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Beauty and the Internet: Old Wine in a New Bottle

By Piyali Sur¹

Abstract

In the consumer culture of late modernity, young women are obsessed with their physical appearance and attempt to conform to socially constructed beauty standards. Adolescent girls are surrounded by images of beauty through advertising, television, films, magazines and the recent beauty blogs that have burst forth on the worldwide web. This paper is on the use of beauty blogs by adolescent girls of the age group 15 to 19 years living in Kolkata, whereby depicting that there is no escape from feminine embodiment even in the digital world. The researcher has compiled the beauty/fashion blogs that adolescent girls regularly visit and hence has attempted to understand the girls' use of the blogs and what the blogs contain. This paper looks at the beauty culture associated with these blogs and traces the popularity of these online beauty resources to the renewed focus on the female body and visual appearance in consumer culture that is transnational. The beauty blogs are virtual feminized spaces created only for women and contain categories of homemade corrective treatments, personal grooming and images of array of beauty products that teach women how to "do femininity". The blogs 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 themselves and not to be done for the male gaze. Termed as "postfeminist sensibility" the blogs depict women as heterosexual desiring subjects with independence and choice. Young women in turn constructed feminine beautification as an empowering as well as a pleasurable experience for them.

Keywords: technology, beauty, blogs, consumer culture, Sexual subjectification, self-disciplining, embodiment, pleasure

Introduction

Technology is identified as masculine, is claimed to be embedded in masculine culture, and masculinity is defined in terms of technical skill and competence. However, with each new innovation in technology there are renegotiations of what is to be considered masculine and feminine. It was assumed that "digital technologies based on brain rather than brawn, on networks rather than hierarchy would herald a new relationship between women and machines." (Wajeman 2009: 5-6). The idea was that internet as a communication and information technology would be used to subvert gender norms through an escape from embodiment or the "embodied basis of sex difference" (Bhadra 2015: 28). In this paper, I argue that information technology instead situates women in their bodies as is exemplified by the beauty and fashion resources and blogs as well as

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millions of beauty videos on YouTube which have burst forth on the worldwide Web embodying women and encouraging them to take a keen interest in fashion and beautification of their bodies. The young women who are the most frequent users of these beauty coverage and blogs are not interested in leaving their bodies behind but use the internet to beautify their bodies offline. This essay focuses on how digital technology reproduces femininity through fashion and beautification by reconfirming prescribed norms of beauty, thereby showcasing how digital technology is embedded in the physical, material world (Sassen, 2002). As Sassen notes, there is no "purely digital" or exclusively "virtual" electronic space; rather, the digital is always "embedded" in the material (2002: 367-68). The young girls' engagement with internet conform embodiment and technology in turn confirms gender ideologies. The websites on beauty reflect the understanding or construction of girls as sexual, and reinforce narrow and stereotypical meanings of girlhood, beauty and consumption.

Internet is becoming this generation's defining technology for beauty and style and is gradually replacing beauty and fashion magazines in shaping bodily tastes and beauty ideals. Like their cousins the fashion magazines, many of these blogs are for a transnational audience that overcomes national boundaries and makes body beautification the ultimate ideal and goal for women. "Through visual...images, then, women not only receive messages about themselves as embodied, feminine beings but also as consumers of both products and of themselves as objects for consumption." (Thapan 2009: 64). The popularity of the beauty blogs is to be linked to the culture of consumption that is characteristic of high modernity. The beauty culture associated with these beauty blogs can also be traced to a renewed focus on the female body and visual appearance in consumer culture that is transnational. To Featherstone (1982), in consumer culture the inner body or its health is maintained to make the outer body appear beautiful². The beauty blogs situated within this material culture encourages a culture of consumption by seducing women to consume beauty products and fashion to maintain both the inner and outer body. These internet beauty resources call for an individualistic, sexualized "external beauty-oriented consumerist attitude" (Bae 2011). The beauty culture of the blogs and online resources in beauty attempt to integrate local and transnational ideals of beauty but primarily are very first world dominated. The consumer experiences of women generate a sense of emotional, aesthetic pleasure typical of consumer culture (Featherstone 2007). The body is an "unfinished project" (Schilling 1993) in a consumer culture to be beautified through consumption but how it is done bears imprints of class on the body.

