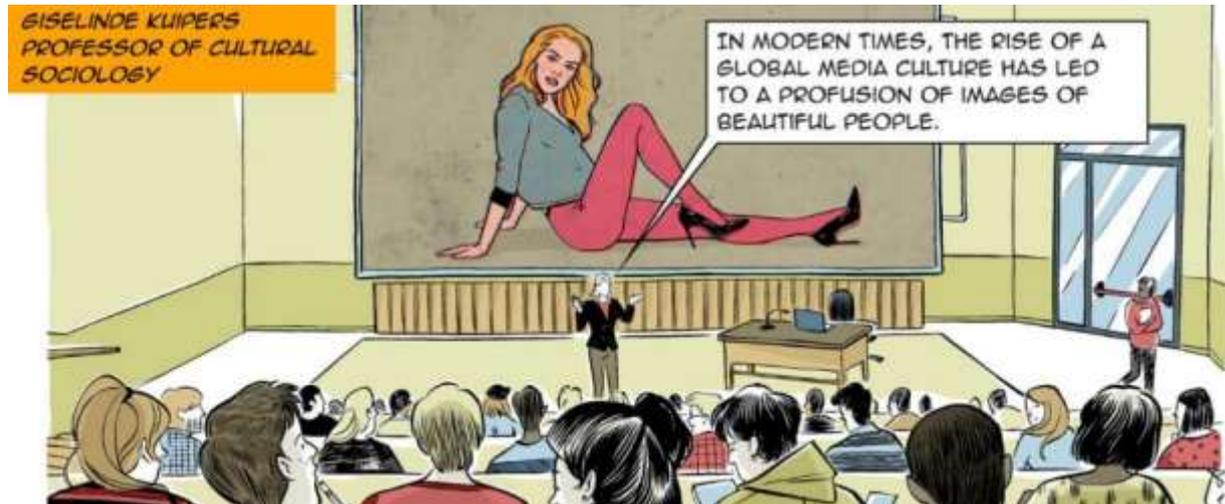# Why fashion models don't smile

How are beauty ideals shaped sociologically?

18 Oct 2016 / Marjolein Lammerts van Bueren

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Beauty. What is it that makes something beautiful? What makes something ugly? What's the standard and who actually decides? And what is the role of the fashion industry in all of this? On October 11, the ERCcOMICS team and the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of Cultural and Behavioural Science presented the results of the first comparative [sociological study of beauty standards](). Under the title, 'On beauty: How fashion creates beauty standards and vice versa', the research shone a light on topics including the modelling industry, fashion photos and cultural capital.

Giselinde Kuipers opened the evening. "Out of everyone sitting here in the audience, I only see six men. That's interesting." As a professor of cultural sociology at UvA, Kuipers led the work group that researched how beauty ideals are shaped sociologically. "The research focused particularly on the standards in the modelling industry, not because we believe that this is where beauty standards are created, but because this industry is exclusively focused on creating images of beautiful people. This industry is all about beauty," said Kuipers. The research eventually led her and her doctoral students, via a range of fashion professionals, models and fashion

photographers in the industry, to the question: what does the average person think about standards of beauty?

1/5

"Out of everyone sitting here in the audience, I only see six men. That's interesting," said Giselinde Kuipers. © Massimo Colella

Fieldwork in the world of fashion

As the first speaker of the evening, Sylvia Holla, who received her PhD from UvA, reported on her ethnographic study of the world of fashion in Amsterdam, Paris, and Warsaw. For her research, Holla tried to ascertain how objectification works and how models experience it. Objectification is the process by which a person is viewed purely as an object. Her question was whether, nowadays, objectification is decreasing as models share more of their lives and personalities on social media channels like Instagram.

