

## Chapter 1

# Physical Appearance as a Form of Capital: Key Problems and Tensions

*Iida Kukkonen*

### Introduction

Beauty is having a moment in the social sciences.

(Mears, 2014, p. 1130)

Social scientists are increasingly turning to the body, and in particular its visual appearance, to understand social inequalities in contemporary societies. Many are finding the Bourdieusian metaphor of capital useful for understanding the connections between inequality and the body or physical appearance. In the past decades, scholars have variably referred to aspects of the body and its visual presentation as physical capital (Shilling, 1991, 2004), bodily capital (Connell & Mears, 2018; Wacquant, 1995), girl capital (Mears, 2015a, 2015b), aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010; Balogun, 2020; Holla & Kuipers, 2015), sexual capital (Green, 2008, 2013, 2014; Martin & George, 2006) or erotic capital (Hakim, 2010, 2011).

In general, sociology suffers from what Neveu (2018) calls the ‘shopping list syndrome’ of capital. The symptoms of this syndrome appear as the Bourdieusian concept of capital is utilised loosely to refer to any single form of power, causing possible inflation the capital metaphor and, subsequently, an inflation of the whole Bourdieusian understanding of social class and structure. (Neveu, 2018). A glance at the shopping list of capital demonstrates that the Bourdieusian capital metaphor is often understood in a manner which promotes a neoliberal perspective of the self as a capital-accruing subject free of structural restraints rather than as a metaphor for class (re)production (see Connell & Mears, 2018).

---

Appearance as Capital, 23–37



Copyright © 2022 Iida Kukkonen

Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. These works are published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of these works (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

doi:10.1108/978-1-80043-708-120210002

It is, however, unclear whether contemporary social scientists concerned with the body and aesthetics are contributing to the shopping list syndrome of capital in adopting and employing the metaphor of capital. It is possible such social scientists are unearthing an important ‘forgotten capital’ to which Bourdieu failed to pay adequate attention – one that has to do with the body and aesthetics (Neveu, 2018).

A chief problem with understanding the physical and aesthetic as capital lies, according to Neveu, in that such capital would require its own specific laws of capital conversion. Writing specifically about erotic or sexual capital, Neveu points out many of the gains of erotic or sexual capital are labelled as sins and carry powerful stigmas (Neveu, 2018). Other forms of bodily or aesthetic capital are subject to powerful social supervision, too. In this chapter, I propose that it is particularly through paying careful scholarly attention to such social rules, or norms, that we can understand how physical appearances may or may not act as a form of capital, and as such contribute to social inequality. In sum, I (re-)claim the ‘laws’ of capital conversion depend on social norms, which may differ across social fields. I further suggest that such rules of capital conversion are structured by the social inequalities of these fields.

Some of the social norms steering capital conversion may be very localised, situational or temporary, others may be national, even global, and more enduring. As such, looking for universal laws of aesthetic capital conversion would be futile. Nevertheless, current scholarship on appearance-related capital has already identified certain commonalities, particularly in terms of how gender is implied in these conversions (e.g. Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020).

A major problem with understanding the physical and aesthetic as capital lies in the underlying, ultimately reductionist understanding of social life as an exercise in capital exchange and of people, or subjects, as always being primarily interested in capital exchange. According to Skeggs, the idea of the capital-accruing subject is inherently middle class. Not everyone treats or understands themselves as projects of capital accumulation and exchange. Capital remains a useful metaphor, but it should not be reduced to an understanding of all people striving to maximise their capital (Skeggs, 2004).

This chapter focuses on how the capital metaphor has been employed to understand physical appearance -related inequalities. I commence with a brief overview of Bourdieu’s understanding of capital and the body, and move on to scrutinising more contemporary conceptualisations of bodily or appearance-related capital. After that, I discuss how the content of what constitutes appearance-related capital has always been and will be in flux, and how not everyone considers their bodies as sites of capital investment. I then consider how conversions of capital are, overall, driven by social norms, after which I make a first draft of the grammar of the accumulation and conversion of what I call ‘aesthetic capital’. Finally, I conclude with my thoughts on physical appearances a form of capital.

## **Bourdieu’s Forms of Capital and the Body**

While terms such as aesthetic, erotic or sexual capital are commonplace if not in everyday parlance then at least in sociological jargon, Pierre Bourdieu (1984,

2011/1986) did not directly consider the body or its appearance as a form of capital in itself. Bourdieu did have a keen interest in bodies, and his scholarship was beyond its years in foregrounding embodiment and the material – turns which humanism and social sciences only took in the 90s. For Bourdieu, bodies were the very loci of inequality: places where capital accrues, is made visible and appropriable.

