

Notion of Beauty Among Women and Their Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT

“In today’s world, while women have greater power, legal recognition, professional success, exposure, and so on, young girls and women are subjected to a totally different sort of social control, which may be just as restricting as the classic image of homemaker and wife.. It’s the beauty myth, an obsession with physical perfection which traps the modern woman in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness and self-hatred as she tries to fulfil society’s impossible definition of the flawless beauty” (Wolf, 2013). The notion is such that beauty is not a simple and unitary cognitive continuum but rather a complex multi-dimensional construct. There is more to beauty than a simple good-bad judgement of attractiveness. The cultural gatekeepers have a major influence on the definition of attractiveness, which in turn helps to form the landscape of beauty (Solomon et al., 1992). Thus, this article intends to explore the various patriarchal manifestations behind the close nexus of patriarchy and capitalism which aggravate the oppression of women and affect their health and psyche by defining beauty standards for them.

Keywords: Social Control, Beauty Myth, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Self-Consciousness, Cultural Gatekeepers

INTRODUCTION

Gorgeous skin and hair, a perfect body is everybody’s dream and a host of realistic changes in our lifestyle are attained to get that. We start envying women blessed with porcelain skin and are always in awe of celebrities

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How to Cite: Bhattacharya, B. (2025). Notion of beauty among women and their everyday life. *Social Work Chronicle*, 14(1), 87-102.

who manage to grab the spotlight. Whether it is hitting the gym, a diet overhaul that includes more greens, or quitting a bad habit, people come up with resolutions aplenty. While career, health and relationships occupy the top slots in most people's resolution list, but there is a great investment made to some essential beauty resolutions that make us look and feel good inside out. Most women have been trapped in the 'beauty' net. Concerns about one's looks, hair, clothes, body and other aspects seem to be unavoidable, regardless of one's level of freedom, sophistication and financial independence.

To explore different aspects surrounding the politics behind green consumption through the beauty lens, in-depth interviews were conducted among 25 respondents out of which 15 are middle class consumers, 2 upper class consumers, 3 lower class consumers, 2 female beauticians, 1 male beautician and 2 male shopkeepers. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the choice-making decisions towards a 'beautiful' lifestyle, a snowball sampling procedure was opted for the recruitment of respondents.

There are different disciplinary scripts offered by the sites such as beauty parlours and salons which creates and sustains the quest to be beautiful. Women visit various salons, spas, image improvement centres and beauty clinics to achieve their beauty standards, which include anything from painless Brazilian waxing and laser hair removal to botox, exotic body wraps and total slimming treatments (James, 2007, p. xx). The mushrooming parlours and salons in every street itself says that how the beauty business is booming. This of course translates into more jobs for lower class women and provides them with better prospects. Beauty parlour training is considered to be one of the key means of transforming women into self-confident, earning, empowered women especially those from less privileged backgrounds (Gimlin, 2002, p. xx).

The growth of the beauty industry has resulted in the institutionalisation of beauty. These institutions include gyms, skin clinics and cosmetic centres, not to mention body sculptors, beauty consultants and nail artists. Everyone, especially the middle class in order to look perfect are willing to spend money and time and are betting to deliver in themselves what their genes have failed to.

In consumer culture, the inner beauty or its health is maintained to make the outer body appear beautiful. The body is an 'unfinished project' in a consumer culture, to be beautified through consumption but how it is to done bears imprints of class on the body. Thus, the social problem here is the cultural construction of beauty standards which are best portrayed

through ads, films, TV, magazines and the recent beauty blogs that have burst forth on the worldwide web. These ads, blogs, etc. promote the idea that beauty is an essential component of femininity and encourage women to take beauty as a serious thing to be achieved to satisfy oneself and also for the male gaze.

