



The Appearance of Power



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Power vs Appeal

Too many men hear “dress well” and interpret it as “look nice/good/pretty.”

They see the women in their lives spend time focusing on their clothing, grooming, and overall appearance and assume that the pursuit of looking good or dressing well is inherently feminine.

As I’ve spoken to men in different conferences and events throughout the world, one of the most common things I’ve heard is, “My wife picks all my clothes out for me.” or, “My mom used to dress me and I never really thought about it after that.” or, “I hate shopping and just wear what my girlfriend thinks I’ll look good in.”

Nine times out of ten, I don’t need these men to tell me that’s the case, because I can tell just from looking at them.

When a woman dresses herself, her primary goal is visual appeal. She wants to accentuate the things that make her beautiful and this desire is driven by a few different components.

Human beings are sexually dimorphic creatures - which basically means that men and women are biologically different. Because we’re different, we have distinct priorities and unique ways of making ourselves valuable to other people - both in looking for a mate and in looking for status or a position within a group or society.

Biologically and historically, women have been able to find both their place within the group and their ideal mate by being the most fertile and the most capable of creating the strongest, most-likely-to-survive offspring. It’s only within the

past hundred or so years that society, technology, and culture have created an environment in which women are able to work alongside men and choose to embrace, delay, or eschew altogether their biological drive to have children.

Culture and human behavior take that biological priority and amplify it. Men seek the most beautiful women we can find - either to be with or at least surround ourselves with. Not only do we love being around attractive women, but we know that it's higher status men who are able to attract the most appealing partners. A woman's beauty becomes a subconscious way for men to jockey for position and status amongst ourselves. In black-and-white terms, we believe the best man gets the hottest girl.

And don't think it's just men who take advantage of this. Women are just as status anxious as we are and know that their position within the social hierarchy of a given group depends largely on how attractive they can be. In fact, more often than not, women are dressing not for the men in their lives, but to compete with and outrank the other women in their group.

So the value of a woman's attractiveness starts with a biological drive and signal, is added to by how that applies to men and our status, and is capped off by how it raises or lowers a woman's own status. Essentially beauty, attractiveness and visual appeal are a huge component of a woman's success - whether she likes it or not.

The naturally beautiful embrace this and do everything they can to give themselves a competitive edge. The rest may choose to do everything they can to look as beautiful as possible, or simply decry the value of beauty altogether and embrace social movements that try to minimize the importance physical appeal.

Either way - whether a woman "leans in" to the idea that beauty matters, or spends hundreds of hours writing online screeds to the contrary - they both know that it does have a strong place in our current society.

As men, our value to the group and our ability to attract the best women is not dependent on how physically attractive we appear. Yes there are still biological markers of genetic fitness - things like a strong jaw signaling higher levels of testos-

terone or broad shoulders that imply more strength - but the value in our appearance is almost entirely related to how it signals our utility.

When a woman dresses well, what does she do?

She maximizes her femininity - even if it happens subconsciously. Heels change her posture so her chest sticks out, her calves look bigger, and her legs appear longer. Mascara and eye shadow make the eyes larger, tipping the balance of the face to an appearance that's more feminine, innocent, and appealing. Following the latest trend shows youth and status.

When taken to its extreme, it's fairly obvious that men and women have different aesthetic goals. It's why our clothing is made differently and most people avoid anything that's either clearly made for the opposite sex or is even too androgynous.

But once the water starts to get a little muddy, once we start to think the end goal of dressing well is something as vague and ethereal as "looking good" then it's more difficult to be able to identify how to accomplish that goal.

This problem is compounded by two simple assumptions - men don't know or care how to dress well and women do.

Now, both of these stereotypes exist for good reason, but that doesn't mean that the solution is to ask the important women in your life for style advice.

Let's go back to another exercise analogy. If you're carrying around some extra pounds, get winded easily, and generally don't like the way you feel, you decide you want to get in shape - a goal that involves diet and exercise.

If you want to lose the gut and put on more muscle, you're going to start seeking advice from someone who lifts weights. If you want to simply slim down - get lean and not worry about putting on any size, you'll turn to someone like a marathon runner for advice.

Both the bodybuilder and the long-distance runner are in better shape than you are, but both took very different paths to get there. If you want to look, feel, and perform like the marathoner, you don't want to take nutrition and exercise advice from the bodybuilder and vice versa.

Both athletes have very different goals and use different means to accomplish those ends.

So, unless you want to dress like the women in your life, getting their style advice will often do you more damage than good.

Rather than helping you look more established, credible, authoritative, and powerful they'll choose clothing that makes you appear younger, trendier, more beauty oriented, and more feminine.

Which is a problem for the average man because - just as a woman's highest sexual market value is demonstrated through signals of fertility, youth, and beauty - a man's is shown through usefulness, bravery, and power.

In fact, youth and beauty are both liabilities for men as both imply a lack of interaction with the outside world, an inability to provide and protect, and untested potential that leaves your worth unknown.

While the primary aesthetic goal for women is visual appeal, the main objective more men is visual power.

Now, don't think that the means to accomplishing those disparate ends have to be entirely different.

Let's take one of the most feminine components of beauty as an example - makeup.

While there is a movement amongst modern, androgynous, males to start embracing makeup and feminine beauty standards, the vast majority of us wouldn't be caught dead putting on some foundation or a little eye shadow in the morning. From both our cultural conditioning and biological imperatives, we know that making our eyes appear more feminine becomes an aesthetic negative instead of a positive. And, when we do see men who have made the jump over to wearing makeup in the same manner as women, it makes most us uncomfortable.

That said, some of the most powerful men in the world will have makeup applied every day. It may be actors on a set or politicians before going live on the

news, but these movers and shakers in society are often having powder applied to their faces to avoid shine from the lights and the camera.