In his early scholarship in the 60s, before developing his influential theory of the forms of capital, Bourdieu conducted ethnographic research among peasants. He described how in his childhood village of Béarn, the economic, social and cultural conditions had not just affected peasant men's bodies, but indeed, the agricultural labour was manifoldly inscribed on the bodies he studied. Not only were the peasant bodies physically shaped by labour, but the peasants also valued their bodies in terms of strength and durability. These bodies were, however, devalued as an asset in mating markets and appeared awkward to the peasants at the village dance. While peasant women from the village adopted fashions and movements from the town, peasant men with their peasant bodies and moves did not feel comfortable dancing. Bourdieu claimed many of the peasants he studied, thus, remained single (Bourdieu, 2004/1962).

Beginning in his early sociological works, Bourdieu was extremely preoccupied with bodies and the social, cultural and economic value inscribed on them. His sociology is corporeal. In his works, Bourdieu referred to the social, economic and cultural conditions inscribed on bodies using terms such as habitus, hexis, doxa and praxis (Bourdieu, 1984, 2013/1977). However, the perhaps strongest of the metaphors he used is that of capital. Along the lines of Marxist thinking, Bourdieu defined capital as 'accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated", embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor' (Bourdieu, 2011/1986, p. 81).

The most condensed version of Bourdieu's formulation of the forms of capital includes three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. Economic capital refers to wealth that is directly convertible to money. Social capital is made up of the actual or potential benefits of belonging to certain social groups or networks. Cultural capital exists in an objectified state (e.g. books, pictures), an institutionalised state (e.g. educational qualifications) and, importantly, in an embodied state consisting of quite stable dispositions of the mind and body. Bourdieu also talks about symbolic capital, which is the form social, cultural and economic capital take when they are not perceived as capital, i.e. products of social labour, but rather as something 'innate', such as when accumulated labour is mis-recognised as competence (Bourdieu, 2011/1986).

Bourdieu did not view capital as something that follows certain universal laws but as something that is always situated in social context, or what he referred to as a social field. For him, the way capital (re)produces social inequality is tied to social structure: '*The structure of the field*, i.e., the unequal distribution of capital, *is the source of the specific effects of capital*, i.e., the appropriation of profits and the power to impose the laws of functioning of the field most favorable to capital and its reproduction' (Bourdieu, 2011/1986, p. 84 [italics by Kukkonen]). While

Bourdieu regarded social fields as social spaces conditioned chiefly by economic, social and cultural capital, he did not think these are the only forms of capital that exist<sup>1</sup>, but suggested rather these three were for him the ‘three fundamental guises’ of capital (2011/1986, p. 82).

Bourdieu mostly considered the body as the locus of inequality and not a form of inequality or capital in and of itself. Yet, he did also discuss, for example, *physical capital* in the context of sports (Bourdieu, 1978). He conceived of the development of such physical capital through sports as:

[...] one of the few paths of upward mobility open to the children of the dominated classes; the sports market is to the boys’ physical capital what the system of beauty prizes and the occupations to which they lead – hostess, etc. – is to the girls’ physical capital [...].  
(1978, p. 832)

This very same idea – that bodily capital is not always just a simple sum of economic, social and cultural capital but instead has potential over and beyond these forms of capital – is echoed in *Distinction*, where Bourdieu notes how physical appearance sometimes challenges and shakes up the class system that is based on the forms of capital (1978, p. 193). This suggests that Bourdieu was aware of the fact that appearance may, in certain contexts, have exchange value that is independent of the three ‘fundamental guises’ (Bourdieu, 2011/1986, p. 82) or ‘elementary forms’ (Neveu, 2018) of capital.

## Different Formulations of Appearance-related Capital

Overall, Bourdieu’s ideas about the body, taste and capital have had a seminal impact on how scholars approach physical appearance as a form of inequality. Scholars have followed in Bourdieu’s footsteps to varying extents, sometimes very explicitly and straightforwardly incorporating his ideas, and sometimes more subtly and implicitly referencing some of his conceptual tools without necessarily retaining the understanding of power and domination inherent in his theories. In this section, I briefly discuss different strands of scholarship that have looked at the body and its appearance as a distinct form of capital and labour in a Bourdieusian sense. By taking this focus, I regrettably exclude important studies that discuss appearance and cultural capital (e.g. Kuipers, 2015).