In a consumer society knowledge is very important: knowledge about existing and new goods, their affordability and how to use the goods appropriately (Featherstone, 2007). The internet, through beauty and fashion blogs makes such information on self-improvement available to the aspiring women. The beauty and fashion blogs develop taste in women by influencing preferences and choices. By focusing on how adolescent girls of 15 to 19 years of age are using the internet to draw ideas and images of fashion and beautification, I would like to make the following points: Firstly, a tween culture of the net generation has emerged oriented towards fashion and beauty through the net where beauty blogs are used personally, rarely discussed among peers and do not create social bonding among its users. Secondly, though the websites on beauty reflect the understanding or construction of girls as sexual, and reinforce narrow, stereotypical meanings of girlhood, beauty and consumption, the girls feel creative and empowered in using

² Featherstone claims that consumer culture places a premium on the appearance of outer body. Hence to enhance the visual appearance of the outer body, inner body is maintained which refers to the health and functioning of the body in face of disease and ageing process.

these blogs. Beautification is a positive experience for these women where they feel they can express their creativity. They try to create their own fashion styles by juxtaposing global elements as observed in the blogs with local cultural elements.

Methodology

I have interviewed 15 girls in Kolkata in the age group of 15 to 19 years to explore their perceptions on beauty, fashion, consumption and their links to femininity. I have only interviewed girls who use fashion/beauty blogs and draw inspiration from them about clothes, fashion and beauty. I have then observed the fashion blogs they regularly visit and hence attempted to understand the girls' use of the blogs and what the blogs contain. I have used qualitative content analysis to read the blogs used by the young women participants to understand the beauty culture associated with these blogs.

Findings

A Divide between users and non-users of fashion blogs

In this study it was observed that the fashion and beauty blogs produced taste among the adolescent girls in Kolkata who were socially affluent and were financially able to indulge in the beauty and fashion trends. Girls from lower socio-economic groups were not aware of fashion/beauty blogs and sites, and though they took a keen interest in beautification, they primarily depended on traditional media like television and Bollywood movies. In a cosmopolitan city like Kolkata in India, the use of mobile phones has spread to lower classes. Though the poor girls had cell phones with internet packs, they preferred to use social networking sites rather than beauty or fashion blogs. This implies that they cannot identify with the images of beauty and style that is disseminated by these "cultural intermediaries" (Enwistle, 2000: 238). This lack of identification may be due to the fact that these "blogs stay within global frameworks" (Sandhu, 2015: 93) that is they highlight global trends in beauty and fashion, more specifically first world dominated fashion trends. For the more affluent girls, beauty and fashion blogs acted as a space for identity construction. These beauty blogs were searched out privately by girls and rarely was there a discussion among friends regarding these sites, as they believed "fashion is private". As McCracken (1993) observes, mass media serve in women's lives to create "a privatized subcultural space" in which secrets of femininity are divulged.

Blogs redefine femininity with a focus on bodies

The beauty blogs as cyberspaces are feminized spaces where "secret routines of femininity are commodified and exemplified" (Black 2004: 27). The beauty blogs show how perfect feminine beauty can be attained, and beauty ideas, practices, and images are unfurled in a manner that they are for women's self-improvement. Women using the beauty/fashion blogs conform to notions of ideal feminine embodiment by making beauty as the ultimate goal to be achieved. Though there are separate blogs for beauty and fashion, I have not made a distinction between them. The blogs watched by my research participants have items on both clothing and style that comes under fashion as well as on beautification. The latter entails the application of beauty products, ideas and practices for enhancement of looks. In late modernity, dress is also a key component of beautification. The regularly watched online resources were StyleCaster, YouBeauty, The Fashion Spot, which are fashion/beauty sites while DIY beauty tutorials (the only Indian blog watched),

bubzbeauty, Kyrzyada, Essentially Eclectic, Hairspray and High Heels, the Beauty Department, A Beautiful Mess, The Every Girl, Nanshy were the blogs and vlogs watched. The attraction of the beauty blogs can be summarized in the words of this research participant:

The beauty blogs have become women's best friends. They tell what to buy and not to buy, how to use make up. Women find the blog aimed at exactly what they are looking for and then reading or watching they lose all track of time.