In the book ‘The Beauty and the myth’, the feminist author Naomi Wolf (2015) argues that beauty is the last best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. Even today, the first word, we choose most times to describe a woman has something to do with the way she looks. We ignore all the other qualities of a woman because we have been taught time and again that for a woman, everything else is secondary in the face of beauty. Wolf thus uses the phrase “Cultural Conspiracy” wherein women who feel old and ugly will buy things they do not need. Even those who create awareness and believe that it is okay not to conform to those beauty standards seem to be mere lip service (Wolf, 2015).

The difficulty with believing that beauty is defined by a set of standards is that we frequently apply them to our own lives, leading to insecurity and mental suffering. The beauty industries, fashion magazines, big firms that operate in the beauty market, peg their stock prices based on our insecurities. The technique of these enterprises is to invent a problem that didn’t exist until they pointed it out, offer a miraculous remedy while claiming to be repairing life itself. These miracle solution ranges from creams that keep nails soft to vaginal whitening creams.

The beauty standards, however, are not only affecting the Asian countries but are very much sound in European countries as well. People in Europe spend money on getting spray on tans or buying plane tickets to the beach to actually get that bronze glow that the Indian parlours warn us against (Kuipers, 2022).

In a culture that thrives on self-doubt, admiring oneself is a radical act. The advertising world not only feeds and profits on insecurities but adds to them by setting unrealistic beauty ideals to which we must conform or at least die trying.

Research Questions

This article aims to answer the following research questions:

- How is beauty and the ongoing pressure of achieving beauty standards linked to larger patriarchal structure?
- Is the consumer choices in beautifying themselves bears imprints of class on their body?

- Can beauty unleash violence upon women?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Beauty and the Influence of Patriarchy

The primary concept of “The Beauty Myth” (Wolf, 1990) is that when women gained authority in other socioeconomic arenas, they were required to comply with strict physical beauty standards. This standard of beauty, according to Wolf, has taken over the role of social coercion that was formerly left to myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity and passivity, all of which were employed to keep women powerless. “The thin, youthful model superseded the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood”, according to the author. The beauty myth propagates the idea that there is an objective measure of beauty, that women must seek to embody it and that men must desire such women. Naomi Wolf contends that the beauty myth is really not about women, it is about men’s institutions and power. Aside from psychologically weakening women, the beauty myth fuels a multibillion-dollar cosmetics business and prevents women from climbing too high in the job by providing a loophole around anti-discrimination legislation. According to Wolf, attractiveness is the final great belief system for maintaining masculine authority.

Somehow people have been flogged by the idea that to be beautiful we have to look a certain way: thin, youthful, smooth skinned, small nosed, silky haired, etc. Wolf uses the phrase “cultural conspiracy”, wherein women who feel ugly and old will buy things they do not need. Thus, these beauty industries are so powerful that they have a vested interest in making people feel ugly and old too. Women’s magazines can be held majorly accountable in the selling of the beauty myth. These periodicals or magazines sell women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy. There lies the power of consumer culture.

It’s the beauty myth: an obsession with physical perfection which traps the modern woman in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness and self-hatred as she tries to fulfil society’s impossible definition of “the flawless beauty”. For instance, the Chinese practice of foot binding among women appears violent to outsiders. By tightly swaddling the foot of girls, starting at about 5 or 6 years of age, ligaments and tendons were stretched and displaced until the sole of the foot was folded with the four lesser toes

under the big toe; also the heel and toes were forced down and together creating a high tightly arched instep. This practice involves the pain in the process and deformity that debilitates women. This cultural practice poses its concerns with the mutilation of the natural body and how it is beauty that is imposed upon women and it is beauty which in turn unleashes violence upon women.

In Chinese society, the bound feet were an enhancement to a woman's beauty and a woman with perfect lotus feet was likely to make a more prestigious marriage. Bound feet were considered to be intensely erotic and thus more desirable to men. Some men preferred never to see women's bound feet, so they were always concealed within tiny "lotus shoes" and wrappings. However, this process of foot binding was not considered as a mutilation of the natural body rather seen as a form of bodily embellishment that was seen as a necessary part of being feminine as well as being civilised.

