Beyond Vanity: an Investigation Into Romanian Women’s Beauty Identities

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This paper investigates women’s conceptualizations of the underlying meanings of beauty (‘natural’ versus ‘artificial’, inner versus outer) and the way Eastern Europe women navigate through these formulations in the process of negotiating their identities. The study elaborates on traditional, feminist and postmodern theories of the body and uses this framework to analyze self-reflexive beauty perceptions and the way perceptions materialize in beauty practices. Drawing on interviews with Romanian women ages 20 to 54, this work emphasizes the complex and often contradictory relation women hold to their bodies, focusing on issues of oppression/empowerment, media influence and cultural ‘normalcy’.

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References


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Women’s perceptions of beauty are important not only because they determine beauty practices that, in turn, translate into consumption patterns, but also because they shape women’s lives. In Eastern Europe, the transition from socialism to capitalism, beyond its political, economic and social components, has also implied a change of lifestyles (Coulter, Price and Feick 2003). These new lifestyles offer the possibility to reinscribe the obsolete socialist notion of gender equality into a new capitalist notion that allows for female empowerment. This study departs from the approach of authors such as Coulter et al. who argue that the 1990s have been a period of radical shift in the way women relate to beauty. Quite on the contrary, this undertaking shows that Romanian women have used the proliferation of market options to evolve along the same conceptual lines as before the fall of communism, instead of going through a phase of serious disruption.

Conceptualization

The paper reviews the main positions represented in the ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’ debate (Bordo, 1993; Brush, 1998; Fraser, 2001; Hurd and Griffin, 2007). On the one side, nature is defined as the raw material awaiting to be amended and thus inferior to culture, whereas the opposing approach presents nature as the perfect blueprint and, therefore, superior to culture. However, ‘nature’ is usually presented...
as a discrete category, defying historical change, situated outside of culture and, thus, not subject to power relations. Paralleling this conceptualization is the discussion of the different approaches to a mind/body dualism focusing on the postmodern notion of ‘natural’ body as text, inseparable from its inscription. Such discussions are placed within the context of the broader debate on empowerment and cultural politics where the body is a “locus of social control” (Bordo, 1993, p. 33), acknowledging feminist works and Foucault’s contribution. Particular attention is given to Foucault’s notion of modern power and the way individual self-surveillance can be imposed with just one gaze, which plays in the normalization of the beauty industry. Finally, the recent theoretical contestation of the opposition between men and women is addressed in the light of postmodernism, insisting on women’s agency even in processes that may be categorized as oppressive in previous conceptualizations.

Method
Fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Romanian women ages 20 to 54 in 2007. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts were then perused in an iterative process for emerging themes in a process of open coding and axial coding.

Major findings: Meanings of Beauty and Beauty Practices
These Romanian women relate repeatedly and in a decidedly nonlinear fashion to a multitude of beauty forms that could be subsumed under both ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ models. In the constellation of perceptions with a cultural currency in Eastern Europe there appear to be competing hierarchies and complex dynamics among beauty types. For example, Cristina thinks that natural beauty is valued more than artificial appearance “with very flashy makeup”, and Madalina feels this has to do with the implied deceitfulness since make up, through “tricks”, makes even unattractive people look pretty. Beauty, for the women interviewed, is an intricate concept that simultaneously feeds into and emerges from almost all facets of life. Notably, beauty is a very mutable feature constantly being constituted, interpreted and contested through everyday interaction. For instance, Ana explains she appraises herself as beautiful or ugly based on how good she is at her job on a specific day or how well her romantic relationship is evolving at a given time.

For most respondents cosmetic use and the aura of artificiality that it brings about is acceptable only insofar as it covers up imperfections, that is only as long as it presents itself as an attempt of mimesis that reinforces the superiority and high social desirability of the ‘natural’ blueprint. Women are wary of the negative associations of cosmetic practices within their culture and therefore are much more willing to identify with practices termed “taking care of oneself” or “avoiding sloppiness” that somehow seem to feebly relate to traditional female roles such as nurturer or aesthetic arbitrator of the family.

Nevertheless, in this specific case, ‘natural’ beauty is not synonymous with the lack of any kind of cosmetic interaction (thus, not identified with nature as an ideal, untouched state), but it is a beauty that imitates the ‘natural’ look using makeup. In this case, ‘naturalness’ comes in degrees and hues and it is clearly culturally defined. Moreover, ‘natural’ beauty needs to be achieved and it requires significant efforts to maintain this ‘natural’ status. Here, the force of the belief in the superiority of nature is necessarily–yet paradoxically–complemented by an appeal to culture: with the supreme valuing of nature as a standard comes the realization of the fact that bodies are imperfect and need to be amended. Ironically, it is not the faith in the superiority of culture over nature, but the utopia of the natural body that makes these women resort to makeup in an attempt to emulate that ideal state.

The respondents in this study, regardless of age, seemed to agree that beauty is a specifically female characteristic and, thus, also a typically female responsibility. However, in the true spirit of postmodernism, it became apparent that there is no one linear discourse on beauty; instead there are a multitude of separate and often contradicting discourses (even stemming from the same woman!) that are being combined and recombined to construct meaning during the course of the conversation. Respondents did not rigorously adhere to one ideology, instead they switched between ideas belonging to such diverse intellectual sources as neo-Platonicism, feminism, postmodernism and so on. Moreover, in their use of these ideas they recombined them in original ways to create new and interesting meaning. For example, although the ascendancy of the natural ideal was predominant among interviewees, they saw makeup, and thus culture, as the way to attain—even if just fleetingly and illusorily—an impression of that ideal. So, for them, nature and culture are both oppositional and complementary terms.

References
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