

REPRESENTATIONS OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN PARK TAE-JUN'S LOOKISM

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Abstrak

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Physical appearance plays an important role in shaping social interaction and hierarchy in contemporary society, particularly through media representation. However, discussions on lookism often focus on beauty standards without sufficiently examining how media texts construct and normalize appearance-based social hierarchy. This research aims to analyze the representation of physical appearance and social hierarchy in the webtoon Lookism using a Cultural Studies perspective. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method by analyzing selected chapters of Lookism through scenes, dialogues, and visual elements related to body representation. The findings reveal that physical attractiveness functions as social capital, granting power, acceptance, and higher social status, while unattractive appearances lead to discrimination and exclusion. Through the contrast between Park Hyung-seok's two bodies, Lookism demonstrates how media not only reflects but also reinforces lookism and appearance-based social hierarchy in society.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern society, physical appearance is often the main criterion for judging a person. This phenomenon occurs not only in the real world but is also reflected in various popular media, including comics and webtoons. One of the social issues that has arisen as a result of this view is Lookism, a form of discrimination based on physical appearance. Cases of appearance-based discrimination are increasingly prevalent in various countries, including South Korea, where extreme beauty standards have become a source of social and psychological inequality among urban communities (Lee, Son, Yoon, & Kim, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2024). This research is important because it seeks to examine how popular media represents this phenomenon while offering a critical understanding of a culture that normalizes physical-based judgments (Choi, Kim, & Ahn, 2024).



The object of study in this research is Park Tae-jun's comic Lookism, which tells the story of a student named Park Hyung-seok who experiences discrimination and social violence because of his physical appearance. The story then highlights the change in his social status after he acquires a second, handsome and ideal body. This study uses Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which explains that social meaning is formed through language and visuals. This theory is used to reveal how Lookism represents the relationship between physical appearance, social power, and the ideology of beauty.

Several previous studies have examined the issue of Lookism and the representation of physical appearance from various perspectives. Selina (2021) examined the phenomenon of bullying and the characteristics of victims in the webtoon Lookism using a literary psychology approach and found that social pressure regarding physical appearance shapes the characters' personalities. Octora (2017) examined social discrimination based on appearance in Korean society using a literary sociology approach and concluded that appearance determines a person's social status. Pilares (2021) analyzes Lookism using Stuart Hall's theory of representation to see how appearance functions as a form of social power. In addition to research that directly examines Lookism, Choi (2021) conducted research using a Cultural Studies approach to Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*, and found that women's bodies are represented as symbols of resistance against oppressive social ideologies. Park (2022) examined beauty ideologies and social hierarchies in modern Korean literary narratives using a cultural studies approach and asserted that representations of physical appearance serve as a mirror of dominant social and cultural values.

Based on these five studies, it can be concluded that previous studies have discussed Lookism and body representation from psychological, sociological, and gender perspectives. However, there have not been many studies that specifically highlight how beauty ideology and social hierarchy are represented through characters in the webtoon Lookism using a Cultural Studies perspective. Therefore, this study offers novelty by highlighting the ideological dimensions of body representation through Stuart Hall's theory of representation. This study also serves as a form of social criticism of popular culture that normalizes discrimination based on physical appearance and reinforces social hierarchies based on beauty standards (Lee et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary texts and popular media are produced within specific social conditions, making their connection to cultural contexts an essential aspect of critical analysis (Hall, 1997; Storey, 2018). Literature reflects core social values, dominant power dynamics, and social hierarchies of the society in which it is created (Hall, 1997). Through narrative structures and symbolic elements, cultural texts convey ideologies that often perpetuate discriminatory perspectives regarding social class, physical appearance, and beauty standards (Tyson, 2015). From a Cultural Studies perspective, representation is understood as the process through which meaning is constructed using language, images, and symbolic signs (Hall, 1997). Rather than merely reflecting reality, representation actively shapes public understanding by repeatedly presenting specific imagery and ideas through media channels (Hall, 1997; Storey, 2018).