To learn and then apply is the functionality of the blogs to the participants. Beauty blogs also support certain brand of products and then give out reviews.

The beauty/fashion blogs are filled with details of **fashion, beauty and lifestyle**. Glitter cosmetics, do it yourself beauty tutorials, latest fashion trends on these blogs are part of body-centric forms of femininity encouraged by consumerist society. These blogs promote the ideology of consumption. It is through the consumption of a variety of homemade remedies, cosmetics, clothes, do it yourself appliances, personal grooming, physical exercises that “improvement is suggested and is likely to take place” (Thapan 2009: 67). Consumption is not only a source of power and pleasure for young women, but it is around consumption that appreciation of others is acquired and identities are constructed.

Beauty as feminine ideal

The beauty blogs talk about beautification of every displayed part of the body from hair to toes which illustrates the commodification of the body (Featherstone 2007) ranging from which lipstick to use for a particular skin tone, to how to have a glowing skin, which shampoos would make hair lustrous were all acquired from the beauty blogs by my women participants. The blogs approach beauty by promoting external resources to promote beauty. The blogs advertise certain brand identities. They “translate their thoughts and opinions to their users, thus influencing their perception of these brands in a very positive manner” (Sandhu, 2015). A sense of deprivation is also created among participants when brands advertised are beyond the buying capacity of the participants:

These blogs, the famous ones are not locally based and rely on brands which are too high-end. They can be admired, but not practically possible for the common person.

One kind of beauty that is promoted by these blogs is primarily ‘**natural beauty**’ which is ‘modern’ with a look that is called the “nude look” and is very first world dominated. It was the most popular makeup among my participants which exhibits a barely made up look. The blogs through various steps³ teach how to look natural by choosing the shades that look natural. Bubzbeauty blog and vlog watched by my participants, calls this the ‘Natural Beauty’ look where the blogger states “it looks like I wasn’t wearing much at all.” The list of products to be used is there on the vlog as well as the steps to achieve the nude look. For instance, Nanshy blogs: “If you have pale skin, opt for pink or peachy colours and if you have olive undertones, opt for pale beige or cream colours. Lip colour should also look natural. Instead of matte lipstick, apply a little gloss on your lips directly.” The ‘natural’, ‘modern’ look promoted by these blogs included subtle

³ The steps suggested vary from 6 to 7 and are very laborious and time consuming.

contouring, lip tints and nude lip balms or pastel shades look intended to cheat the eyes of the audience and acquire an "I woke up like this" look. The natural look hides and deceives the labour put behind to achieve this look which is very feminine yet modern.

One participant who was heavily influenced by this modern look said:

It is deceiving the eyes of the other, pretending that one has no makeup on but has makeup bases and natural lip colour making one look naturally radiant and beautiful. This is the true essence of makeup (Rajanya 18 years).

In contrast to the "nude look" there is also the promotion of a standout dramatic look where eyes are made smoky and seductive with mascara and glittery lipsticks. To Bubzbeauty it is the "vampy" or the "dark" look and the site offers a tutorial on how to attain the look through products suggested.

Besides a bold red lip, a smoky eye is one of the best ways to dress up your face when going out on the town. But, it can also be one of the hardest beauty tricks to master. Luckily, once you learn the steps (and get the proper tools required) you can become a master yourself (Stylecaster). Accessed on 5th May 2016.

This implies internet produces beauty cultures where women take an active part and find enjoyment and agency in performing the beauty practices. For beautification, video logs were preferred by the participants where step by step application of makeup (lip, eyes, face, nail art) was disseminated. Intense involvement with fashion blogs is expressed by one participant, "When I watch the blogs I forget time. I get so engrossed watching it. I love to watch the video logs, the do-it-yourself makeup." Women participants expressed that they learnt and loved to watch these tutorial beauty blogs and sometimes practiced the very complicated and time intensive beauty practices.

