty while denigrating those who fall short of this set beauty standard. Regardless of any generations in the past, beauty has been appreciated; however, no era of the history had been more intolerant of those who lack beauty than now (Lim, 2007). Often, this beauty standard is forced upon women in Korean society, thus resulting in invisible yet most unwanted competition. Besides, this radical attention paid on women's appearance resultantly classify an acceptable beauty in a narrow spectrum.

When examining a social phenomenon whether it be desirable or undesirable, one should also investigate who are the likely beneficiaries. Ironically, with the sensational K-pop syndrome flocking a wider audience over the past few decades, Korea's cosmetic industry grew its volume in and out of the country. Therefore, people should be keenly aware of this change and carefully examine the flip side of this social phenomenon.

Therefore, this research investigates factors explaining the way people perceive their body and appearances. Unlike some people believe, what affects such perception cannot solely be attributed to the environmental and cultural influences. Therefore, this study will uncover the intricate interplay of lookism and its underlying factors to inform the society of what measures must be taken to help people form a healthy self-image.

More specifically, issues surrounding gender inequality will also be examined along with the lookism pervasive in our society given the public attention paid on the me-too movement that swept across this society. Therefore, how men and women perceive the importance of their appearance differently in various contexts will be explored to break down the gender disparity of lookism.

## Literature Review

Drawing a steep upward slope, an interest in one's appearance is evolving into a primary focus of our society as people spend an enormous amount of time and money to spruce up their appearance (Jo & Hwang, 2013; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2006). Caring for one's appearance is central to our self-management

skill, and how satisfied we are with our appearance affects our self-esteem and overall quality of life (Kang & Park, 2009). Park (2005) argued that leaving one's body uncared for is often perceived by many as a poor self-management skill because a body, to modern-day people, is an embodiment of a desirable identity within society. Paying attention to a better-looking appearance may awaken people's understanding and the significance of their own body, thus stimulating their overall metacognitive ability, goal-setting, and behavioral patterns (Hong & Lee 2005).

Unfortunately, paying excessive attention to our appearance may give birth to side-effects. Knowingly and unknowingly, many people are forced to compare their appearance with others, thus damaging their self-esteem and a healthy self-image. Lee and Kim (2015) argued that an ideal body image, to most people, is being tall and skinny, and this standard is formulated through mass media. By and large, the way we view or how satisfied we are about our body is primarily affected by the present-day social and cultural standards (Kang & Park, 2009; Wassner, 1982) that are established most widely through mass media.

Many existing literatures argue that ordinary people's fantasy about an ideal body image is learned through the contents communicated via mass media (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Kim, 2001; Park & Sung, 2001; Hong & Lee, 2005; Park, 2005). They criticized how mass media set a skinny body as the ultimate beauty standard and forced ordinary citizens to fantasize a slender body (Lee, 2009). The more people fantasize an established standard, the less accommodating our society may become different beauty standards. Women with skinnier body winning beauty peasant, frequent coverages of skinny western models on fashion magazines, and a growing number of diet-related newspaper articles all add up to the social phenomenon that society sets this particular body image as an ultimate beauty standard (Lee, 2009). Mass media, powerful channels through which people experience social ideals, strengthens a standard, suggesting that a better-looking appearance is the foundation of happiness and success (Featherstone, 1991).

Botta (1999) argued that there is a strong association between a mass media exposure and a stereotype bodily image, and single females in their 20s are more likely to internalize the body image of (fashion) models they see on mass media. He further asserts that the more they internalize such an ideal body image, the stronger the stereotype becomes. Han (2000) warns that when people perceive body or appearance of fashion models and celebrities as a general beauty standard, they may grow dissatisfied with their body image and appearance. Therefore, we as a society must better identify what contents in mass media have deleterious effects on the way people perceive their body and appearance. Also, existing literature pays little attention to and leaves out the male population when examining such relationship; therefore, this research will zoom in on the gender differences associated with body image and appearance.

## **Methods**

### **Data**

This research uses data from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). With five-year intervals, Korea Women's Development Institute under MOGEF designs a survey; Statistics Korea provides methodological assistance and conducts the survey on the field. The survey had been administered from August to September 2016.

