

Is Beauty a Promise to Happiness?

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When I was a little girl around the age of five I was introduced to make-up. I fell head over heels in love with it. Needless to say, my love for make-up hasn't changed and it has expanded to all types of products for skin, hair, and body. I wake up in the morning and I wash my face because there are advertisements that tell me a clean face is beautiful. I brush, and perhaps whiten my teeth because having white teeth is important to being beautiful. When I apply make-up for the day time, I don't use as much eye liner as I would if I were going out at night because there was a magazine post about the correct amount of eyeliner based on certain occasions. Up until college I was unaware that the methods I was taking in order to be what society deemed as beautiful was all because I wanted to be happy with my appearance. It is through my passion for cosmetics that I have come to wonder, why. Why is beauty so important to our culture, specifically women, and why is it framed as "happy"?

Females choose to transform their bodies assuming that the change will lead them to happiness. Achieving, maintaining, and adapting to what the cosmetic industry propagates as beautiful creates a mutual narrative among females in America. The cosmetic industry imposes and enforces a cultural standard that beauty can be a means to happiness, originally influenced by men and men's institutions. As time has gone by, this illusion has become oriented in identity, performance for the other, beauty methods and routines, and myths circulated in American culture. When the cosmetic industry capitalizes on the marketing of transformation through products a never ending search for happiness, a tumultuous cycle in unattainable standards of beauty, and continued male dominance is the result.

The importance of one's appearance, particularly for women, is not a new phenomenon. There is a long history of this trend. The concept dates back to Cleopatra in 69 BC. According to Mark Tungate, author of *Branded Beauty*, it is uncertain that Cleopatra was by definition "beautiful", but she is considered "the earliest

example of an icon of beauty" due to her beauty routine (9). Egyptians "believed that not only cleanliness, but also beauty, was next to godliness", they would participate in methods such as cleansing baths, teeth cleaners, exfoliation with clay and ash, remedies for wrinkles on skin, kohl used for eyeliner, etc.. There is also evidence of a highly profitable beauty trade in Egypt (11). For the Egyptians beauty was an expression of their status, fair skinned elite were often compared to sun-tanned workers. Ancient Greeks hone in on "highly developed body consciousness('s)" of their peoples (12). This created the idea that beauty was "a matter of proportion" (12). Through the Dark Ages and the rise of Christianity we can examine the increase of purity and the pressure to look "virginal (or), forever young" (14). Women paid a painful price of broken bones and collapsed lungs for beauty in the 16th century when corsets were made to accentuate the bust and shrink the waist. In the 19th century the use of skin creams and facial cleansers were advertised to all classes and "by the turn of the century, the fabrication of 'beauty products' was evolving into an industry" (18). Elwood Watson explains in his article *The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One* that, "defining beauty is an elusive, if not impossible, task" he goes on to explain that "as culture evolves, so does the definition of beauty" (Watson 115). Because culture is constantly changing, both the ideals of beauty and the ways to achieve a certain image have transformed. Appearance is a crucial marker of identity, and attaining that certain appearance has remained the ultimate goal because it is thought to lead to happiness.

Our body and appearance is a part of our identity and in American culture, identity is important to being an individual. Yasemin İnceoğlu explains in his article *New Beauty Icons: Freedom or Conviction to the Human Body* that in today's capitalistic society, "the general status of private property is also applied to the body" (13). By viewing the body as private property, humans, more specifically females, can choose to invest in their appearance. The cosmetic industry offers numerous methods for people to think they are bettering themselves by investing in their body as an object. What we choose to consume and how we decide to transform our bodies with cosmetics, whether it be applying make-up, cleanliness routines, cosmetic surgery, or skin care products, etc. reflect the ways

in which we use our bodies as private property. The methods of modification indicate how “the body has become a liberation object in appearance” (13). Mainstream hegemonic ideals set by the cosmetic industry influence females to rediscover themselves through the concept of liberation. Once the female has liberated her body to reach a certain standard by way of products in the cosmetic industry, she becomes happier with her identity. As societal standards of beauty change through time, women continue to follow them. Reaching the cultural norms of beauty has become a sort of religion for females because what they are really searching for is happiness in the way that they look.

