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Jacob Kaplan

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut

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Eyeglasses as a Social Status Symbol

Jacob Kaplan

At their most basic, eyeglasses serve as a medical treatment for visual impairment. However, glasses are a highly visible symbol of social status and capital. Thus, while glasses serve to enhance eyesight, they also provide insight into an individual's social, political, and economic status. Historically, glasses have carried a negative connotation, as they were closely associated with impairment, and wearers were perceived as frail and dependent, needing correction (dos Santos et. al, 2022; Munro et. al, 2016). But, as eyeglasses were embraced within a capitalist, elitist society, they evolved into a symbol of intelligence and wealth. Because of this, eyeglasses developed an identity outside of their corrective capacity, and as such, glasses (or the impairment they historically symbolized) cannot supersede preexisting social hierarchies. Instead, eyeglasses function as a reflection of one's social status, calcifying power and position, or cementing a lack of them.

Although visual impairment may be an invisible illness, its treatment is not; those suffering must display their condition or confront the costs of uncorrected vision in daily life. This treatment has carried severe social consequences, as eyeglasses were repeatedly described as a “‘badge of infirmity’ or ‘badge of disgrace,’” (Almond, 2021). However, this changed with the development of ‘invisible’ rimless glasses, serving as an initial attempt to hide visual impairment (Almond, 2021). These attempts continue today, as contact lenses become increasingly popular. Whereas those suffering from ‘invisible’ illnesses such as chronic pain are constantly forced to assert the presence of their illness in an invalidating society, those with visual impairments often strive to conceal their condition as much as possible (Ganesh, and Lazar, 2021; Swartz et. al, 2018). However, this concealment is only available to those of status,

who already experience the social benefits of eyeglasses, a trend discussed throughout this paper (Swanson, 2012).

Recently, eyeglasses have functioned as a symbol of social status, due to their association with intelligence and wealth. Eyeglasses are an inherent symbol of affluence. The simple act of wearing glasses demonstrates that one can afford preventative eye care, as well as the cost of the devices themselves. This is particularly true for youth; since their prescription can change regularly, eyeglasses symbolize an ability to afford that repeated expense. The intuitive association between glasses and wealth is supported by research concluding that financial costs are the primary barrier to obtaining ophthalmologic care or spectacles (Schneider et. al, 2010). As such, those who cannot access eye care are more likely to be of low socioeconomic status. These individuals cannot afford to leave work, cannot obtain childcare, or live in areas where optical services are inaccessible (Schneider et. al, 2010). They are often people of color, as racial/ethnic minorities are more likely to avoid healthcare usage due to discrimination they face within the medical system (Schneider et. al, 2010.) Again, those already lacking in social capital are unable to access the benefits of eyeglasses, further solidifying existing hierarchies of race and class.

While individuals lacking in social capital are unable to access the status associated with glasses, those with capital use eyeglasses to elevate themselves further. As some of the stigma surrounding glasses faded, visual aids began to function as emblems of “status, fashion, and intelligence” (Almond, 2021). The mainstream acceptance of eyeglasses as status symbols caused a subsequent proliferation in advertisements. Corrective eyewear designs became increasingly elaborate, and precious materials such as tortoiseshell began to be incorporated into visual aids (Almond, 2021). Gold, as well as silver, became quite popular in eyeglasses and

served “as a bridge between fashion and science” (Hughes, 2019). Suddenly, those with spectacles, unlike those with other illnesses, could minimize their impairments through superfluous displays of wealth. Ostentatious eyeglasses served as a means for the wealthy to assert their status as members of polite society, operating as symbols rather than true medical treatments. In fact, some individuals wore eyeglasses purely for aesthetic reasons and their symbolic impact (Almond, 2021). This trend continues today as blue-light glasses have become popular among young adults, not for any medical benefit they provide but rather due to their representation of intelligence and status (Zahra et. al, 2021). However, the purposeful use of glasses as a status symbol is again primarily accessible to those of means, and thus crystallizes social stratification.

The symbolism of eyeglasses is not shared equally amongst all groups. Children who wear eyeglasses do not seem to benefit from a resultant rise in social status. On the contrary, most suffer from the negative connotations of their visual impairment and subsequent need for corrective eyewear. Youth with visual impairments have worsened behavioral development, scholastic performance, and overall well-being (Morjaria et. al, 2019). As early as age four, children begin to believe societal stereotypes about eyeglasses and become disparaging towards others with glasses (Han et. al, 2006). In fact, bullying and concern with one’s appearance are so great that they significantly decrease eyeglass compliance among youth (Sabharwal et. al, 2021; Jellesma, 2013). Broadly, children utilizing corrective eyewear have been found to have a reduced quality of life compared to ‘normal’ controls (Leske et. al, 2020). Society at large tends to view children with glasses more negatively, often expressing pity. This may be because very young children with visual impairments are more likely to also have other physical developmental issues. Thus, eyeglasses are symbolic of other disvalued traits, in this case, most