### *Physical, Bodily and Sexual Capital*

Chris Shilling (1991) sought to elaborate on Bourdieu’s theory through the concept of physical capital. He claimed the physical was too important to be reduced to a subform of capital. He was perhaps the first to claim physical capital is not just expressive of class location but actually magnifies social inequalities because people have different possibilities for converting physical capital into other forms of capital (p. 565). Loïc Wacquant, who studied under Bourdieu and

collaborated with him, conducted ethnographic studies among boxers who cultivated their bodily capital. Crucially, Wacquant notes that this bodily capital was appropriated, owned and controlled by brokers; it was not just the boxer who benefited from their capital (Wacquant, 1995). Both Shilling and Wacquant focused on forms of appearance-related capital that are very physical and may be considered masculine: movement and strength. In the marriage markets of peasant fields of Béarn, these may not have constituted capital, but in boxing rings and athletic fields at school, movement and strength certainly matter.

The current trend of regarding the body as a somewhat distinct form of capital began with sociologists of sexuality, including Martin and George (2006) and Green (2008, 2013, 2014), who meticulously deployed and developed Bourdieusian concepts in their studies of sexual culture and fields. In Bourdieusian field theory, capital exchange happens in socially embedded markets or fields: actual social contexts in which people inhabit different locations, i.e. social positions. Adam Isaiah Green described this vividly, relating how he, as a doctoral student, had walked from Chelsea to the West Village, two districts on the small island of Manhattan located around 1.5 km from one another:

In these settings [the gay scene of Chelsea], I grew keenly, often painfully aware of my body and its bearing, the fit of my clothing, the affect of my gait, the pump (or lack thereof) of my muscles, the expression on my face. [...] Walking south, below Fourteenth Street, I entered the West Village, and the change from one sexual field to another was abrupt and palpable, as if I had crossed into an entirely new geography. [...] The faces were less often white, the bodies less uniformly gym trained, the affect less controlled and more colorful, the clothing more varied, and the men typically older than I by at least a decade, often two.

(2014, p. 3)

Fields are constituted by relationships between actors, and those relationships are not equal. People enter fields with different kinds of power resources, including, but not limited to, the ‘fundamental’ forms of capital. Age, gender, race, sexual orientation and related categorisations matter on social fields. It is on diverse fields that the value of capital is negotiated (more or less implicitly). Indeed, scholars of sexual capital and fields propose exchange value is a property of fields more than of individuals.

### ***An Economist Approach to Capital***

Economists have conducted quantitative research on appearance-related socio-economic inequalities for decades. Sociology was slow to catch up on the turn to appearances (Mears, 2014), and when it did, it incorporated much of the research in economics as a foundation and built research upon such scholarship. Sociological review articles on the topic of beauty and related inequalities (Kwan &

Trautner, 2009) and aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) took the totality of economic research as a starting point for their literature reviews. However, while economic research identifies the phenomenon of appearances being congruent with capital, it often turns to other sciences to explain it. In economics, aesthetic capital is often understood in terms of individual beauty, which has individual benefits: ‘beauty pays’ (Hamermesh, 2011). Sometimes it is understood as human capital, a concept which comes with the idea that human capital can, and should, be cultivated (for a discussion, see Holla & Kuipers, 2015).

The idea of aesthetic capital as a form of cultivable capital was popularised by Catherine Hakim, who published her ‘theory of erotic capital’ in 2010. The theory was deemed politically problematic but also internally inconsistent (Green, 2013), but it certainly caused a stir and popularised the idea of the (female) body as capital. Hakim (2010, 2011) believes appearance-related capital, or erotic capital as she calls it, is ‘by nature’ something that women possess more of. She urges women to accumulate and exploit this ‘honey money’ to remedy gender inequality. She suggests that while all women are not natural-born beauties, all females can benefit from beauty if they work on their appearance and dare to use beauty to their benefit.

Hakim’s theory may be considered a prime example of what certain feminist critics consider postfeminism (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009): a gendered neoliberal ideology which stresses female agency and power while obfuscating or disregarding structural inequalities, including class. Indeed, class-based physical differences are easily regarded as products of choices or lifestyle and in terms of individual responsibility (Vandebroek, 2017, p. 232). Although Hakim’s idea of erotic capital says to have its roots in Bourdieu’s theory, it appears to have been largely inspired by economic theory instead. Hakim conceives of capital as if it were ‘natural’, meritocratic and individual rather than social and unequal, as if capital exchange happens on free markets according to the universal laws of supply and demand. Such a conceptualisation of markets is very different from the one held by scholars engaged in Bourdieusian field theory.

