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BEAUTY BRANDS ONLINE: VISUALITY, LABOUR, AND REPRESENTATION

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Introduction

Beauty as a category has always been intimately tied to industry. Engagement with beauty has historically been seen as inherently consumptive (see Lakoff & Scherr, 1984) and (perhaps therefore) inherently feminine (see Friedan, 1963) and trivial (Hollows, 2000). Popular discourse today would suggest, however, that beauty is increasingly seen as creative, and no longer assumed to be the domain of any one gender, particularly in online spaces (O’Grady, 2021). Yet as an unprecedented plurality of individuals appropriate beauty as a site of gendered expression and affirmation, their engagements with beauty continue to be entwined with the broader beauty machine—what third-wave feminist scholars called the “fashion-beauty complex” (Bartky, 1990). This is not wholly new, and versions of the structure-agency debate have plagued feminist examinations of beauty for decades (Craig, 2006; Jarrín, 2017). Online beauty culture, however—co-produced by beauty brands, content creators, and audiences—presents a space where the imprecise lines between individual and industry become still hazier. Amidst celebrations of the democratisation of beauty on one end (Yanagihara, 2021), and cries of an overly appearance-obsessed culture on the other (Abram & Fong, 2020), what does a situated feminist examination of online beauty culture tell us today?

Conceptual framework

Images of women have been a site of enquiry since the early days of the feminist project (Butcher et al., 1974). Scholars have frequently drawn from Berger’s work on the “ways of seeing” gendered bodies in art (Berger, 1972), and Foucault’s work on bodies and power (Deveaux, 1994; Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). My theoretical position draws largely from Bordo’s invocation of Foucault—a “materialist” view of the body, one that accounts for the “direct grip” that culture has on bodies,

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beyond merely in/exclusion through representation (Bordo, 1993). Bordo's understanding of the material body is linked to the cultural—culture that, she argues, normalises and disciplines. There is no “outside” to this culture (Blum, 2005)—we are all placed varyingly within it, and individuals exercise various modes of “culturally scripted” agency within the frameworks of power in the culture industries (Pitts-Taylor, 2007; see also Fraser, 2003).

In the present study, I examine images from one type of source—beauty brands—to examine how they represent bodies, but also how these images are produced at the intersection of techno-aesthetic choices, platform affordances, market considerations, and the modes of gendered identity privileged by culture at a given point in time.

Methodology

Based on data collected as part of my doctoral work on the beauty media landscape in India, this paper maps the practices of beauty brands online by analysing 545 Instagram posts¹ made by the five most followed beauty brands in India—Lakmé, Sugar, Nykaa, MAC, and MyGlamm. The framework for analysis is adapted from the visual analysis model developed by Bock et al. (2001), that accounts for all “phases” of image communication, including the context of design, incidence, production, media, and reception. Further informed by Lister & Wells' (2004) cultural studies approach to visual analysis, I conduct a mixed-methods content analysis of the 335 photos and 210 videos sampled.

Findings

It was useful to first question who produced this content. Some brands like Nykaa and MAC primarily shared content that was produced by/for them, while others like MyGlamm and Sugar relied heavily on reposted content from influencers, particularly ones with smaller followings, even employing “influencer scouting teams” to do so (Sil, 2021). Influencers bear the brunt of content creation, constituting what Duffy terms “aspirational labor” (Duffy, 2022), creating content with the implicit hope that they will eventually earn monetary returns. But it is the brands that benefit financially, with Sugar reporting that social media content generated a revenue of USD 12million for them in the year 2020 (Sil, 2021). The ownership of influencer-generated content remains ambiguous, with brands subtly asserting ownership while merely acknowledging creators through tagging.

Influencer-generated content also lent itself to a particular “look”— flat-lit, tight frame with relatively high saturation, shot at eye level with a static recording device, often featuring little to no talking, and text on screen. Some of these choices are shaped by platform affordances (aspect ratio, post format, compositional tools such as text and stickers etc.), and the assumption of a mobile viewing device (small, hand-held, perhaps

¹ Collected over one week in February 2022. I used the third-party tool “IG Downloader” to save all posts made by the selected brands during the sampling week.

affording distracted viewing). But this “look” is also notable for the shift it signals—a departure from the “high fashion” look of magazines, suggesting a democratisation in what images of beauty can look like. A new assemblage of technological tools enables content production—the mass adoption of smartphone-compatible ring lights emerges as a significant catalyst here. 76% of influencer-generated posts used a ring light, made evident by the unmistakable ring-shaped reflection it casts in the subject’s eyes. Once a specialised piece of equipment, ring lights are sold cheaply and widely in India today (as low as USD 8)—often available for sale by streetside vendors in urban spaces. The ring light represents a key piece of the puzzle—a technological tool, and increasingly a competence aspiring creators must possess, leading to it evolving into an aesthetic standard that new entrants may be required to uphold.

While the content space democratised in some ways, it also flattened in others. At the level of appearance, hegemonically held ideals of Indian beauty—long, straight hair, fair skin, big, “almond-shaped” eyes, and full lips (see Reddy, 2006; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009)—are far from being dismantled. Most persons featured in the sample were light-skinned (64%). Hair texture and length also aligned with conventional standards of attractive femininity—75% persons had straight hair, and 67% had long hair. It was also instructive to observe how people were represented. Several posts by the brand Lakmé featured only a partial face or body (such as lips, eyes, or nails) to showcase the featured product, engaging in the “dismemberment” of women and the objectification of their bodies, rendering them less than human (Killbourne, 2014).

This study sheds light on a range of nuanced dynamics. The beauty brand on Instagram offers a site to examine new modes of precarious labour and economic insecurity (see Elias et al., 2017; Bishop, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Hund, 2023), in a country where gendered labour precarity has been baked into the social system (Raveendran, 2016) and the promise of transformation through digital democratisation runs loud in socio-political discourse (Pitroda, 2015). It further points to the particular forms of bodily capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that are privileged by the industry, popular culture, and even the platform (Bishop, 2021) in a nation where appearances have been found to determine women’s economic and social opportunity (Parameswaran, 2011). At the same time, it also points to the new ecology of beauty media today: the actors and technologies that make it possible, the opportunities it presents, and the new aesthetics and production modes it affords. This study of branded content feeds into my doctoral thesis that looks at the beauty media landscape in India today—built of brands, social media marketers, public relations personnel, influencers, influencer relationship managers, journalists, and editors—but it also speaks to broader cultures around appearance and gendered self-presentation and the nebulous nature of labour and influence in today’s media environment.

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