

POSTER

COSTLY BEAUTY: EFFECTS OF FEMALE LUXURY CONSUMPTION ON PERCEPTION OF ATTRACTIVENESS AND WEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Humans invest substantial resources in appearance enhancement, with females particularly engaging in costly beautification practices. Female appearance modifications are traditionally explained through two theories: supernormal stimuli theory, where modifications create exaggerated visual cues to exploit preferences, and intrasexual competition, where costly items signal wealth to deter rivals. Neither theory fully explains observed consumption patterns. We hypothesized that the effects of appearance modifications depend on both visual manipulation and perceived cost. We first created standardized stimuli that depicted 55 female models in control conditions and with varied lipsticks (economy/luxury, pink/red) and shoes (economy/luxury, flat/heel). Participants ($n=279$; Czech; 177 females; age 18-40) assessed attractiveness and wealth of stimuli, projected in real-life size. Significant discrepancies between expected and observed ratings were detected using mixed-effects models. Overall, economy items demonstrated stronger wealth-enhancing effects than expected (mean difference: -0.89 to -0.51), while luxury items generally showed inflated expectations (mean difference: +0.34 to +1.40). Specifically, for lipsticks, red shades were expected to enhance attractiveness by +1.24 on our 10-point scale, while observed effects were modest. For shoes, flat shoes' attractiveness was underestimated, and luxury heels' wealth-enhancing effects were substantially overestimated. Sex differences were pronounced: females exhibited stronger expectation effects for visually exploitative items. These findings suggest perceptions about appearance enhancement practices are often exaggerated compared to actual effects. The results challenge the theoretical frameworks by demonstrating that use of visually exploitative features more strongly influence wealth perceptions than product cost, and expectations about attractiveness enhancement of visually exploitative items are often inflated.