Another approach to beauty is to promote homemade remedies for self-improvement. Stylecaster writes:

Natural beauty has moved on from being a trend and is making its mark as a beauty category. Natural ingredients from all over the world have provided us with benefits for our hair and skin (Stylecaster). Accessed on 5th May 2016

The emphasis on natural care of the body does not deviate from normative definitions of feminine beauty with a focus on hair, skin, and other physical attributes (Thapan, 2009). Research participants spoke of the learnt homemade remedies for skin and hair like how to remove acne, how to have a bright glowing skin, how to reduce hair fall, how to remove dark spots and the like kinds of self-improvement. In the words of one participant:

The beauty blogs are very helpful in home treatments because they specify each and every ingredient properly and mention about them and their uses. But one must learn about her skin first, there are remedies for each type of skin issues on these beauty blogs. So instead of running to a dermatologist and getting medicines and balms which are filled with chemicals I can look at the blogs and then in the kitchen to help me instead.

The beauty blogs are virtual spaces only for women and contain categories of homemade corrective treatments, personal grooming and images of an array of beauty products that teach women how to “do femininity”. The blogs promote that beauty is an essential component of femininity and encourage women to take beauty as a serious thing to be achieved.

Beauty as pleasure

The young women pleurably communicated their use of beauty blogs to get ideas of beauty and fashion. Getting hooked on these online beauty resources indicates that women cannot separate their selves from consuming these beauty practices. They conform to the Foucauldian notion of power where external agency is no longer required pressurizing them to look beautiful. The self is constructed by the power regime in such a manner that women choose to engage in beauty practices which they believe is done for themselves, for their own pleasure. Hence, this young generation of women have rejected the feminist claims that beautification objectifies and sexualizes women’s bodies for male gaze. They have reworked the meanings of feminism by stating that investment in beautification and feminine appearance is power and pleasure generating rather than being oppressive. One research participant said “I feel creative when I learn the most and I sense pleasure through smell and touch mostly. When you see the results of beautification, it is a very good feeling.” The women participants felt that taking care of oneself and beautifying their bodies are their responsibility and disagree that it is for the male eyes. Hidden is a narcissistic approach to beauty with a stress on choice and beautification for oneself. The question is why they do not like themselves when they do not confirm to the “accepted” reigning beauty paradigms or feel they have failed. It implies that patriarchal norms of beauty have an effect on them and self is constituted through internalization of patriarchal beauty regimes. “Young women believe, therefore, that they can ‘have it all’, and that this entails career, economic independence, property owning, sexual freedom, and investment in a feminine appearance. Their identity is closely associated with their bodily appearances” (Black, 2004: 42). A kind of self-disciplining, self-monitoring is adopted by the girls lest they fail the beauty test. The desire to look good, better than the other is also a product of the commodified system. The young women through consumption accomplish a femininity which is “girlie femininity”, a kind of emphasized femininity as Connell would term it.

In media representations of women or in beauty advertisements there has been a paradigm shift. The goal of beauty advertisements has slid from one “geared to achieving a look whose goal was to attract men” to “self-improvement and beauty rituals as a means of achieving satisfaction for the self.” The changing representation of women in the media including the digital is about the liberated woman who can now freely choose to “use beauty” and feel good about it. The message sent by these beauty blogs is about women’s right to be beautiful and the feelings of empowerment that come with a beautiful visual appearance. The beauty blogs encourage women to take interest in feminine pleasures. The online resources on beauty stress the possession of a “sexy body” as central to women’s identity (Gill, 2007).

For instance Stylecaster posted the following:

Feminist means different things to different women. Most will even agree that dated, narrow-minded definitions—a woman who hates men, for example—has absolutely nothing to do with it. For that matter, those who believe it does clearly aren’t equipped to deal with a new generation of females who only lean in if they

want to, who make their own decisions about having—or not having—children, who unapologetically flaunt their sex appeal, and who understand the sheer power of the word “no.” Accessed 6th May 2016)

Another post by Stylecaster underlines the importance of fashionable appearances as source of empowerment:

You get up in the morning and you want to look a certain way—in that sense, fashion can be very empowering.” -Amy Odell, editor of Cosmopolitan.com on Stylecaster.

