

Income inequality fuels status anxiety and sexualisation, research shows

November 25 2019



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Women's appearance enhancement is driven partly by status anxiety and income inequality, according to new research.

Researchers at the universities of Melbourne and New South Wales have examined the relationship between [income inequality](#), status anxiety and sexualisation of [women](#).

Using a role-playing experiment, more than 300 people from 38 countries participated in a hypothetical society online where each version matched one of the many economies of the world today.

Participants were asked to indicate how anxious they were about [social status](#) in their respective society and then chose an outfit to wear for their first night out. Options ranged from least to most revealing.

Researchers found that women assigned to economically unequal societies chose more revealing, sexy outfits for their first night, and they did so because they were anxious about their social status.

By making women worry about social climbing, research shows that economically unequal societies incentivized women to use their attractiveness to get ahead.

University of Melbourne gender relations expert Khandis Blake said results show that for some women, being the fairest of them all can be a smart strategy to climb the social and economic hierarchy.

"Although we might like to pretend in today's environment that beauty doesn't matter anymore, research and our day-to-day experiences say otherwise," Dr. Blake said.

"Our results favour a view of women as strategic agents, using the tools available to them to climb the [social hierarchy](#) in specific socio-economic environments.

"When we see women in these outfits, pouting into their phone cameras

or preening over their appearance, we might think it's just narcissism. But things are more complex. It's really about women responding to incentives in their environment, given the state of their economy."

As [economic inequality](#) continues to grow, researchers say so too will women's preoccupation with their [physical appearance](#), and the [mental health issues](#) that tie in with this.

"Beauty is one way women can out-do others and try to maximize their lot in life, but it's important to remember that beauty has a shelf-life and obsessing over your appearance comes with other risks and challenges."

More information: Khandis R. Blake et al., "Status anxiety mediates the positive relationship between income inequality and sexualization," *PNAS* (2019). www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1909806116

Provided by University of Melbourne

Citation: Income inequality fuels status anxiety and sexualisation, research shows (2019, November 25) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-11-income-inequality-fuels-status-anxiety.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.