

The Black Mirror-Stories: Creating A Short Story Collection Highlighting Beauty Penalty Phenomenon in the Indonesian Society

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ABSTRACT

Beauty penalty is a phenomenon which occurs in society which imposes disadvantages on attractive people. However, as this phenomenon has largely been acknowledged in the confinement of one individual's testimony to another without adequate further study, the majority of people still ignore it. Despite its prevalence and significance, the beauty penalty phenomenon lacks deeper discussion, especially in Indonesia. In response to this reality, this paper explores the triggers to beauty penalty and multiple forms which the beauty penalty affects one's life using the concept of perceived entitlement by Margaret Lee et al., the concept of unmet expectations by Catherine Eckel and Rick Wilson, and the concept of beauty penalty forms by Stephen Marson and Joanne Hessmiller as the theoretical framework. We explore this topic by designing a short story collection to show how people's perceived entitlement and unmet expectations of the attractive protagonists as the triggers to beauty penalty occurrence. In addition, the work shows that the beauty penalty phenomenon can manifest in forms such as social penalties, mental problems, emotional disturbances, and physical challenges. Thus, the protagonists must face their own forms of beauty penalty to achieve their goals.

Keywords: beauty penalty, physical attractiveness, short story collection

INTRODUCTION

The perception of physical attractiveness is generally promoted as positive. In this discussion, those with beauty privilege are defined as those who meet the characteristics of the beauty standard. The Indonesian beauty standard has diversified over the years. However, it still mainly revolves around the characteristics of having lighter skin complexion, tall and slim figure, dark and long hair as the ideal for women (Wianti, 2020, p. 15-16). While for men, it revolves around the characteristics of being tall, having a pointy nose, having broad chest and shoulders (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2023).

There are views and opinions circulating within the society that beauty privilege does have a significant impact on life, such as how beauty is associated with more advantages in life and how beauty privilege grants more safety (Rosar, et al., 2012, p. 372-391). Another research done with workers shows that people who are deemed to be physically attractive are less likely to experience bullying, even in the workplace (Scott & Judge, 2013, pp. 93-113). The popular perception that attractiveness equals abundant advantages has fuelled Indonesian society's efforts to fulfill beauty standards. This can be seen from the rocketing trend of procedures to alter one's appearance in order to achieve the ideal through cosmetic surgery and whitening products (Rini, et al. in 2018, p. 309-315; Saraswati, 2013, p. 108-128).

However, despite the common perception that being good-looking equals having an easy life, the beauty-privileged also suffer from the beauty penalty phenomenon. In this work, beauty penalty is defined as a situation where attractive people suffer from disadvantages (penalties) from their surrounding environment (Wilson & Eckel, 2006; Marson & Hessmiller, 2016; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

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Beauty penalty occurs whenever those who are good-looking cannot meet society's expectations (Wilson & Eckel, 2006, p. 189–202). For instance, an attractive waitress may receive a lower tip when she cannot meet a customer's expectation. The expectation rises when the customer unconsciously expects outstanding service when looking at the waitress. When in truth, the waitress may just be performing according to the standards. In addition, there are also negative views in society where attractive people are assumed to be vain, and vain people are assumed to be attractive (Han & Laurent, 2022, p. 264-286).

The beauty penalty phenomenon needs to be addressed by society as it significantly affects the individuals which it is imposed on. There are multiple disadvantages of the beauty penalty such as how it affects psychological, behavioral, and physical aspects of one's life (Khan, Hussainy, & Iqbal, 2016, pp. 157-158). Prolonged poor awareness or lack of discussion would only exacerbate these disadvantages.

This work aims to capture the factors which trigger the occurrence of beauty penalty and its various forms which affect attractive individuals using stories which are within the Indonesian context to make them more relevant to readers. Since multiple studies show how male have the upper hand in the beauty penalty phenomenon (Johnson, et al., 2010, p. 301–318; Braun et al., p. 379-383; Ruffle and Shtudiner, 2015, p. 1760-1776), it can be concluded that the beauty penalty phenomenon tends to occur more to attractive women. Hence, the discussion and works in this paper will focus on showcasing the beauty penalty phenomenon on women.