Do we see this as inherently negative? No because we understand that the application of makeup is used as a neutralizer. The goal of the powder is not to enhance certain characteristics, it's to compensate for what the camera does and help get the wearer back to a state of neutrality.

The goal of makeup on a news anchor is not to make him look more appealing. It's to make him look normal.

But, we can continue to take the concept further. Because, it's not just getting back to neutral that can take something as feminine as makeup and make it acceptable.

There are many cultures in which the application of paint on the face and body was inherently masculine.

Native American tribes, Scottish rebels, African warriors, and many more cultures have used paint as a way to communicate visual power, signal status, strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, and mark acts of bravery.

The body and face paint don't have any inherent or biological meaning to them. However, by assigning value to the markings, they become potent tools for the men wearing them to signal their power to others.

A man who's dressed and made up in a feminine way may be much more capable of killing me than one who's in a loin cloth and covered in body paint but I know which one I'd fear running into more, and it's all because the first is communicating beauty and the second is signaling power.

But direct, violent power isn't the only kind of strength available to men. If that were the case history would be full of leaders who were physically strong, violent, and dominant.

Power can be wielded (and communicated) indirectly as well. For example, let's talk about the peruke.

That word may be unfamiliar but it's the name of an item that is known all too well - a powdered wig.

In the late 16th century the plague of syphilis was rampant in Europe. And, because of a lack of modern medicinal practices we take for granted today, those who contracted the STD took the brunt of it. Open sores, dementia, rashes, hair loss, and even blindness were all common symptoms of the disease and were experienced by many.

During this time period long hair was a status symbol and baldness was a sure-fire way to be ostracized from polite society. As a way to protect themselves from the immediate damage to their reputation, syphilis-ridden men took to wearing wigs of goat, horse, or even human hair. However, while this saved many of them from becoming outcasts, the wigs themselves were obvious cover-ups for a natural problem - not a display of status on their own.

At least, that was the case until 1655 when the king of France began to lose his hair. Louis XIV was at a ripe old age of only 17 when his balding started to become apparent and, rather than lose face, he hired four dozen wigmakers to alleviate his problem. Five years later, the king of England did the same thing once his hair started to grey.

Because of the power - both physical and social - that these kings wielded, the aristocracy began to adopt the trend of wearing wigs. And, as trends are prone to do, perukes trickled down to the upper-middle class and became the latest fad in Europe.

The price and size of wigs rose drastically. Large, envy-inducing perukes sold for 32 times what the average wig went for and the term "bigwig" became synonymous with power and authority and is still used today.

What was initially a less-than-effective way for an unfortunate balding fellow to not be cast out from society quickly became one of the most coveted and expensive accoutrements a man could have at his call - all because it conveyed a message of financial and social power from those who wore them.

These wigs displayed zero direct power. They weren't symbols of men slain in battle, nations conquered, or lands discovered. Instead, they represented indirect, social and financial power.

Like many displays of wealth and status, perukes communicated to the lower and working classes that those who wore them were above menial labor, could afford ostentatious displays of wealth, and didn't have to rely on their own direct sources of power to affect the world around them.

While the modern West, especially countries like the United States, may reject such displays of conspicuous consumption - we still see luxury vehicles, designer-brand clothing, uncalloused hands, and other displays of indirect power in men today.

Which all comes back to the ancient, biological underpinnings of what it takes to be an effective man. Power is the confidence and competence necessary to take on risk and turn it into reward. Power is how men have been able to fulfill our traditional roles to provide, protect, preside, and procreate. Power is what protected us and our families from the saber-tooth tigers and men from other tribes who wanted to take our resources for their own.

While most men today won't confront a whole lot of physical danger, we do have our own ways of facing risk and exemplifying power. In fact, there are plenty of men who would feel much more comfortable in a fist fight than approaching a woman at a bar.

Because, even though physical risk has largely been outsourced to other men, social risk is still something every one of us has to grapple with each and every day.

Do you play it safe and not talk to anyone you don't already know but then miss out on the opportunities that can come from expanding your social circle?

Do you open yourself up to meeting new people and deepening your network but also risk exposing yourself to rejection and watching that rejection snowball into outright repulsion from polite society?

Do you stand out in a sea of blue shirts and wear red because you're willing to identify with a different culture or simply reject the status quo around you?

Do you blend in and wear blue because doing so means you aren't worrying about the drawbacks and costs that come from standing out and can be free to focus on other ways to accomplish your goals?

These are all questions with which we wrestle, albeit subconsciously for most of us. They are problems we are confronted by and trade offs we're expected to make.

For many men, the ability to take and overcome social risks is one of the biggest advantages they have.

While direct power may be more easily communicated universally - a warrior covered in scars and wearing a necklace of human ears is going to be intimidating regardless of where you're from - indirect power is much more context dependent.

For example, something that is seen as a "universal" standard of power today - the well-made business suit, doesn't translate to all subcultures within Western civilization. Try wearing a suit to a meeting for a startup or into an MMA gym and see how far it gets you.

Nor does its power translate into other non-Western cultures. A man who is part of a small tribe in the Amazon who's never before had contact with the outside world will not be impressed by a suit. Any man wearing one will look odd and ridiculous.

And even within established, Western culture, the suit's symbol of indirect power doesn't span all time. It doesn't matter how well made a double-breasted, Tom Ford, charcoal suit is - if it's being worn to a meeting with the Sons of Liberty during the American revolution, it's going to look out of place and inconsistent with any mode of influence and status at the time.

Thankfully a lack of universalism doesn't make something impossible to understand - especially because most masculine communication, whether that's direct or indirect, falls within a few key virtues that do exist across both time and culture.