Females not only monitor their own perception of their body for themselves, but also for the other. According to John Berger author of *Ways of Seeing*:

The men are as they behave and women are as they appear. The men gaze the women and the women observe their being gazed. Thus a female becomes transposed herself into an object, especially into a visual object, something to be gazed.¹ (47)

Women often observe themselves unaware that they are subconsciously performing for the “male audience” (İnceoğlu 10). An underlying theme of this concept is explained through The Narcissus Myth, a story of Narcissus, “a beautiful youth in ancient Greece who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool...and eventually died...because he could never fully possess himself” (11). In today’s society we can link this to the act of looking into a mirror or taking a selfie. As people constantly bombard their minds with images of themselves they acquire a desire for “self-exhibitionism” by putting themselves on display (12). This is a psychological pressure of Narcissism, where the female constructs an ego from her own image while observing herself as something to look at from the other’s perspective. Women have become visual objects in society. They are constantly on display and because the cosmetic industry perpetuates that certain standards of beauty will give them happiness, women participate in “self-exhibitionism”. In this search for happiness women become caught in a trap of socially wanting to be accepted by others based on their appearance and psychologically wanting to be accepted on their appearance by their own self. The problem is that women can never fully possess the high standard of

beauty exhibited by the cosmetic industry, so the search for happiness is never ending.

The beauty transformation of a female is repeated on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis. On a daily basis a female may apply make-up during her morning routine or skin cream to take care of her complexion. Many females find it important to keep nails and hands groomed, in turn they go and get manicures and pedicures on a week to two week basis. Salons across the world provide hair, nail, and esthetic treatments. Females even participate in physically painful procedures such as plastic surgery to reach cultural norms. In conjunction to the repetitive methods that females use to maintain beauty standards are new products introduced to consumers by the cosmetic industry. Whether it be the new red lipstick that is slightly more pink than last season’s line or the new foundation that promises less wrinkles than ever before, the ever changing market influences females to continue in their method’s to be beautiful by consuming the product. The method’s that females use to become beautiful come down to the ultimate goal of happiness. The author Sara Ahmed presents theoretical approaches to happiness in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. Ahmed explains that happiness has become an “individual responsibility” and “an instrument, as a means to an end” (10). The cosmetic industry offers new ways to be beautiful each time a female steps into a mall or make-up store. Thus, women partake in methods of beauty because it is a social responsibility to themselves to become happy by making themselves more beautiful. The cosmetic lines take advantage of the females unconscious responsibility to be happy by producing and advertising products that act as “instruments” to be used to be beautiful and thus, happy. The female is aligning herself with what culture has perpetuated to be a method to happiness.

The products produced by the cosmetic industry can also be viewed as, what Ahmed calls, “happy objects” (21). Ahmed examines philosopher John Locke’s idea that “happiness is a form of pleasure” through objects “that affect us in the best way” (22). It is not the cause of pleasure from the happy object, but the experience of pleasure. John Berger’s point that “publicity proposes it will make us richer, even though we will be poorer by having spent out money” in *Ways of Seeing* adds to this argument (131). Take for example, a “happy object” within the cosmetic industry, lipstick, pictured in Figure 1.



Figure 1

First, the female draws her attention to the product in the advertisement. She knows that buying the lipstick will consequently result in less money. But what the advertisement promises is happiness from beauty. The pleasure suggested by the advertisement, is the use of the lipstick. Once she applies the lipstick she will become “richer” and happier in experiencing the form of pleasure that the lipstick has to offer. All types of products within the cosmetic industry become “happy objects” when they are used.

It is through the methods and use of products in the cosmetic industry that women begin to align themselves socially. Females try to replicate the images portrayed by the cosmetic industry in the media because they are advertised as happy. And happy is a social virtue. Ahmed states that “‘happy objects’ can become ‘unhappy’ over time, in the contingency of what happens” (45). This can be directly related to the beauty methods of females that are sustained by products in the cosmetic industry. If a female participates in the method of putting on make-up every morning, she also must take it off at night. When the mask is removed, she finds unhappiness with her natural appearance. Causing her to reapply the make-up as a method in the morning to make her happier. The eye awakening issue is that females are only unhappy with their appearance because of what is represented as a beauty standard in media. If women view images of ever changing beauty standards they will continue to try and align with them. They become unhappy when they are unable to achieve them. With the portrayal of happiness comes a deeper feeling rooted in unhappiness. Even though this is a vicious cycle, the cosmetic industry sustains and increases its profits because of it.

Beauty is an ongoing fascination for American culture. Women feel the need to look the best for themselves and for the people around them. This need to feel beautiful is catered by the culture surrounding it. Appearance has remained an important part of identity, but the standards of beauty have constantly evolved. In today’s culture, beauty is what sets females from males. Femininity has caused women to be defined by their looks, in turn they want to be beautiful. As expectations and standards are set women become more vulnerable to what is called “looksism” (Freedman 2). The term “looksism is a form of social control that influences how people see themselves and how they are seen by others” (2). Women are victims of this social control starting at a young age when females begin psychologically considering their appearance. During youth many females are introduced to the Barbie Doll, exemplified in Figure 2 and 3.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Barbie has a long slender body that is impossible to achieve in proportion, incredibly large eyes with very long eye lashes, long thick hair, and more. When a young girl is given a Barbie doll, she is taught to play with Barbie as if Barbie is herself. Barbie teaches and represents what culture defines as femininity and beauty. During early years females are vulnerable to their surroundings, and although Barbie is not the only influential toy on the