Women rendered themselves subordinate by keeping their small tied feet, as doing so would entail women being confined to their homes. Women made shoes for themselves and their friends, in a world of Confucian domesticity where men plough, women weave (Ko, 2001).

Feminine Beauty Ideal in Fairy Tale

The beauty ideal has diminished, intensified or remained stable over time in children's literature (children's fairy tales). The prevalence of the feminine beauty ideal can be found in children's tales and these tales project subtle but powerful messages surrounding beauty.

There are cultural associations associated with beauty and some general questions are raised such as "Is there a clear link between beauty and goodness", "Are there instances where danger or harm is associated with beauty or desirability?" It has been discovered that women's beauty is emphasised in stories more than men's attractiveness, and that beauty is more important for younger women than for older women. What's noteworthy is how women's attractiveness is characterised in stories with younger women, who are frequently labelled as "fairest". These produce certain discourse in relationship to beauty. Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness and between ugliness and evil. For instance in the tale Mother Holle, it shows that it is beauty which is often rewarded and lack of beauty is punished. Cinderella is another classic example which connotes goodness and industriousness with beauty and how these beautiful women are rewarded for their hard work. Also in the White

Bride and The Black Bride, the mother and daughter are ‘cursed’ with blackness and ugliness. In this way, beauty becomes associated not only with goodness but also with whiteness and economic privilege (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003).

There are tales in which danger or harm is associated with physical attractiveness. In the tale All Fur, the princess who was beautiful that was forced to run away from the castle because her own father fell in love and said to his councillors that he wanted to marry his own daughter.

There are also stories that link between beauty and jealousy. For instance, stories where murderous actions are taken by the step-mother which remind readers of the symbolic lengths some women go to acquire or maintain beauty.

The emphasis on feminine beauty ideal operates as a normative social control for girls and women. Furthermore, the emphasis on beauty has remained strong seemingly has increased during a period of time when women have achieved greater economic and legal status (Seidman & Alexander, 2001).

Thus, one would argue there is glorification of feminine beauty which redirect girl’s and women’s attention to their looks. Through the proliferation of fairy tales in the media, girls and boys are taught specific messages concerning the importance of women’s bodies and women’s attractiveness.

Beauty Parlours, Magazines and Transformation of Self

There exist certain disciplinary power sites such as beauty parlours and salons which they impose certain practices on women. These sites of fashion have the potential to serve as spaces in which pleasure and resistance coincide with oppression.

The disciplinary power of beauty culture inscribes femininity in the female body. Women’s bodies are poked and prodded, shaved and sprayed, manipulated into some degrees of submission to a set of ideas that defines beauty as always elusive, always demanding further manipulation, more attention and more visits (Bartky, 2012).

The representational beauty parlour gives women with female-generated concepts of beauty and self-esteem, as well as a space to empower oneself for the hardships that come with living in a patriarchal, class-based and racist environment. It seems unlikely, however when the representation meets the real, beauty culture or beauty parlours provide

sufficient evidence of essentialist or even hard-won female solidarity (Scanlon, 2007).

Cultural Gatekeepers and the Construction of ‘Beauty’

People distinguish multiple types of physical attractiveness; Specific types of physical attractiveness are seen as more or less suitable (i.e. better matching) for certain products when paired in advertisements. Interestingly, physical attractiveness appears not to be a simple and unitary cognitive continuum but rather a complex multi-dimensional construct. There’s more to beauty than a simple good/bad attractiveness assessment (Solomon et al., 1992).

More specifically, people distinguish between multiple types of good looks (for example: cute, elegant and sexy) and that in advertising, certain beauty ideals are appropriately paired with specific products than with others. Thus, the cultural gatekeepers play an important role in creating media messages and indirectly teach members of the general public how to think about physical attractiveness.