### *Gendered Capital and Labour*

Bourdieu’s theory of capital was, for some reason, not easy for feminists to engage with. While gender scholars working on the topic of bodies and appearances happily drew from other influential sociologists, importantly Foucault (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003/1993), Bourdieu did not really trend among feminist scholars. As Adkins (2004) points out, the reason is not just that Bourdieu failed to include an understanding of gender in his theories (see, however, Bourdieu, 2001, 2013/1977). Foucault, too, dismissed gender in his ponderings. Nevertheless, most feminist thinking about the body took a Foucauldian direction (Adkins, 2004).

Meanwhile in the early 2000s, scholars of labour, organisation and gender turned to Arlie Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) to understand contemporary service economies but noticed that the labour they were

studying was not just emotional but aesthetic as well. A new term, *aesthetic labour*, was coined (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001) to denote how in the service economy, workers' bodies are screened, cultivated and managed for commercial purposes, i.e. profit (for a review, see Mears, 2014). It is clear that aesthetic labour shares analytic similarities with theories of bodily capital (see Mears, 2014). However, the scholarship on aesthetic labour also involves a nuanced understanding of power as more than just a sum of forms of capital. It incorporates discussions on the distribution of power in situated late-capitalist settings, where people face bodily expectations and norms chiefly as profit-producing entities in organisations as customers, employers, (potential) employees, entrepreneurs and freelancers (Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Hrac & Leslie, 2014; Pettinger, 2008; van den Berg & Arts, 2019). The scholarship has also paid particular attention to how the distributions of power, wherein appearances and their value at and for work depend on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age, and how different aesthetic qualities related to such social categorisations, i.e. femininity, heterosexuality, whiteness and youthfulness, are invoked and curated for commercial benefit (van den Berg & Arts, 2019).

Recently, working with and beyond Bourdieu, scholars including Ashley Mears and Oluwakemi Balogun have used aesthetic or 'girl' capital as a lens through which to consider how women in the beauty and entertainment industries navigate such realms and the power imbalances involved in making the best of their capital, while at the same time maintaining standards of respectability. Both Mears and Balogun take seriously the agency of the women in their research, while at the same time highlighting how the exchange of female aesthetic capital is often reliant on male intermediaries and how a great deal of the profits involved actually accrue to these men (Balogun, 2020; Mears, 2020).

## **The Flux of Aesthetic Capital**

In 2010, Anderson et al. reviewed the scholarship on beauty perks and penalties and proposed a working definition for aesthetic capital as combination of appearance-related resources, including facial traits, body shape, size and physique, hair, beard, styles of dressing and grooming (p. 566). This is, perhaps, a good start for a definition because it is indeterminate; it does not say what kinds of facial traits or body size constitute capital. This is crucial because capital can hardly be a list of traits; bodily traits and styles gain their exchange value in everyday social exchanges in various fields, where valuation, and indeed value, is in constant flux.

Hence, the bodily shapes, facial traits or fashions that are valued as resources today are different from those that could be exchanged and appropriated tomorrow. For example, the association between status and a slim and toned body is a relatively recent development (cf. Mennell, 1987). Looking at an old painting or reading a classic novel written in a time when food was not abundantly available, it becomes clear fat was beauty and it served as capital. It still does in certain parts of the world (see, e.g., Wiley, 2018 on Mauritanian beauty).

Another example which illustrates the social construction of appearance-related capital is the tanned (white) body, which became a status signifier and, hence, a resource at the time when it came to signify leisure instead of work in the fields. As more white people gained access to inexpensive flights to the south and solariums opened up even in the deepest heart of Lapland, tan lost its upper-status significance. These days, being too tanned or having too much fat is scorned – a prime example of this being reality television, which presents working-class bodies as abject and in need of transformation (McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Skeggs, 2009).

In contemporary consumer culture, the concept of capital is often interpreted as if everyone has equal interest in and equal opportunity to accumulate aesthetic capital that is considered legitimate at that time and to exploit it. Connell and Mears (2018) criticise scholarship on bodily capital for endorsing such a neoliberal perspective of the self as a bundle of assets that can be used for personal gain and ignoring the structural inequalities that define beauty and guide the uneven distribution of what they call bodily capital (pp. 561–562). Indeed, the use of economic metaphors such as capital may be interpreted as reproductive of the very system of capitalist capital accumulation they wish to criticise.