A “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill 2007) pervades the online beauty resources where there is “women’s subjectification” instead of “objectification.” Social media, including fashion/beauty blogs unlike past representations do not depict women as passive, but as active desiring heterosexual subjects. This is what Gill (2007) terms “sexual subjectification” as opposed to sexual objectification in media constructions of femininity. Images of women in the beauty blogs are no longer for the male gaze but send messages about the liberated (young) women who should indulge in self-satisfaction, self-care and take active interest in their bodies through beautifying them. The underlying theme in these blogs is that women should please themselves, a taboo in most societies and especially in India. The fashion sites highlight how young women can look attractive and confident through consuming new fashion styles. The strong message of the blogs is “do it for yourself”. However, the messages in the blogs are for certain women who fit into the heteronormative regime. There is a complete obliteration of lesbian, old women, black and fat women.

Aesthetic aspect of fashion

For clothing styles women look at the latest fashion trends and outfit ideas and try to recreate them with the clothes they own. For instance this picture is from a fashion blog. It would be interesting to notice that young women position themselves within a discourse of influence by fashion blogs but also outside it. They do not comply with the total fashion statement but recreate it. There is an interplay of passive influence and critical agency.



Figure1. Fashion in blogs creating an impression in the mind of research participants



Figure 2. Fashion recreated by research participant as viewed in the fashion blog (Figure 1)

The concerned research participant (figure 2 and in figure 3 in the following page) illustrated how she had recreated the outfits showcased in fashion blogs. In the above picture she has recreated the first outfit. Rather than copying the entire outfit exactly, girls combine different features from different images and give an individual interpretation to it. This participant said “When I go shopping I tend to pick up pieces of clothing which I have seen on blogs.”



Figure 3. Recreated Fashion Statement

The young women feel great pleasure and creativity in recreating the images on blogs materially by selecting from different stores different fashion items and then putting them together to make a style which they define as their private fashion. Hence the consumer culture gives these women a “creative space” to express their creativity in terms of fashion.

First world images in beauty/fashion blogs

As mentioned, Primarily the blogs, even the Indian ones exhibit western styles, a very small segment is dedicated to ethnic wear, sometimes named “return to the roots.” When there is fusion as can be observed the dominant trend is again western.



Figure 4. Fusion Fashion (images via: www.cilory.com) Accessed 5th May 2016

The pictures below attest how fashion styles of youth icons on blogs are emulated by research participants in creative ways.



Figure 5. Bodycon Dress as in the blogs. Accessed 6th May 2016



Figure 6. Bodycon dress followed by a research participant very similar to the one in Figure 5, but only has added a ring.

Though the girls studied designed their personal wardrobes influenced by these blogs, they wanted to maintain their personal style by juxtaposing global elements with local cultural elements. Most of my participants would wear a bracelet or nose rings and silver earrings along with their western attire. As the above participant mentioned “I follow fashion but keep style intact”.

Concluding remarks

Young women in this sample experience their embodiment through visual and textual representation of beauty on fashion blogs. The proliferation of beauty blogs catering primarily to young and middle-aged heterosexual women indicate how important the issue of beauty is to women. Adolescent girls use cell phones with internet facility and beautification sites are only a click away. Achieving the ideal body is heavily encouraged by the writings and images in these blogs, through tutorials on do- it- yourself exercises. Hence disciplining of the body and pleasure of the flesh are no longer in opposition to one another (Sandhu 2015) as disciplining of the body through diets and exercises enables one to achieve a desirable body which in turn leads to pleasure (Enwistle 2000). Black argued “modes of embodiment are not simply about appearances, but rather, as signifiers of physical capital, they indicate the habitus and social position of the bearer”

(2004: 73) Blogs are not virtual environments separated from the concerns of local everyday life. Technologies are “ideologically shaped by the operation of gender interests, and consequently... serve to reinforce traditional gendered patterns of power and authority” (Balsamo 1996: 10).

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