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Sylvia Holla shares her research, 'A slim profession makes heavy demands" The aesthetic labor and lifestyles of M/V fashion models'. © Massimo Colella

After reviewing the literature, making observations, conducting interviews and taking part in a fashion show herself, Holla concluded that the personality of the model is often seen as a distraction. It detracts from the aesthetic aspects that are shaped by the bookers, photographers and makeup artists, among others. Models act as chameleons, changing with each new client. "The shape is more important than the person themselves," said Holla. But it's not just other people in the industry who are objectifying models, it's the models themselves. How do they feel about it? "That depends on the situation. In general, models don't like being presented as objectives, particularly not during castings. In contrast, walking in fashion shows is often seen as something fun, and when a model is actively and creatively involved in the 'creation of beauty', objectification is experienced as positive."

It seems that the objectification of models has begun to recede as Instagram has made its rise, but Holla is conflicted about that idea. "In my opinion, it's still a disguised form of objectification under the guise of subjectification. The way models present themselves on these platforms is extremely specific and conveys a desired image. And the most important part of that is that it's sellable. It's the objectification of subjectivity itself, and that's an interesting subject for follow up research."

Why do models never smile?

Fashion photography has been criticised by both science and society for creating unrealistic images. The models are too white, too thin, too idealised, too sexualised, in short, too objectified. In the past, she herself worked as an editor and producer for the fashion magazine, L'Officiel, but this evening, Elise van der Laan is here to talk about her research into fashion photography, a subject on which little research has yet been done.

"High fashion models don't smile because they're high fashion models"

In June 2015, Van der Laan was the first in the research work group to complete her PhD with the dissertation, 'Why fashion models don't smile: 30 years of fashion images'. After going through 13,353 images from Dutch, French, English and Italian high and low fashion magazines from 1982 to 2011, she discovered that, over the years, high fashion models have become interpreters of the empty, passive look. They're often placed in unnatural poses in abstract settings and rarely smile. You begin to notice the characteristic open mouth, blank or staring look and the emphasis that bare legs and exposed cleavage places on the body. It's a trend that Van der Laan has dubbed stylised withdrawal. And why do models never smile? "It's how they differentiate themselves from other people or commercial models we might see, for instance, in the IKEA catalogue. High fashion models don't smile because they're high fashion models," said Van der Laan.

The open mouth and hollow look of a model. Book cover of Van der Laan's study, Why fashion models don't smile: 30 years of fashion images. © Instagram Elise van der Laan

The codification of beauty

Italian researcher Elisa A.G. Arfini worked from Rome as an analyst studying fashion images. She talked about her experiences of visual analysis. How do you approach a fashion photo from a scientific perspective? What should you pay attention to and what are the details? "All of the images we researched were converted into numbers and broken up into smaller pieces or codes. We worked on tablets where a sort of survey had to be filled in about every fashion image that we found in the magazine, questions like, where's is the light coming from? How sharp is the photo? And questions about body characteristics, makeup and facial

proportions. In doing so, we tried to objectify what we were seeing," said Arfini.

"Beauty is one of the most powerful ways we have of ranking and judging others. "

Beauty and social inequality

[Giselinde Kuipers](#) closed the evening with her comparative study, 'Beauty and social inequality'. The research was conducted in the Netherlands, England, France, Italy and Poland. With her study, she showed that beauty is a source of power and influence. Not everyone lives up to the standard of prevailing beauty ideals, so the power isn't distributed equally.


4/5
Giselinde Kuipers used photos to examine how people's perception of the image of a beautiful body in general differs in comparison with the image of a model, particularly a young, sleek, slim one. © Massimo Colella

"Beauty is one of the most powerful ways of ranking and judging others," explained Kuipers. How are fashion images seen? How does the industry influence what people think is beautiful or ugly? The answers formed a complex conclusion. Firstly, Kuipers said, "beauty is strongly associated