Writing about the general concept of capital, Skeggs stresses the concept of the capital-accruing subject is inherently middle class and exchange value is a middle-class value (Skeggs, 2004). The so-called entrepreneurial self who rationally invests in their body and their self is arguably the ideal subject of *the middle classes*.

Working-class subjects may cultivate their own ideals that sometimes have nothing to do with accumulating exchange value, as Beverley Skeggs' empirical research suggests. Skeggs unpacks exchange value from use value: whereas exchange value bears potential for becoming economically valuable, use value carries possibilities for considering oneself valuable outside the system of middle-class values and ideals (Skeggs, 2004). Skeggs' thinking highlights how not all systems of value operate according to a simple standard of middle-class exchange value. In some fields, aesthetic practices carry different meanings and different values. For example, glamour can be inexpensively emulated and is, as such, quite democratic (Holliday & Taylor, 2006). Glamour does not necessarily aim at exchange for any socio-economic benefits; indeed it may be of little exchange value in, for example, labour markets. Nevertheless, it may carry use value.

Reducing all beauty practices to status-seeking and assuming everyone is equally interested in capital exchange is problematic. Overemphasising aesthetic capital as a strategic, meritocratic or universal resource fails to take into account that: first, not all agency is directed at capital accumulation (Skeggs, 2004); second, agency is structured by inequality (Schneikert et al., 2020); and third, agents are bound by social norms.

## The Grammar of Exchanging Aesthetic Capital

Norms, essentially informal rules, comprise the 'grammar of society' (Bicchieri, 2006). Economic sociology and field theory both presuppose markets or fields are



like any other social constellations in that they are bound by such social grammar. Indeed, a basic premise of economic sociology is that no free markets wherein exchange of capital happens exist because markets are always socially embedded (Swedberg, 2009).

Fields or markets can be very local (e.g. a particular bar or a subforum, or the online and offline market or field for collectors of particular items) and have their own local grammar or set of norms. While fields or markets may be very small or local and their unequal systems of value and exchange were very different one from another, this does not mean that there are no national or even global grammars. While different social fields constitute independent social contexts, they are nevertheless interconnected, as ‘agents parlay their capital from one field to another’ (Green, 2014, p. 13).

While at any given point, the social world can be divided into an infinite number of markets or fields, these bleed into and combine with one another; after all, a field or a market is a conceptual tool for delineating and studying a particular social constellation. Hence, social fields may be highly situational and temporary, as in a given nightclub or online chat room on a given night or a particular company at a given time. We may call the social norms that structure this field’s micro-level norms. We can also draw the boundaries of a social field so that it constitutes a particular selection of people, such as Finnish people working in particular jobs. The norms that structure the conversions of capital in different occupational field might be considered meso-level norms. Finally, we can take a bird’s view and look at, for example, the Finnish society as a whole, and consider the norms that structure the exchange of capital on such a large field, that is, macro-level norms.

The norms of any given field were shaped in the past and are shaped in the present in social interaction, in which people were never equal (as Bourdieu put it, ‘the social world is accumulated history’ (2011/1986, pp. 81)). People, thus, have different opportunities to define what constitutes value on a given field and to engage in exchange. However, norms do not only define the value of capital on a certain market but also govern the conditions of its exchange. They determine how and by whom capital may be exchanged.

Bourdieu referred to such social norms as ‘the rules of the game’ and highlighted how the upper classes with their accumulated capital are socialised to know these rules by heart and to know how to deploy them strategically. In a Bourdieusian sense, capital exchange is not just about carrying capital on a certain field, but it is also about how well one knows the system of value and exchange, and how well one is able to use this system to further one’s accumulation of capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 2011/1986).

Bourdieu thought the rules of the game were rigged, particularly against the lower classes. It is somewhat peculiar that it did not really occur to Bourdieu that rules of exchange are unequal not only in terms of class but also in terms of other social categorisations that affect capital accumulation, including, for example, ethnicity and gender. Certain feminists have thought ‘with and against Bourdieu’ (Lovell, 2000) to understand the entanglement of class and gender (see also Adkins, 2004). Skeggs (1997) shows how femininity is inherently classed and also

racialised. [Moi \(1991\)](#) suggests gender structures social fields. From this perspective, a player's position in the field is not the simple function of their habitus and their volume of different capitals, but other classifications also influence how one is inscribed in the grammar of capital exchange.