market, what she represents is exploited through time. As females age they become self-conscious of their appearance. This is evident in a study done by Yasemin Inceoglu. Inceoglu conducted a field study to find a relationship between women and beauty. In 30 in-depth interviews women were asked to provide a definition of a beautiful woman. Many of their answers were synonymous with the traits of a Barbie doll. Some of the features the women included were “big, colorful and beaming eyes, buxom lips, long legs, shining, flat white teeth, slim, beautiful long hair, well-groomed, smiling, attractive, natural, sex appeal” (22). When females believe that they are to acquire such standards for themselves, they too believe that they should acquire them for others. Women begin changing themselves physically so that they feel good emotionally, thus fulfilling societal expectations of beauty.

The idea of being beautiful and pretty in American culture is equated to happiness.

It happens every day, American’s are constantly bombarded with images of beauty. Whether they are walking down the street, watching TV, or opening a magazine, images of femininity consume their minds. The media offers consistent reminders that appearance is extremely important in our culture. What

makes appearance so important to American culture is the way it is equated to happiness. Success is also often times associated with the happiness of an individual. The ways in which women use cosmetics to change their appearance for others legitimizes what Lois Banner calls “Cinderella mythology” (Banner 249). Disney’s story of Cinderella communicates how Cinderella was ignored as a housekeeper, but when she transformed into a beautiful princess she was able to have everything that she wanted and live happily ever after. Every person who has watched Cinderella understands that it was her external features that won the Prince over. The hidden theme in Cinderella exemplifies the Cinderella mythology, the idea that “beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women” (249). In order to achieve happiness women think they must become

more beautiful. Adjusting to the exterior pressures of American culture where beauty is a highly valued commodity is difficult for women.

Myths operate strongly in society because social contexts are built upon them. When people share common beliefs, they are circulated and illuminated into something that is thought to be real. Culture has never failed in producing its own myths. In regards to the correlation between beauty and happiness arises the myth of femininity. Myths about femininity that developed in the past still effect the way women are viewed and how they view themselves today. For example, in athletics, if a male executes poorly in sports his peers may tell him he “runs like a girl” or “fights like a girl”. This demonstrates how females are viewed as the weaker sex in the use of language. Women portrayed in media are often made to look glamorous and beautiful. An example in today’s culture that is

circulated very frequently is Marilyn Monroe, pictured in Figure 4.



Figure 4

Author of *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, Sarah Churchwell positions that “the scale of the myth is impossible to measure” (7). As an American icon Monroe is stereotyped as an icon of desirability and uber femininity. She represents the Cinderella narrative through her transformation from a plain girl

named Norma Jean to the beautiful and sexual Marilyn Monroe. She is made to seem that she found success in becoming beautiful. The media circulates representations of Marilyn that make her seem happy and beautiful all the time. When her sad private life is hidden behind her captivating gaze in her public life her meaning becomes blurred. Along with the blurring of Monroe’s public and private sphere and the consistent “attempts to establish a truth about a mythical figure”, arises Churchwell’s simile, a “cultural apocrypha” (8). A “cultural apocrypha” is a religious metaphor that demonstrates the meaning of “what we believe we know, not what we know” (8). As Monroe is continually disseminated in culture, females view her as the epitome of beauty, but what she really is, is hidden. Females think they should replicate that standard and self-exhibit themselves because Monroe receives the desire of men by doing so.

Resulting in the indication that females are visual objects upon which to be viewed. In result they are reduced to their body as an object. What femininity is interpreted as in current culture illustrates the reign of male dominance.² As male dominance is perpetuated in culture, so do the standards to be youthful and beautiful in appearance. If beauty continues to stay aligned with being happy then male power will continue.

An idea that stems from the myth of femininity is the “beauty myth”, a term coined by Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. Wolf discounts the mythological nature of beauty where it exists objectively and universally because it is “necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary” (12). Instead, she states that the standard of beauty is “a currency system like the gold standard” (12). She goes on to say that “the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God ... It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” (13).