To capture the discussion of the issue into fiction, we would use the form of a short story collection. (Short) stories are fundamentally incomplete and indeterminate in both fiction and real life—they tell fragments of life (Tucan, 2014, p. 144-151). The form of short story collection suits the purpose of garnering perspectives from different characters with similar starting points of being attractive females in different situations. These differences are useful to provide context for readers to achieve understanding of the topic and shape their stance regarding the issue in Indonesia.

Since the short stories will focus on portraying the everyday reality people face in the current social setting, we decide to write under the realism genre. This genre focuses on making every detail as realistic as possible. This is done with the hope to evoke better understanding of the issue at hand within Indonesian society.

Serving as the theoretical framework are the academic research by Margaret Lee et al. (2018, p. 424-442) which identify the concept of perceived entitlement, whereas Rick Wilson and Catherine Eckel (2006, p. 189–202) discuss the concept of unmet expectations. The two concepts will be employed to identify the triggers of the beauty penalty phenomenon.

The concept of perceived entitlement, expresses in a study titled “Perceived Entitlement Causes Discrimination against Attractive Job Candidates in The Domain of Relatively Less Desirable Jobs” by Margaret Lee, et al. (2018), stated that people generally infer that attractive individuals feel entitled to good outcomes (p. 424-425) which were previously elaborated in Griffin & Langlois' study 2016, as cited in Lee et al., 2018, p.424-425 about how this assumption stems from the expectation that attractive individuals often receive good outcomes. Moreover, the finding is strengthened by Feinberg's definition of entitlement where it is described as a sense that one has some level of right access to one's desired goals (Lee et al., 2018, p. 424-425). Through this, it can be concluded that the perceived entitlement, which people immediately attach to an attractive individual, develops into negative perceptions such as being seen as more immoral and vain (Han & Laurent, 2022, p. 264-286) and entitled (Lee et al., 2018, p. 435).

In addition, the concept of unmet expectations, presented in “Judging a Book by Its Cover: Beauty and Expectations in the Trust Game” by Rick Wilson and Catherine Eckel (2006, p. 189–202), revealed how once attractive individuals failed to fulfill people’s expectation, the people then gave penalties (beauty penalty) towards the attractive individuals.

The beauty penalty phenomenon can take various forms to transpire in one’s life. Serving as the theoretical framework for this is the results of the academic research by Stephen Marson & Joanne Hessmiller (2016) titled “The Dark Side of Being Pretty”, where they identified beauty penalty forms as follows:

1. Social
Being vulnerable to abusive relationships, domestic violence, and verbal threats by peers. Having to approach men and women differently in order to avoid unwanted attention and negative perceptions which will affect social relationships.
2. Emotional
Suffering from the public’s tendency to dismiss their complaints regarding their emotions due to the perceptions of how attractiveness guarantees one’s happiness.
3. Mental
Being self-conscious, being concerned of their image (seen as a stuck-up), being unable to express themselves comfortably.
4. Physical
Feeling the pressure to dress down to avoid being judged from their looks to avoid disadvantages in certain situations.

The designed short story collection tells the story of Maddy, Catalina, Rebecca, and Iris. All of the characters are attractive Indonesian women aged 22 to 35 years old who are victims of the beauty penalty phenomenon. Each story portrays what triggers the beauty penalty to occur and shows the impactful forms it materializes in their respective lives.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of the short story collection is that the beauty penalty is prevalent and significantly impacts attractive individuals, particularly women, despite society's lack of awareness. Each short story will show readers the beauty penalty phenomenon’s prevalence through the protagonists which come from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the stories will display the significant impact the phenomenon has on each protagonist’s life.

Plot

Below are four plots of the stories.