Thus, different people have different possibilities for exchanging aesthetic capital. The exchange of capital can be divided into the *accumulation* and *conversion* of aesthetic capital in social exchange (e.g. [Sarpila et al., 2020](#)). If we consider aesthetic capital a fourth 'elementary' capital (for a discussion, see [Neveu, 2018](#)) which compliments economic, social and cultural capital, then the accumulation of aesthetic capital means the exchange of economic, social or cultural capital for aesthetic capital. Likewise, the conversion of aesthetic capital means the exchange of aesthetic capital for economic, social and cultural capital.

Accumulation of aesthetic capital happens chiefly as a conversion of economic and cultural capital to aesthetic capital. The conversion of economic capital to aesthetic capital happens mainly through consumer practices, many of them laborious. That is, it is not enough to buy appearance-related consumer items, but these must be used (e.g. toothpaste, shampoo, trainers), applied (e.g. make-up, facial masks) and taken care of (e.g. ironing clothes) on a daily basis. Conversion is, thus, very time-consuming, even as much of the appearance work of consumers can be and is outsourced, as when a consumer visits a dental hygienist, a cosmetologists or hairdresser. The conversion of cultural capital to aesthetic capital happens through taste. As doing consumer practices 'right' requires cultural capital ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)), the successful accumulation and display of aesthetic capital strongly depends on cultural capital ([Holla & Kuipers, 2015](#); see also [Luna, 2019](#)). Those endowed with more capital can 'afford' to engage in long-term, future-oriented and more subtle means of investing in their bodies and looks, while those with less capital tend to prefer practices of accumulation that produce quicker and more visible results ([Vandebroeck, 2017](#)). The subtler and more time-consuming forms of accumulation are particularly prone to being (mis)perceived as natural, innate differences and to be appraised as valuable symbolic capital.

The norms that guide conversions, which amount to the accumulation of aesthetic capital, are first and foremost gendered. Women are expected to accumulate aesthetic capital, while for men, such capital accumulation is less approved of ([Kukkonen et al., 2018](#); [Sarpila et al., 2020](#), see also [Ojala and Pietilä, Chapter 4](#)). [Gimlin \(2007\)](#) explains such gendered expectations by pointing out that while all bodies are required to work on their bodies in order to transform them from the 'natural' state to a 'cultural' state, groups traditionally associated with the 'nature' side of the nature/culture dichotomy (e.g. females, non-whites) need to work more on 'culturing' their bodies (see also [Black, 2004](#)).

Conversions of aesthetic capital are well documented (for reviews, see [Anderson et al., 2010](#); [Hosoda et al., 2003](#); [Maestripieri et al., 2017](#)) and can happen as conversion from aesthetic capital to social capital, such as when a person considered beautiful gains friends, potential or actual partners or, for example, followers on social media (a form of social capital that may quite easily be monetised, i.e. converted into economic capital). The conversion from aesthetic

to economic capital happens chiefly on the labour market, for which there is plenty of evidence (Maestriperi et al., 2017). The conversion of aesthetic to cultural capital is evident, for example, in situations where a singer or artist's work is esteemed more highly because of their looks, or, generally, where a person who is deemed to possess aesthetic capital is rewarded in cultural fields (e.g. Dean, 2005; Hrac & Leslie, 2014).

The norms that guide the conversion of aesthetic capital are also gendered, particularly when it comes to exchanging aesthetic capital to economic capital in working life. Women who profit from their looks in working life are more disapproved of than men who do the same (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020).

Overall, the grammar of society appears to function such that those who are in subordinate positions in society (e.g. women, non-whites) are called upon to accumulate aesthetic capital yet are not necessarily allowed to benefit from it themselves. They are invited or even guided to exchange whatever capital they have for aesthetic capital and are promised upward mobility in exchange (see Kukkonen, Chapter 2). Arguably, even people who do not possess social, cultural or economic capital can train their bodies to be commercially viable at home, and supposedly, girls, in particular, ought to just learn to dress, behave and dance, notwithstanding their backgrounds (cf. Hakim, 2010). Such an overemphasis on the agency involved in the accumulation of aesthetic capital is misguided, as not everyone has equal opportunities for capital accumulation or conversion. As such, this promise of upward mobility by means of aesthetic capital appears a case of 'cruel optimism' (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017; on cruel optimism, see Berlant, 2011).

While aesthetic capital can be accumulated and converted in social exchange, it is also crucial to note that conversions do not always benefit the capital-accruing subject. As Wacquant (1995) and Mears (2015a, 2015b, 2020) have shown in their research on bodily capital, capital does not always benefit the person it is attributed to but can be appropriated by other actors in the field. Such actors may include individual persons who benefit from other people's aesthetic capital, but in most cases, it is economic actors, companies, that play a bigger role. The ways in which businesses cultivate, harness and benefit from employees' aesthetic capital and the aesthetic labour involved are well documented, particularly concerning the service sector (Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Williams & Connell, 2010; Witz et al., 2003). The appropriation of aesthetic capital and labour does not necessarily feel or look like appropriation of capital to the people involved, and indeed, this is key to the functioning of such unequal systems of exchange (Mears, 2015a, 2015b, 2020).