In contemporary society, Lookism emerges as a form of social discrimination that evaluates and treats individuals primarily based on their physical appearance (Pechmann & Wang, 2019). Mass media, advertising, and the entertainment industry consistently

reinforce idealized standards of beauty, which are subsequently internalized by the public as normative expectations (Lim, 2020; Choi et al., 2024). Physical attractiveness frequently functions as social capital, granting individuals easier access to power, respect, and societal privileges (Park, 2022). Conversely, individuals whose physical traits deviate from these dominant standards experience rejection, intimidation, and social exclusion (Choi & Yang, 2017). Through contrasting bodily representations in media texts such as the webtoon *Lookism*, cultural narratives expose how social hierarchies are constructed and reinforced by appearance-based discrimination (Kim & Kim, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a Cultural Studies approach to interpret the meanings, representations, and social values embedded in popular media texts. The research subject is Park Hyung-seok, the main character in Park Tae-jun's webtoon *Lookism*, whose experiences reflect social treatment and mobility based on physical appearance. The research object focuses on visual and narrative representations of body image, discrimination, and social status depicted throughout the webtoon. The primary data source consists of Chapters 1 through 4 of *Lookism*, selected purposefully for their contrasting depictions of Hyung-seok's original body—which undergoes bullying and social marginalization—and his newly acquired attractive body, which commands instant respect and social privilege. Data were gathered through a comprehensive close reading technique, systematically identifying relevant scenes, visual panels, and character dialogues that pertain to appearance-based discrimination and social stratification. As the primary research instrument, the researcher analyzed and categorized these textual and visual elements into distinct thematic codes. The data were then critically evaluated using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, examining how media imagery constructs beauty ideologies and reinforces social hierarchies within contemporary cultural contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1.1 Representation of Physical Appearance in *Lookism*

The visual and narrative analysis of *Lookism* demonstrates how physical appearance functions as an essential determinant of social evaluation and interpersonal treatment. In the early chapters, Park Hyung-seok's original body—portrayed as overweight and non-conforming to societal beauty norms—is subjected to continuous physical violence, verbal abuse, and systematic marginalization by his peers. Visual panels depict his original physique through slouched postures, disheveled styling, and exaggerated facial expressions of distress, contrasting sharply with the stylized, symmetrical, and athletic features of his dominant peers. This visual polarization reflects how media texts visually encode physical unattractiveness with vulnerability and subaltern status, reinforcing societal biases that equate non-standard bodies with lesser social worth.

1.2 Representation of Social Hierarchy in *Lookism*

Social hierarchy within the webtoon is inextricably linked to physical aesthetics, where characters fitting dominant beauty standards automatically occupy superior social positions. The dramatic shift in Hyung-seok's social reality upon acquiring his second, conventionally attractive body illustrates the operational mechanism of beauty privilege as social capital. Characters who previously abused or ignored him immediately adjust their demeanor, offering respect, protection, and social deference. In several key scenes,

bullies who routinely threatened Hyung-seok's original body hesitate and show submission toward his attractive body. This structural shift proves that physical attractiveness functions as a form of socio-structural authority that actively dictates one's placement within the institutional and peer hierarchy.

1.3 Ideology of Beauty and the Meaning of the Two Bodies

The narrative duality of Park Hyung-seok's two bodies serves as an ideological critique of societal double standards and appearance-based valuation. Despite retaining his original timid personality, moral compass, and internal identity, the radical difference in how society treats his two physical forms reveals that individual worth is governed primarily by external aesthetics rather than intrinsic character. Through Stuart Hall's framework of representation, this sharp bodily contrast exposes how dominant beauty ideologies are naturalized and enforced within contemporary popular culture. By explicitly illustrating how physical traits dictate social mobility and acceptance, Lookism functions as a cultural critique that lays bare the oppressive mechanics of aesthetic hegemony.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals how Park Tae-jun's webtoon Lookism represents physical appearance as a primary mechanism for constructing social hierarchy and distributing power within contemporary culture. Through the visual and narrative contrast of Park Hyung-seok's dual bodies, the analysis demonstrates that physical attractiveness operates as vital social capital, granting immediate status, respect, and social protection. Conversely, non-conforming bodies are systematically encoded with vulnerability, leading to exclusion and social violence. Applying Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this research shows that Lookism does not merely reflect societal biases but actively exposes how dominant beauty ideologies are naturalized and enforced, illustrating that an individual's social position is often dictated by aesthetic value rather than personal character or moral integrity.

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