There seems to be correspondence of content specific looks with particular product and media images in the minds of cultural gatekeepers. Given the current trend towards lifestyle fragmentation, which is demonstrated by the development of finely targeted media, the necessity to more closely equate beauty types with desired product imagery becomes even more essential. The creation of well brand image can be a vital strategic issue both for new products, and for mature products that have attained brand parity and are now seeking competitive advantage primarily through image oriented campaigns (ibid).

People now seem to make fine-grained distinctions among beauty types, rather than merely rendering global judgements of attractiveness or unattractiveness which lays the framework that perceptions of advertising are affected by such subtle yet important distinctions (Khoo, 2019). This product or model matching process is based on categorising the prototypical fashion models as classic beauty or feminine, sensual or erotic, cute, girl next door, sex kitten and trendy.

For example, models who work at car shows have varying ‘looks’ as communicated by different automakers (Solomon et al., 1992). These matches are nonetheless based largely on intuition and such choice of matches may be quite adept at times and they also may be erroneous. A ‘mismatch’ may occur, for example, when a cute woman fails to convey an appropriately sophisticated image.

Therefore, these cultural gatekeepers (beauty editors, media people) have a huge impact in laying out the general conception of what is beauty, and what is attractiveness among the common masses.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology applied was qualitative in nature which was considered to be more applicable and suited to an exploratory paper like this. A snowball sampling procedure was used in the recruitment of respondents comprising both men and women. Snowball sampling was used because most of the respondents didn't want to disclose their beauty secrets and beauty regimens for the fear of being judged. The final sample consisted of 25 participants, drawn from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to reflect a range of beauty consumption experiences. These included:

Fifteen middle-class consumers, whose beauty practices reflected aspirational consumption and negotiation with social norms; two upper-class consumers, often aligned with high-end beauty culture and professionalised aesthetics; three lower-class consumers, whose narratives revealed more resource-constrained and improvisational approaches to beauty; two female beauticians and one male beautician, offering insider perspectives from the beauty service industry; two male shopkeepers, who provided insight into the supply, demand and marketing of beauty products in local markets.

The inclusion of these varied voices helped uncover both individual and structural dimensions of beauty practices, thereby ensuring triangulation in perspectives.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed participants the flexibility to narrate their experiences in their own terms while still aligning with the thematic concerns of the research. Interviews were conducted in comfortable, familiar settings chosen by the respondents themselves to facilitate openness and reduce response bias. Each session lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were maintained throughout to document non-verbal cues and contextual factors influencing the interaction.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts using an inductive coding process. Patterns were identified across the dataset, with particular attention paid to the emergence of recurring themes, contradictions and contextual complexities. Codes were grouped under broader categories, and relationships between themes were mapped to understand how social class, gender identity, occupational background, and cultural beliefs intersected in shaping beauty consumption.

The final themes not only captured the diverse motivations behind beauty practices, but also illuminated the hidden anxieties, cultural performances and socio-economic boundaries within which these practices are located.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of my research are as follows:

Beauty Comes with a Baggage of Patriarchal Manifestations

Beauty is something that women have been bound by and it appears that the beauty net traps women and makes it difficult for them to ignore on how they look or present themselves in everyday life. The beauty net not only encircles women but also men who feel pressurised to look more handsome and manly. But not to deny the fact that most of my male respondents feel that beauty is not their concern and feel that beauty regimes are more feminine issues. There are instances that show even if men want to look after their skin and are concerned about how they look, they are subjected to many criticisms, ragging, bullying, etc. Beauty thus, becomes an inescapable form of power that dominates women as well as men in an invisible fashion.