## Conclusions

The social sciences have seen a veritable boom of interest in physical appearance in the past two decades, and many sociologists have turned to Bourdieu's scholarship to make sense of appearance-related social inequalities. In particular,

scholars have conceptualised the body and its appearance using the metaphor of capital, in a more or less Bourdieusian sense, to explain and study such inequalities.

While the concept of capital has been used to suggest looks could or should be utilised as currency in social exchange on free markets, the majority of research on the subject suggests that insofar as we can conceive of a person's looks as capital, this capital ought to be situated in fields or markets that are unequal and governed by social norms. These social norms are not equal for everyone and differ by field or market. Even at a societal level, different people may face different rules of capital exchange, depending on their social position.

This should not be taken to mean that appearances could not constitute a veritable form of capital which has influence on our lives – quite the opposite. The idea that appearances act as a form of capital should be taken seriously. Considering appearance-related inequality from the perspective of norms and capital means recognising that the appearance-related inequalities of today were not always there, and importantly, they do not necessarily have to be there.

## Note

1. Indeed, according to Neveu (2018, p. 368), Bourdieu wrote, '[t]here are as many forms of power (or capital) as existing fields (2011, p. 128)'.

## References

- Adamson, M., & Salmenniemi, S. (2017). 'The bottom line is that the problem is you': Aesthetic labour, postfeminism and subjectivity in Russian self-help literature. In A. S. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour* (pp. 301–316). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Adkins, L. (2004). Introduction: Feminism, Bourdieu and after. In L. Adkins & B. Skeggs (Eds.), *Feminism after Bourdieu*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Anderson, T. L., Grunert, C., Katz, A., & Lovascio, S. (2010). Aesthetic capital: A research review on beauty perks and penalties. *Sociology Compass*, 4(8), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00312.x>
- Balogun, O. M. (2020). *Beauty diplomacy: Embodying an emerging nation*. Stanford University Press.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. Routledge.
- van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2019). The aesthetics of work-readiness: Aesthetic judgements and pedagogies for conditional welfare and post-Fordist labour markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018758196>
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Black, P. (2004). *The beauty industry: Gender, culture, pleasure*. Routledge.
- Bordo, S. (2003/1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body* (10th anniversary ed.). University of California Press.

- Bourdieu, P. (1978). Sport and social class. *Social Science Information*, 17(6), 819–840.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2004/1962). The peasant and his body. *Ethnography*, 5(4), 579–599. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138104048829>
- Bourdieu, P. (2011/1986). The forms of capital. In I. Szeman & T. Kaposy (Eds.), *Cultural theory: An anthology* (pp. 81–93). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bourdieu, P. (2013/1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Boyle, B., & De Keere, K. (2019). Aesthetic labour, class and taste: Mobility aspirations of middle-class women working in luxury-retail. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 706–722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119827753>
- Connell, C., & Mears, A. (2018). Bourdieu and the body. In T. Medvetz & J. J. Sallaz (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 561–576). Oxford University Press.
- Dean, D. (2005). Recruiting a self: Women performers and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(4), 761–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005058061>
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 606–626. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003>
- Gimlin, D. (2007). What is ‘body work’? A review of the literature. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00015.x>
- Green, A. I. (2008). The social organization of desire: The sexual fields approach. *Sociological Theory*, 26(1), 25–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00317.x>
- Green, A. I. (2013). ‘Erotic capital’ and the power of desirability: Why ‘honey money’ is a bad collective strategy for remedying gender inequality. *Sexualities*, 16(1–2), 137–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712471109>
- Green, A. I. (2014). Toward a sociology of collective sexual life. In A. I. Green (Ed.), *Sexual fields: Toward a sociology of collective sexual life* (pp. 1–23). The University of Chicago Press.
- Hakim, C. (2010). Erotic capital. *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 499–518. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq014>
- Hakim, C. (2011). *Honey money: The power of erotic capital*. Penguin.
- Hamermesh, D. S. (2011). *Beauty pays: Why attractive people are more successful*. Princeton University Press.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. The University of California Press.
- Holla, S., & Kuipers, G. (2015). Aesthetic capital. In L. Hanquinet & M. Savage (Eds.), *International handbook for the sociology of art and culture* (pp. 290–304). Routledge.
- Holliday, R., & Taylor, J. S. (2006). Aesthetic surgery as false beauty. *Feminist Theory*, 7(2), 179–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700106064418>
- Hosoda, M., Stone-Romero, E. F., & Coats, G. (2003). The effects of physical attractiveness on job-related outcomes: A meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Personnel Psychology*, 56(2), 431–462. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00157.x>