physical disabilities (Han et. al, 2006). Whereas glasses may serve as a prominent symbol of wealth and education in adults, in children, they function as a symbol of the fragility of life. This phenomenon is similar to that described in *The Body Silent*, where the author explains how individuals with paralysis are a “living reminder of the frailty of the human body” (Murphy, 2001, p. 229). These perceptions of children with eyeglasses have critical long-term consequences. Children with visual impairments are often bullied by their peers and internalize the notion that eyeglasses imply a character flaw. Later in life, adults with glasses are more likely to view themselves as less attractive, reflecting the adversity they face in their youth (Jellesma, 2013). Lastly, it is important to note that the social costs of eyeglasses once again fall upon lines of race and class, as the impacts are disproportionately observed among poor, minority youth (Sabharwal et. al, 2021).

Unlike children, adult men, who already possess the highest amounts of social capital due to their identity, are most likely to benefit from the positive status associated with eyeglasses. Here, men’s initial social status serves as a protective factor against the stigma of glasses. Men with glasses are regularly described as more truthful, hardworking, and dependable than those without glasses (Guéguen, 2015). Moreover, men who wear eyeglasses are consistently perceived as more intelligent, which can easily be seen throughout popular media. This perception of increased intelligence corresponds to an image of increased societal status. Eyeglasses are positively correlated with intellect and with membership in a more powerful socio-professional group, such as corporate executives, medical practitioners, or university professors (Guéguen, 2015). Correlations between glasses and social position extend back centuries, as physicians and religious leaders in Victorian England commonly wore spectacles (Almond, 2021). These stereotypes could have self-reinforcing effects: men with glasses are

thought to be more intelligent and industrious and are thus more likely to receive better academic and occupational opportunities. These increased opportunities lead to better socioeconomic standing, and in turn reinforce the belief that those with eyeglasses are somehow innately superior in terms of personal character (Guéguen, 2015).

While some perceive eyeglass wearers as successful and clever, not every perception is a positive one. Males with glasses are regularly determined to be more submissive and less assertive than those without. Eyeglasses are also associated with less sociality and attractiveness among men (Guéguen, 2015). Importantly, glasses have a strong feminizing effect on men. This effect has historical roots, with images as early as 1871 mocking the femininity of men wearing eyeglasses. Because of these biases against male effeminacy, men had to follow strict social guidelines concerning glasses-wearing. This included avoiding wearing eyeglasses as an accessory, a common act among women. (Almond, 2021). However, for any stigma that men with glasses may face, men are more likely to be targets of a positive glasses effect altogether than women.

As implied above, women are regularly afforded a mixed response with respect to the use of eyeglasses. Indeed, women with corrective eyewear may experience the aforementioned perceptions of heightened trustworthiness, intelligence, and dependability just as their male counterparts do (Leder, 2011; Horgan et. al, 2004). However, females more strongly experience the negative social effects of glasses, especially the perception of diminished attractiveness (Okamura, 2018). This is likely due to societal beliefs about appropriate character traits for women to embody, and fear, anger, and retaliation against women who are in positions of power and intelligence. For instance, female characters with glasses were often used as a satirical symbol, mocking women who demanded equal rights in the political or academic spheres

(Almond, 2021). Moreover, just as women often experience more rigid societal expectations than men concerning their clothing and other external choices, women face constraints concerning their wearing of eyeglasses. Historically, eyeglasses were only considered appropriately used by women as a fashion accessory, rather than an effective medical device (Almond, 2021). Whereas men could utilize glasses for their functionality, women could solely use them for their appearance. Glasses thus served as a symbol of status, cementing existing social hierarchies. Only those already in positions of socioeconomic power (wealthy, white men) could truly capitalize upon the benefits of eyeglasses use. Women, attempting to grasp onto this symbol of social status, were instead relegated to a position of inferiority.

The meaning of corrective eyewear as a symbol of social status has varied widely across time and space. Historically, eyeglasses were viewed as a symbol of frailty and associated with personal failure. Over time, and with the assistance of marketing and consumerism driven by capitalism, they became an increasingly prominent mark of wealth and intelligence. However, the symbolic meanings of glasses are not distributed equally among all. Children, previously perceived as a vulnerable group, are viewed as even more feeble when wearing eyeglasses, serving as a reminder of the frailty of human life. Men, who already occupy a dominant position within the social hierarchy, are best able to exploit the benefits of glasses as symbols of industriousness, education, and power. Women with glasses experience some of those benefits, but also experience negative perceptions, and retain their diminished status within society. Thus, while initially glasses may be thought of as a symbol of democratization, granting access to knowledge for all, they are not. Eyeglasses only function to preserve existing hierarchies of socioeconomic status. Through their design and use, glasses continue to divide individuals

among lines of age, gender, and class. Although they may appear to be simple assistive medical devices, eyeglasses are truly anything but.

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