Although beauty standards have had a long history across many cultures, the “beauty myth” was constructed during the Industrial Revolution when new technology could reproduce images of what women should look like in all sorts of ways (Wolf 15). Women became enclosed in the private sphere as housewives who performed housework and child rearing. The roles of women continued to transform with the release of Betty Freidan’s eye opening book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Wolf explains that “since the women’s movement had successfully taken apart most other necessary fictions of femininity ... the economy, law, religion, sexual mores, education, and culture were forcibly opened up to include women more fairly” (16). In today’s society the “beauty myth” has reemerged in a new and very strong way. The dissemination of images constructed by the

cosmetic industry that model the cultural standard of beauty illustrate how the “beauty myth” has been “summoned out of political fear on the part of male dominated institutions threatened by women’s freedom” (16). Wolf calls the reaction to the changes in gender relations a “collective reactionary hallucination” by both men and women. What Wolf is suggesting is that the timeless images and meanings of beauty portrayed in the public contradict the real situation of women. American culture has created the woman to be “beauty-without- intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty; women are allowed a mind or a body but not both” (59). The separation of mind and body in culture causes females to become so preoccupied with reaching certain standards of beauty that they “reinforce the hallucinations in a rising economic spiral” (17). The separation also causes culture to remain dominated by the male.

The issues that arise are in the way that the

cosmetic industry uses images to prescribe standards of beauty. It is through the cosmetic industry’s useful market manipulation that females unknowingly fortify the “beauty myth”. Take for example Figure 5, an advertisement by Dior featuring



Figure 5

Natalie Portman in 2012 that was under scrutiny because Portman’s eyelashes were overly exaggerated and said to be naturally unachievable.

Beyond the airbrushed and modified aspects of the advertisement emanates a deeper meaning. Females view this image and unconsciously consider her to be a beauty standard to strive for. Although Portman does not look happy, she is conveying a gaze upon the consumer. The advertisement is exemplifying the “beauty myth” through the way that it is setting a beauty standard in terms of how long a females eye lashes should be. In turn the advertisement suggests a behavior, that the female can achieve this look by consuming and using the product. In the book *Ways of Seeing*, the author John Berger explains how an

advertisement such as this one can convince a female to consume.

“Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.” (131)

Dior, as apart of the cosmetic industry is manufacturing a beauty standard. Females succumb to the “beauty myth” in the very act of envying the beauty standard. The advertisement conveys that the mascara gives the female the opportunity to be made glamorous and envious of what she could be. Being envied by oneself and by others is a form of reassurance and happiness for females. The promise of the advertisement, to create a “New Look” is also representative of the vicious cycle of the “beauty myth”. Dior is expressing a beauty ideal that is “new” and different from a previous beauty ideal that the female may have had. When beauty standards shift and conflict with other beauty standards, women are convinced to transform and align with what is popular. Because females are persistently chasing new beauty standards it is no wonder that they find unhappiness and negative body images of themselves based on the old standards that were previously popular. The cosmetic industry capitalizes on the marketing of transformation. This results in a never ending search for happiness, a tumultuous cycle in unattainable standards of beauty, and continued male dominance.

It is no question that the cosmetic industry takes advantage of females in society. Changing what images media circulates is an impossible challenge in itself, when the cosmetic industry has become extremely successful. The industry revenues billions of dollars a year, and the numbers only continue to increase. The money represents a correlation between capitalism and the beauty ideal. In today’s capitalistic society, humans fight for what they think will make them happy. Everything that they do, is in search for happiness as the end goal. If being beautiful is a part of a female’s happiness she is contributing to the successful aspect of capitalism. And if the search for happiness within beauty standards does not, and cannot end because the cosmetic industry is constantly changing the standard, then capitalism will reign. If happiness is a social responsibility that aligns people into groups then people will continue to

search for it as the end goal. But what is the end goal, if the discussion and meaning of happiness is always changing. Just like beauty standards that change and circulate in culture, so do meanings of happiness. The idea up for thought is whether happiness is a goal, or a myth that has been created by American’s to continue capitalism. Because myths are built upon social constructs of culture, they are created for a reason. It is not just the cosmetic industry that is profiting from selling the idea of happiness. If happiness is perpetuated as a social tool, an alignment with others, and a social responsibility towards others then the way it works as a myth can correlate to the triumph of capitalism.

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Images

Figure 1

<http://www.disneydreaming.com/2011/12/30/emma-stones-2012-revlon-lipstick-advertisement/>

Figure 2

<http://www.ourmuddyboots.com/barbie/>

Figure 3

<http://www.ivstatic.com/files/et/imagecache/636/health/slideshow/barbie-full-250.jpg>

Figure 4

<http://eselcine.com/frases-marilyn-monroe/>

Figure 5

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/About/General/2012/10/23/1351011010349/An-advert-for-a-Christian-010.jpg>

¹ *Ways of Seeing* is based on a BBC television series that aired in 1972 that challenged the way that culture views and perceives images.

² This idea stems from Naomi Wolf's argument about the "beauty myth" that is elaborated on later in the paper.