with women, which is probably why there are so many more women than men in this room. And this beauty is often 'driven' by men." Secondly, Kuipers explained that the idea of a beautiful body in general differs with that of a model: young, sleek and slim. In the case of faces, tastes tended to vary – the Libelle look, the Vogue look, the porno look or facial types that fell outside these 'model clusters'. Kuipers noticed an imbalance in the perception of beauty in faces depending on the background and social position of the viewer. "Young, urban, highly educated viewers were attracted to less typical faces. In that respect, the so-called 'good taste' of the highly educated also shaped a kind of inequality in terms of the perception of beauty."
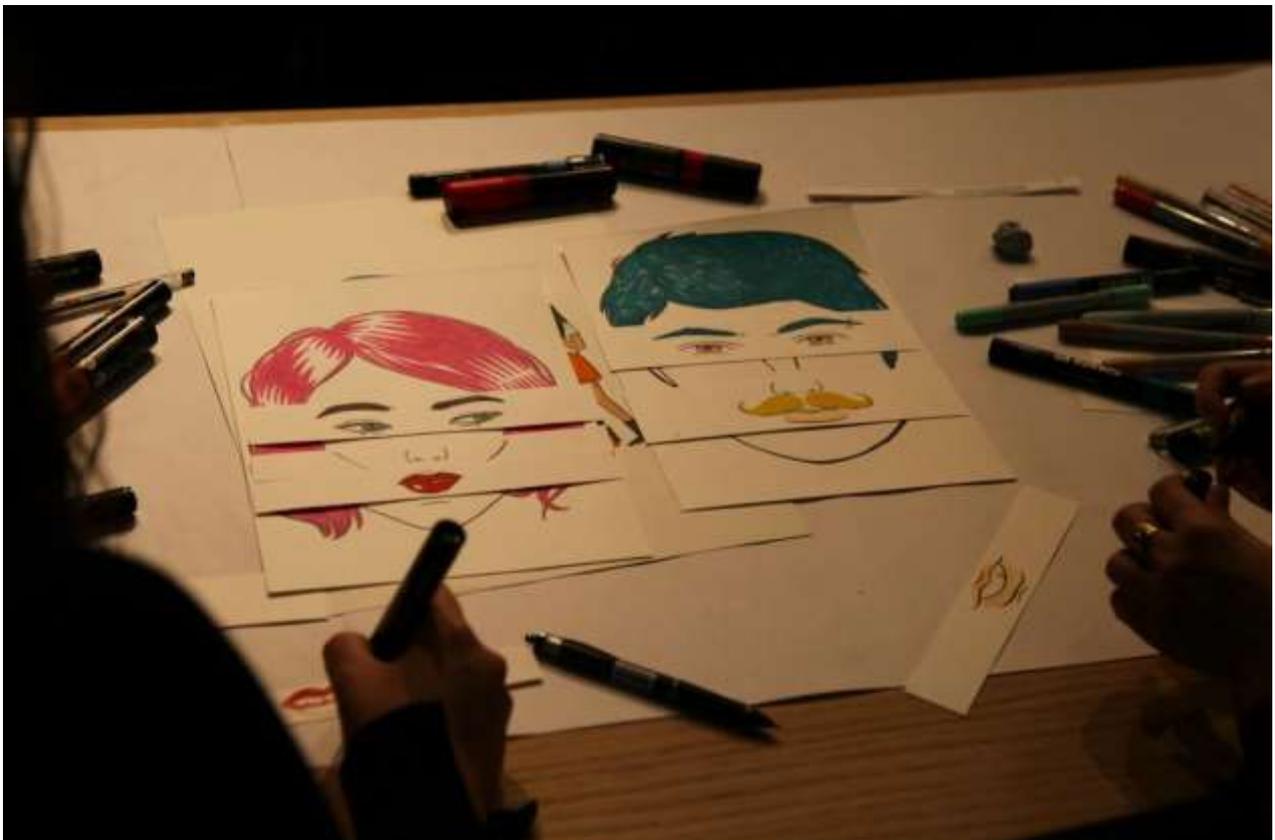
Cartoons by Francesca Protopapa and Eleonora Antonioni. © Massimo Colella

Research in cartoon form

This year, the research also gained support from ERCcOMICS, a creative project run by UPMC (Université Pierre et Marie Curie) in partnership with La Bande Destinée a communication agency, that explores European science by means of powerful visual storytelling." The evening was captured in cartoon form by cartoonists Francesca Protopapa and Eleonora

Antonioni. Want to get the full story? Take a look at the [online cartoons](#) at erccomics.com.