### **Participants**

7,399 people who were born earlier than the year 1997 have responded to the survey, and they are from 17 cities or provinces throughout Korea. Because the focus of this research is explicitly paid on young adults, anyone above 29 has been eliminated from the study. The remaining 917 responses is used for this analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Minim.	Maxim.
Gender	917	.54	.50	0	1
Height	917	168.24	8.23	150	194
Weight	917	62.86	13.18	38	110
BMI	917	2.05	.54	1	3
Diet	917	.23	.42	0	1
Education	917	2.44	.53	1	3
Marital Status (Single)	917	.86	.34	0	1
Health Condition	917	6.34	1.97	1	10
Employment Status	917	.54	.50	0	1
Men are treated unequally	917	1.35	.82	1	5
Women are treated unequally	917	2.10	1.11	1	5
Stress Level of the Past 2 wks	917	2.97	1.09	1	5
Nega. Emotion of the Past 2 wks	917	2.51	1.09	1	5
Discriminated for Appearance	917	.24	.43	0	1
<i>Valid N (Listwise)</i>	917				

Because female is coded as 1 and male as 0, 54% of this sample is female. The average height of the sample is 168.24 (SD = 8.23), and the average weight is 62.86 (SD =13.18). The average Body Mass Index (BMI) of the participants is 2.05 (SD = .54)—BMI is the participants’ weight (kilogram) divided by their height (meters squared)—participants’ BMI is coded for below normal as 1, normal as 2, and higher than normal as 3. Therefore, most participants’ BMI falls in the normal level.

The variable *diet* originally consisted of three categories: (1) I am on a diet to lose weight, (2) I am *not* on a diet, but I want to, and (3) I am *not* on a diet because I don’t need to. However, the variable has been recoded as 1 being “on a diet” and 0 being “not on a diet” to better analyze the relationship with other variables. As illustrated in *table 1*, approximately 23% of the participants are on a diet.

The participants’ education background is being measured by three separate categories: (1) below middle school, (2) high school graduate, and (3) college graduates and above. Looking at the average 2.44 (SD = .53), most participants are high school graduates or above. For participants’ marital status, those who are unmarried, or single, are coded as 1, married people as 2, divorce or divorcee is 3, and those whose spouse deceased are 4. Only two people have answered divorced and one person answered his/her spouse had been deceased, these people have been merged into the *singles* category. Therefore, 86% of the respondents are singles, and only 13% of them are married.

Analysis

Table 2. How would you rate your general health?

Very Bad									Very Good
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩

General health is included in this analysis because both physical and mental health may affect how people view their appearance. The participants’ health is 6.34 (SD = 1.97) out of the 10-point scale. This means that the general health of the patients is above average. For the participants’ employment status, the original question is as follows.

Table 3. Employment Type

	Types of Employment Status	
Employment Type	Unemployed	①
	Employed Stably	②
	Employed temporarily	③
	Paid on a daily basis	④
	Self-employed	⑤
	Family Business (Unpaid)	⑥

Though different, the answer ②, ③, ④ in **Table 3** seem to indicate employment, whereas the answer ① and ⑥ are not notably different. Therefore, ②, ③, and ④ have been combined to indicate employment and ① and ⑥ have been combined to indicate unemployment.

Table 4. What do you think about the gender inequality of our society?

Women are treated				Completely Equal					Men are treated
Very Unequally							Very Unequally		
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	

Participants’ perception about gender equality of Korean society was asked as illustrated in **Table 4**. However, since interpreting the answer to the question seemed inconducive, they were then converted as below.

Table 5. Gender Inequality for Women and Men

<i>In our society, <b>women</b> are treated</i>								
Very Unequally					Completely Equally		Very Unequally	
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨
▽	▽	▽	▽				▽	
⑤	④	③	②				①	
<i>In our society, <b>men</b> are treated</i>								
Very Unequally					Completely Equally		Very Unequally	
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨
		▽			▽	▽	▽	▽
		①			②	③	④	⑤

Now, what used to be a question illustrated in **Table 4** is now separated into two different variables: one about how men are treated unequally and the other about how women are treated unequally in our society.

Assuming that participants’ recent experience, especially negative ones, is highly associated with the participants’ way of viewing themselves, their stress levels of the past two weeks and negative emotions—melancholy, frustration, anxiety, and depression—experienced for the past two weeks have been asked. For both questions, a five-point scale is being used as (1) being *never experienced at all* and (5) being *experienced very often*. The results show that an average stress level is 2.97 (SD = 1.09) and an average negative emotion is 2.51 (SD = 1.09). Lastly, for the question asking whether they have been discriminated because of their appearance, 24% of the participants answered *yes*.