The Role of Social Media in Reinforcing Patriarchal Notions

Different social networking sites like Facebook, Pinterest comes up with articles on a regular basis featuring say for instance “What Men Find Beautiful in a Woman – 7 Traits – Dating Advice Guru” which reinforces the idea that women are valued simply for their beauty and that too beauty

as defined by the male gaze. Women are forced to believe that it is their beauty which will take them to a good lifestyle. Advertisements like that of Fair & Lovely further reiterates the fact that women empowerment in a job for instance comes by being fair and beautiful. The conception of beauty however, is not a simple good or bad judgement of attractiveness. There are distinctions made on different types of physical attractiveness. Multiple types of good looks that people want to follow depending on their preferences or the specific occasions to which they are attending it shows the variegated types of cultural gatekeepers which exist simultaneously in the beauty industry. Depending on the occasion, people wear makeup for different looks like cute, elegant, messy or casual, trendy, sensual, etc. Apart from this, the beauty parlours also provide women with female generated notions of beauty and provide directives that sustain throughout their lives. Some responses state that on one hand, beauty boosts self-confidence but at the same time it eventually unleashes violence on women.

One of the respondent named Suranjana Chakraborty, aged 22 who is a great fan of the Veteran actress Sridevi said “I think it is the unnecessary beauty standards which the Bollywood industry sets upon, mostly the actresses, are very violent and oppressive. In trying to conform to such beauty standards, Sridevi ji had to go for 23 surgeries and such constant surgeries weakened her immunity system which finally led to her sad demise”. The other aspect which once again reiterates beauty as violent is the fact that 40% of female respondents share their concern saying its beauty which risks their lives too. A respondent named Reena Chatterjee, aged 21 said “Being extraordinarily beautiful also makes you vulnerable among men especially in countries like India. I have been subject to eve teasing and even groping where men feel women’s bodies can be prodded, poked, groped and even raped. So now whenever I step out I wear loose fitting dresses and wear less make up so that I don’t look that pretty to evoke attention among men”. These responses state that for some beauty boosts self-confidence but at the same time it also unleashes violence on women.

Old Wine in a New Bottle

The newly launched products in the markets have more or less the same age old ingredients but small improvisations are made in order to appear lucrative, or maintain the appearance of novelty. As stated by the culture industry thinkers, that in a capitalist society, pseudo-individuality and pseudo-authenticity reign. Thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer (1947)

go on to say that the culture industry consistently fails to deliver on its promises to its customers.

The culture industry very effectively sells its products among consumers by using the celebrities as its cultural gatekeepers who are themselves victims of the scheme at some point of time. The choices that individuals make are not really their own choices but the choices are manufactured and produced by the larger social structures which operate in order to benefit the rich capitalists.

Patriarchal Notions Justified Through ‘Nature’

On one hand, respondents feel that it is the ‘natural’ which sustains the quest to be beautiful at the same time, what is natural can also be altered with the biotechnological innovations. The notion of beauty not only works at the level of appearances but also relates to behavioural traits like being beautiful is perceived as being good and kind hearted whereas being ugly is taken to being wicked and evil. As one of my respondents share her experience in an interview for the position of receptionist in the Grand Oberoi Hotel recalls saying that the people in the interview panel said that no customer would like to approach me for queries because I was dark skinned and did not have a slim body. Such responses itself reveals how we stereotype people depending on their looks and it automatically results in a pre-conceived notion about their behaviour and mannerisms at large.

Glocalisation Restructures Inequality

Glocalisation is a concept that is designed in order to emphasise that the globalisation of a product or service is more likely to succeed when the product or service ad it’s been tailored to the culture in which it’s being sold. This results in a homogenising tendency wherein not only the geographical but also cultural boundaries become blurred. This translates into what George Ritzer calls ‘McDonaldisation of the World’ (Ritzer, 1996). The market trends suggest that the ‘naturals’ space has turned highly competitive. For instance, Hindustan Unilever relaunched Lever Ayush and this new brand Ayush claims to be formulated with 5000 years of Ayurvedic wisdom to solve modern day beauty problems (Mallick, 2024). Local and indigenous terms rooted in a particular culture are used by different companies to sell their products at the local level. Usage of local terms like *kumkumadi tailum* incorporate a desire to buy the product because such usages involve a reconfiguration of local identity by