The Black Mirror

The story begins with Maddy’s introduction as a full-time model who despises her job and wishes to pursue her culinary talent instead. Her despising modeling is formed as she feels worthless and disgusted by how people treated her (such as denying her food despite almost fainting in order for her to look good, constantly touching her as a part of the job). Elle, her mom, constantly pushes her to pursue modeling since she was a child due to her attractiveness, insisting that it is the perfect job for her daughter and how being physically attractive leads to a much better life. Maddy finds that her complaints and protests about modeling are often ignored, particularly by her mom and Jen, her best friend. They view her problems as

insignificant since they see all the privileges she receives from being a model, labeling those problems a small price to pay for what she gains. One day, Maddy has to choose between attending a casting call for Milan Fashion Week or a pastry competition that will benefit her when she switches careers. Her mom offers to help her establish her patisserie business if she auditions. It is a tempting offer but she cannot see herself doing modeling any longer, so she ends up registering for the competition. However, she gets rejected. Then, on her audition day, Maddy discovers that Elle is the one who made the competition committee deny her participation, prompting a big argument with her mom who still cannot take Maddy's complaints seriously. In the end, Maddy chooses to stay at Jen's, quit modelling, and plans to open her patisserie.

The Swan and The Lion's Den

The story introduces Catalina as a new recruit in a startup company and the breadwinner of her family. Everyone in her new team expects Catalina to be bubbly and sweet, which are the common traits people associate with attractive women. However, her anxiousness and awkwardness cause her to ruin her colleagues' perception of how attractive women should be, causing Catalina to be seen as a stuck-up. This, in turn, worsens her anxiety since her colleagues ignore her for not fulfilling their expectations of her. As Catalina cannot afford losing her job due to her responsibilities as the breadwinner, she decides to give into the people's expectations to recover people's perception of her after she is inspired by her mother's resilience. However, being bubbly and sweet turns out harder than she expected so she decides to be herself again, resulting in backlash from her colleagues. It leads her to realize that it is impossible to stay in her job without compromising her values. In the end, she decides to submit to their expectations of her in order to keep her job.

Gilded Chains

Rebecca is introduced as a young housewife in a big city. She is trying to navigate her new role as the newest member of the Sasongkos, one of the city's prominent socialites. As a former overseas middle-class office worker, she finds her mother-in-law and the family's expectations intimidating. Felicia, her mother-in-law, has the expectation that a pretty face will guarantee all the positive attributes needed in a daughter-in-law. Felicia's decision to entrust Rebecca to arrange the family's monthly dinner puts Rebecca under pressure. She accidentally tells her group of new socialite friends regarding the matter which leads to her being swarmed by their suggestions. The conflict ensues as the dinner Rebecca arranges goes awry when none of the suggestions meets the socialites' standards. It causes the Sasongko family and the guests' perception of Rebecca to go south as she fails to fulfill their expectations. As a result, on top of the snarky remarks and insults she receives, Rebecca is shunned from their social circles. Later on, Rebecca finds peace in her solitude as Lius, her husband, takes her on a trip to Singapore. Lius encourages her to defy the others' expectation and prove her competence, just like what she did at the beginning of her career in Singapore. The resolution occurs as Rebecca succeeds in holding her husband's birthday dinner in the following month. Hence, Rebecca feels more secure and welcome as she succeeds in fulfilling her new social group's expectations.

The Odd One Out

Iris, a member of a sales department for Cavado, an event organizer company, is very passionate about her job. She often goes out of her way to give suggestions for matters outside of her job description. Though her suggestions have proven to be useful, they are often ignored by Ana, her head of department, who believes Iris only needs to do her job as she is hired for her attractive appearance, not her capabilities. Iris then switches to Dreamworks, the competitor's business. To avoid being pigeonholed as a gorgeous airhead, Iris decides to dress down. Her new approach succeeds as others appreciate her capabilities. One day, Lucy, her head of department at Dreamworks, trusts her to handle the presentation for Rare Cosmetics. Lucy confronts Iris to be herself at work by being both stylish and clever like she

used to be. Iris then shows up to the pitch without concealing her looks. Iris is head-to-head with Ana on a presentation and the impromptu proposal submission to win the tender. In the end, Iris wins against Ana and earns her acknowledgement. Iris proves that she is both beauty and brains through her remarkable sales performance.

Characters

The Black Mirror

Maddy Wijaya, 25 years old, is a full-time model with long, black hair. She is comfortable in front of the camera since she has pursued modelling since she was young.

Eleanor (Elle) Wijaya, 62 years old, is Maddy's mother. She has the ambition to establish her daughter as a well-known Indonesian model. Elle is used to arranging things to go her way. She is 170 centimeters tall and has medium wavy hair.