**Results**

Table 6. Variables for Gender Comparison

Compared to personality, wealth, and others, how important do you think appearance matters?

*To men, when it comes to*

	Very Important									Not Important
(1) Dating	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(2) Marriage	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(3) Career	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(4) Relationship	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩

*To women, when it comes to*

	Very Important									Not Important
(1) Dating	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(2) Marriage	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(3) Career	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
(4) Relationship	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩

For a reference, the above questions have been administered to both male and female participants. Therefore, how men and women understand what matters to men and how men and women perceive what matters to women can be examined. Next, to compare the mean differences in the questions in **Table 4** by gender, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted and the results are provided below.

Table 7. *t*-test of gender difference for appearance in different contexts

	Male ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Female ( <i>n</i> = 493)	Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
<b>Men’s Appearance &amp; Dating</b>	Mean (SD) 6.63 (1.88)	6.08 (2.15)	.55	4.12	.00

<b>Men’s Appearance &amp; Marriage</b>	Mean (SD)	5.96 (1.99)	5.60 (2.14)	.37	2.69	<b>.01</b>
<b>Men’s Appearance &amp; Career</b>	Mean (SD)	6.66 (2.10)	6.31 (2.26)	.35	2.40	<b>.02</b>
<b>Men’s Appearance &amp; Interperso.</b>	Mean (SD)	6.49 (2.23)	6.06 (2.35)	.43	2.81	<b>.01</b>
<b>Women’s Appearance &amp; Dating</b>	Mean (SD)	7.34 (1.90)	7.07 (2.14)	.27	2.05	<b>.04</b>
Women’s Appearance & Marriage	Mean (SD)	6.87 (1.98)	6.79 (2.18)	.08	.59	.55
Women’s Appearance & Career	Mean (SD)	6.94 (2.10)	7.19 (2.11)	.25	1.83	.07
Women’s Appearance & Interperso.	Mean (SD)	6.81 (2.29)	6.67 (2.29)	.15	.96	.34
<b>Discriminated by Appearance</b>	Mean (SD)	.19 (.39)	.27 (.45)	-.08	-2.99	<b>.00</b>
Perceived Appearance	Mean (SD)	2.80 (.58)	2.73 (.60)	.07	1.82	.07
Perceived Body Image	Mean (SD)	3.03 (.81)	3.12 (.81)	-.09	-1.70	.09

Looking at **Table 7**, one can see that men and women perceive the importance of their appearance. About the importance of men’s appearance, male respondents themselves place more importance on their (male) appearance in a dating relationship, marriage, career-seeking, and interpersonal relationship, whereas female respondents think men’s appearance isn’t as important in each context. When it comes to the importance of women’s appearance, male respondents seemed to place a higher value in women’s appearance in dating relationship than female respondents did ( $t = -2.05, p = .04$ ). Most importantly, females respondents had reported that they had been discriminated by appearance more so than male respondents did ( $t = -.299, p < .01$ ).

Table 8. Dependent Variables (1) body & (2) appearance

	Very Skinny	Skinny	Average	Fat	Very Fat
What do you think about your body?	①	②	③	④	⑤
	Very Unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
What do you think about your appearance?	①	②	③	④	

First, using *how participants perceive their appearance* as the dependent variable, the following variables have been included as an explanatory variable—BMI; general health; the stress level of the past two weeks; negative emotions experienced for the past two weeks; inequality for men; inequality for women; seriousness felt about men’s or women’s appearance being ridiculed on TV; deriding women on the websites like online community, portal, and social media. Next, using the same independent variables, *how participants perceive their body* was analyzed.

Table 9. Mass Media's Disparaging Portrayal of People's Appearance

How serious do you think are the following?	Not at all	Not Serious	Serious	Very Serious
1. Internet advertisement portraying sexual activities or a body part	①	②	③	④
2. Derisive portrayal of women's appearance to elicit laughter on TV	①	②	③	④
3. Derisive portrayal of men's appearance to elicit laughter on TV	①	②	③	④
4. Mocking women on online community, website, and social media	①	②	③	④