integrating with global values. People feel themselves as a part of the larger global market by buying the products which have Indianness to it. Certain coinage of terms like ‘virgin’, ‘anti-oxidants’, ‘sulphate-free’, ‘paraben-free’, etc in the products shape consumer choices. The findings indicate it is the faith in science which has resulted in products in becoming more marketable. The appeal of scientific terms like ‘anti-oxidants’ and cultural notions like ‘virgin’ and ‘gold’ have been systematically employed by the industrial houses to establish control over the market.

However, the products that claim to beautify us come with a huge price which automatically excludes the poor from having access to this process of beautifying culture. This is how the process of glocalisation creates unequal power dynamics.

Ordinary women are more susceptible to patriarchy and capitalism as a result of the pressure to be beautiful, which also damages their sense of self. Women who purchase unnecessary items do so because they feel old and unattractive. There lies the power of the beauty industries which has vested interests in making women feel ugly and uncomfortable in their own selves.

Beauty thus appears to be an inescapable entity or form of power that perpetrates patriarchy and to locate that power would be difficult because it operates through the process of self-surveillance and self-regulation.

The Role of Social Work in Challenging Beauty Standards and Their Structural Roots

Social work, as a profession grounded in the values of dignity, equality and justice, holds an important role in addressing the harm caused by rigid and unrealistic beauty standards especially when those standards are shaped by both patriarchal control and capitalist profit-making.

Social workers can engage with these issues at multiple levels—working not just with individuals, but also with families, communities, institutions and policy frameworks. These include:

Creating Safe Spaces and Encouraging Self-Worth

At the ground level, social workers can support individuals—especially women and adolescents—in building self-acceptance and confidence. This can be done by facilitating group discussions, individual conversations and workshops that challenge dominant beauty ideals and encourage people to see their worth beyond physical appearance. These safe spaces

can allow individuals to speak freely, unpack the pressure they face and realise they are not alone in their experiences. The focus can be made on shifting the narrative from perfection to authenticity, and from judgement to self-compassion.

Supporting Mental Health and Emotional Healing

Beauty-related stress doesn't just stay on the surface- it often runs deep, affecting how people feel about themselves and their place in the world. Social workers trained in mental health can offer counselling and emotional support to those dealing with issues like low self-esteem, anxiety, eating disorders, or body image struggles. This can be done by compassionate, trauma-informed approach that not only addresses symptoms but also acknowledges the root causes—such as constant comparison, media influence and societal judgement.

Speaking Out Against Harmful Practices

Beyond working with individuals, social workers can speak out, write against the unjust beauty standards induced by the industries and practices that profit from people's insecurities. This can be done by collaborating with advocacy groups and women's rights organisations to call for better regulation in advertising, demand more honest representation in media and push for inclusive policies that celebrate diversity in skin colour, body size, age and ability. This form of advocacy can help challenge the systems that create and benefit from the beauty myth.

Recognising Differences and Practicing Inclusivity

A key strength of social work is its emphasis on intersectionality—the understanding that people's experiences are shaped not just by gender, but also by class, caste, race, religion, disability and sexuality. Not everyone is affected by beauty norms in the same way. For instance, a queer person, a Dalit woman, or someone from a rural background might face layered forms of exclusion or judgement. Social workers can ensure that every person's story is heard, validated and supported with care that fits their context.

In essence, social workers can challenge the idea that beauty should define worth by running awareness campaigns, media literacy sessions and open dialogues where young people and families can question what

they see on screens and understand how beauty norms are culturally constructed. This can help individuals unlearn harmful beliefs, advocate for healthier representations and work towards a world where people are valued not for how they look, but for who they are. Through this multi-layered approach spanning care, education and activism, social workers can become both allies and catalysts in the fight against the harmful beauty norms shaped by patriarchy and capitalism.

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