- Hracs, B. J., & Leslie, D. (2014). Aesthetic labour in creative industries: The case of independent musicians in Toronto, Canada. *Area*, 46(1), 66–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12062>
- Kuipers, G. (2015). Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries. *Poetics*, 53, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.10.001>
- Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., Sarpila, O., & Pajunen, T. (2018). Exploitation of aesthetic capital—disapproved by whom? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 38(3/4), 312–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-09-2017-0116>
- Kwan, S., & Trautner, M. N. (2009). Beauty work: Individual and institutional rewards, the reproduction of gender, and questions of agency. *Sociology Compass*, 3(1), 49–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00179.x>
- Lovell, T. (2000). Thinking feminism with and against Bourdieu. *Feminist Theory*, 1(1), 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647000022229047>
- Luna, J. K. (2019). The ease of hard work: Embodied neoliberalism among Rocky Mountain fun runners. *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 251–271. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9412-8>
- Maestriperi, D., Henry, A., & Nickels, N. (2017). Explaining financial and prosocial biases in favor of attractive people: Interdisciplinary perspectives from economics, social psychology, and evolutionary psychology. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X16000340>
- Martin, J. L., & George, M. (2006). Theories of sexual stratification: Toward an analytics of the sexual field and a theory of sexual capital. *Sociological Theory*, 24(2), 107–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2006.00284.x>
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage.
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12211>
- Mears, A. (2015a). Working for free in the VIP: Relational work and the production of consent. *American Sociological Review*, 80(6), 1099–1122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122415609730>
- Mears, A. (2015b). Girls as elite distinction: The appropriation of bodily capital. *Poetics*, 53, 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.004>
- Mears, A. (2020). *Very important people: Status and beauty in the global party circuit*. Princeton.
- Mennell, S. (1987). On the civilizing of appetite. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4(2–3), 373–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327687004002011>
- Moi, T. (1991). Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist theory and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture. *New Literary History*, 22(4), 1017–1049. <https://doi.org/10.2307/469077>
- Neveu, E. (2018). Bourdieu's capital(s). In T. Medvetz & J. J. Sallaz (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 347–374). Oxford University Press.
- Pettinger, L. (2008). Developing aesthetic labour: The importance of consumption. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*, 2(4), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJWOE.2008.022495>
- Ringrose, J., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). Regulating the abject: The TV make-over as site of neo-liberal reinvention toward bourgeois femininity. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(3), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770802217279>

- Sarpila, O., Koivula, A., Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., & Pajunen, T. (2020). Double standards in the accumulation and utilisation of 'aesthetic capital'. *Poetics*, 82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101447>
- Schneickert, C., Steckermeier, L. C., & Brand, L. M. (2020). Lonely, poor, and ugly? How cultural practices and forms of capital relate to physical unattractiveness. *Cultural Sociology*, 14(1), 80–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520905417>
- Shilling, C. (1991). Educating the body: Physical capital and the production of social inequalities. *Sociology*, 25(4), 653–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038591025004006>
- Shilling, C. (2004). Physical capital and situated action: A new direction for corporeal sociology. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 473–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569042000236961>
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class & gender: Becoming respectable*. Sage.
- Skeggs, B. (2004). *Self, class, culture*. Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (2009). The moral economy of person production: The class relations of self-performance on 'reality' television. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01865.x>
- Swedberg, R. (2009). *Principles of economic sociology*. Princeton University Press.
- Vandebroeck, D. (2017). *Distinctions in the flesh: Social class and the embodiment of inequality*. Routledge.
- Wacquant, L. J. (1995). Pugs at work: Bodily capital and bodily labour among professional boxers. *Body & Society*, 1(1), 65–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X95001001005>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2001). *Looking good, sounding right: Style counselling in the new economy*. The Industrial Society. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520510585370>
- Wiley, K. A. (2018). *Work, social status and gender in post-slavery Mauritania*. Indiana University Press.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). "Looking good and sounding right": Aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Witz, A., Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2003). The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization. *Organization*, 10(1), 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001375>