Table 10. Regression analysis of Self-perceived Appearance

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	<i>B</i>	Standard Error	Beta		
Constant	2.69	.16		16.68	<b>.00</b>
BMI	-.13	.04	-.12	-3.72	<b>.00</b>
General Health	.06	.01	.19	5.29	<b>.00</b>
Stress of the Past 2 wks.	.07	.03	.13	2.49	<b>.01</b>
Negative Emotion of the past 2 wks.	-.07	.03	-.13	-2.61	<b>.01</b>
Men are treated unequally	-.04	.03	-.07	-1.45	.15
Women are treated unequally	-.08	.02	-.17	-3.25	<b>.00</b>
Derisive Portrayal of Women on TV	-.15	.06	-.20	-2.63	<b>.01</b>
Derisive Portrayal of Men on TV	.11	.05	.14	1.98	<b>.048</b>
Mocking women online	.09	.03	.12	2.70	<b>.01</b>

*Dependent Variable: Q: What do you think about your appearance?*

A regression model was fitted to predict how people evaluate their appearances. The intercept shows that the level of self-perceived appearance is approximately 2.69 ( $p < .01$ ) when all the other variables are held constant. When people body mass index (BMI) increases by one point, the self-perceived appearance decreases by .13 ( $p < .01$ ). When people's general health is one point higher, the self-perceived appearance increases by .06 ( $p < .01$ ). When people's recent stress level increases by one unit, their perceived appearance increase by .07 ( $p < .01$ ). When people's negative emotional state increases by one unit, the self-perceived appearance *decreases* by .07 ( $p = .01$ ). Also, when people's opinion that women in our society are treated unequally increases by one unit, their perceived appearance decreases by .08 ( $p < .01$ ). When people's concern about the derives portrayal of women on TV increases by one unit, their self-appearance *decreases* by .15 ( $p = .01$ ). When people's concern about derisive portrayal of men on TV is problem increases by one unit, however, the self-perceived appearance increases by .11 ( $p = .048$ ). Lastly, when people's concern about mocking women on the internet increase by one unit, their self-perceived appearance increases by .09 ( $p = .01$ ).

Table 11. Regression analysis of Self-perceived Body Image

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	<i>B</i>	Standard Error	Beta		
<b>Constant</b>	1.08	.19		5.58	<b>.00</b>
<b>BMI</b>	.80	.04	.53	18.59	<b>.00</b>
<b>General Health</b>	-.03	.01	-.07	-2.24	<b>.03</b>
Stress of the Past 2 wks.	.01	.03	.02	.40	.69
Negative Emotion of the past 2 wks.	.04	.03	.05	1.12	.26
Men are treated unequally	.02	.03	.02	.52	.60
<b>Women are treated unequally</b>	.09	.03	.14	3.09	<b>.00</b>
Derisive Portrayal of Women on TV	-.01	.07	-.01	-.21	.84
<b>Derisive Portrayal of Men on TV</b>	.13	.06	.13	2.05	<b>.04</b>
Mocking women online	-.02	.04	-.02	-.50	.62

*Dependent Variable: Q: What do you think about your body image?*

Lastly, another regression predicting people's self-perceived body image was fitted. The intercept shows that their body image is approximately 1.08 ( $p < .01$ ) when all the other variables are held constant. And when their BMI increases by one unit, their body image increases by .80 ( $p < .01$ ). Next, when people's general health increases by one unit, their perception about body image decreases by .03 ( $p = .03$ ). Next, when people's opinion about the unequal treatment of women increases by one unit, their body image increases by .09 ( $p < .01$ ). People's concern about a derisive portrayal of men on TV increases by one unit, their body images increases by .13 ( $p = .04$ ).

## Conclusions

Looking at the *t*-test, the gender disparity in the importance of appearance is clearly present: Men and women perceive their importance of appearance differently in a context in which they find themselves. More importantly, women feel that they are discriminated by appearance more than men do. One should delve into the reason why women are more discriminated by their look rather than their inner quality. And policymakers should use these findings to devise policies that would ensure that no women will find themselves at disadvantage in our society.

Next, the regression model predicting people's self-perceived appearance shows that their BMI, general health condition, stress or negative emotion experienced in the past two weeks explain the change of how people perceive their appearance. Interestingly enough, media's derisive portrayal of men or women explains how people evaluate their appearance. So this evidence must be the foundation of further research as to what specific factors in media are attributing to the phenomenon.

Lastly, another regression model predicting people's self-image shows that BMI And general health condition are clear indicators of how people interpret their body image. Though slightly different, media's derisive portrayal of men's appearance does explain the change in people's body image. This is a reason enough for the policymakers to manage the flow of mass media to minimize



contents that would encourage negative body image and appearance so that everyone can foster healthy self-image and live their life to the fullest.

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