Jennifer (Jen) Antonius, 24 years old, is Maddy's best friend since high school. She is a supportive and bubbly person. She has short bob hair which she dyed to be blonde.

The Swan and The Lion's Den

Catalina (Cat) Sugianto, 25 years old, is a determined employee who is easily anxious about everything. She is 165 centimeters tall and loves to put her hair up in a bun or a ponytail.

Irene Sugianto, 60 years old, is Catalina's mother. She is a loving mother and a tough woman. She has brown bob hair and is petite.

Jessica Robert, 26 years old, is one of Catalina's colleagues. Jessica is bold in her actions and words. She has a light caramel hair dye and a pale complexion.

Gilded Chains

Rebecca (Becca) Ekaputri, 35 years old, is a former employee-turned-housewife who has a tall and slim figure with a slightly tanned skin.

Felicia Sasongko, 65 years old, is Rebecca's mother-in-law. Enjoying the position of being the matriarch of the Sasongko family, she has a firm say about what should and should not be done by the family members. She has a plump figure with her hair frequently styled into a bob.

Audrey Wiratno, 36 years old, is one of Rebecca's friends from the pilates group. She is tall and slim. She has her hair dyed blonde. She can be quite shallow, but she means well for her friends.

The Odd One Out

Iris Hartono, 22 years old, is a passionate member of an event planning company. Iris has a pale white skin and a tall figure.

Adriana (Ana) Iman, 26 years old, is Iris' former head of department. She is a blunt woman that pays little attention to the effects of her words. Ana is around 155 centimeters tall.

Lucy Wiratno, 35 years old, is Iris' new head of department at Dreamworks. She is a cheerful woman who tries to bring out the best in everyone. She is slender with dyed hair that is often put into braids.

Conflict

This paper mainly focuses on Man vs. Society where the conflict occurs when the main character is fighting against the society with a different mindset, such as bullying (Pradnyaningsih et al., 2022). In this discussion, the people around the protagonists represent the society in conflict with these attractive women. This type of conflict is a major occurrence in the stories since the main discussion of this study is where the protagonists challenge the societal opinion and concept about beauty penalty. This can be seen particularly in “The Black Mirror” where Maddy strives to correct the false perception about how her attractiveness equals a smooth life. In addition, it can also be seen in “The Odd One Out” as Iris confronts society's expectations that attractive individuals excel in their work by relying on their looks. She proves that she is skilled as she is beautiful.

CONCLUSION

The first purpose of this short story collection is to explore the factors that play a part in triggering the beauty penalty to occur. Based on the theoretical framework, we show that perceived entitlement and people’s unmet expectations towards attractive women trigger the beauty penalty phenomenon. In "The Black Mirror," Maddy's complaints are dismissed because her appearance leads others to perceive her as one without struggles. This is evident in her interactions with her mom and her best friend. In “The Swan and The Lion’s Den”, Catalina faces a beauty penalty because of others’ perception of how an attractive woman should be in terms of personality. When she does not act according to their perception, she is perceived as vain.

In “Gilded Chains”, Rebecca faces a beauty penalty for failing to meet her new social circle’s expectations of how an attractive person should be. Their comments suggest that someone as attractive as her, with her work experience, should excel in social tasks like arranging social dinner. In “The Odd One Out”, Iris’ career advancement at Cavado is hindered because companies focus on her looks rather than her skills. Her former head of department dismisses her suggestions, expecting her to succeed based on her appearance alone. Thus, perceived entitlement and unmet expectations trigger the beauty penalty phenomenon.

In designing this short story collection, we also portray the beauty penalty's impactful forms across four areas: emotional, mental, social, and physical. In "The Black Mirror," Maddy's (who is emotionally invalidated) desire to leave modeling clashes with her surroundings' praise, highlighting the emotional toll. Similarly, Catalina in "The Swan and The Lion's Den" experiences heightened anxiety (as a form of the mental impact) due to pressure based on her looks, hindering her work relationships.

"Gilded Chains" explores the social penalty of beauty through Rebecca. She is shunned for not living up to expectations which can be seen through Felicia's silence and the post-dinner insults. In "The Odd One Out," Iris suffers from the physical form of the penalty. To be valued for her competence, she downplays her looks as she tones down her appearance at her new company.

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