

**The Colliding of Worlds:  
Local Beauty and Fashion Consumption  
in a Global Context**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Most existing feminist studies of globalization have tended to focus on the exploitation of women in poor and underserved areas of the world. However, the purpose of this research was to examine the intersection of the Western beauty myth for globally privileged women with the exploitative practises of a global economy. Thus, I examined how ten White women living in a mid-size prairie city who adhere to middle-class expectations of feminine appearance relate their patterns of beauty and fashion consumption to general trends of globalization. This study found that some Western women who consume beauty products act as both agents and pawns in the exploitative global economies.

The methodology used in this project included both qualitative interview-based research and interpretive text analysis of works on globalization. The interviews with ten Saskatoon women were guided by forty-one questions and tape-recorded. The focus of the interviews was two-fold: 1) the participants' practices and beliefs regarding beauty product consumption; and 2) the awareness the participants have about the role their beauty product consumption has within the global context.

In conclusion, all ten women, including the three who expressed resistance to the popular beauty ideology, showed evidence of having internalized the dominant beauty ideology. Combined awarenesses of sweatshop abuses, the fractured production processes that characterize globalization, and the consumer culture in which they live influence participants' consumption choices to some degree. Thus, five of the ten participants make consumption choices based on ethics-related concerns as a result of their awarenesses.

These results suggest that further research is needed in the area of beauty consumption and globalization. They also indicate that education and awareness are significant factors affecting beauty consumption practices but that other factors, such as the need for social and financial success, affect women's choices to consume beauty products in a global arena.



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about patriarchy, capitalist consumerism and the beauty myth, long before I studied at university,  
and for gifting me with her passion and her bravery to challenge the status quo.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Nitara, Dana, Kathy, Karen, Pam and Chris.

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my parents Pat and Bob Kuzak.

Most of all, this thesis is for you, mom.

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... and now I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity. Some of us know how we came by our fortune, and some of us don't, but we wear it all the same. There's only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?

*The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver

## **CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE**

### **Purpose**

The overall purpose of this research is to explore how Western women who adhere to middle-class expectations of feminine appearance relate their patterns of beauty and fashion consumption to general trends of globalization. This requires a critical engagement with theories of global economy, social interrelations, beauty ideologies, and gender. Because most existing feminist studies of globalization have tended to focus on the exploitation of women in poor and underserved areas of the world, this study will contribute significantly to our knowledge by providing a preliminary commentary on processes of globalization and beauty consumption. I will explore how some Western women who consume beauty products may act as both agents and pawns in the ever- expanding and persistently exploitive global economies.

To get a sampling of how Western women consume beauty products in a globalized economy, I interviewed ten Saskatoon women who adhere to mainstream standards of feminine presentation. By “mainstream” I am referring to a style of physical self-presentation that reflects dominant, Euro-Canadian, middle-class criteria for women. Thus, I did not chose women of colour or women whose physical style of presentation indicates a sub-cultured alternative lifestyle or political view, such as Punk, Goth, Grunge, Hippie or Queer. My choice of White women who present themselves according to hegemonic values reflects a desire to study consumptive patterns and beliefs of the privileged consumer located in a Western cultural setting, who plays a significant role in the consumer/producer

equation that is part of the exploitative nature of globalized capitalism. In this study conformity to hegemonic standards of femininity must also be understood to have local significance since all my participants are from Saskatoon, a mid-sized prairie city in Saskatchewan, which is an economically marginalized province relative to other Canadian provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec.

There is a wide variation in the economic and educational positions of the ten women in my study. Their socio-economic positioning varies from very middle-class professionals to working-class clerks and serving personnel. However, this economic variation is not relevant to my study as all ten women represent a position of relative affluence when their global position is considered.

Economically, none of them experience the kind of poverty that threatens their daily survival, and culturally, they are all subjected to similar commercial and popular images of beauty and of the “good life.” In other words, I assume that all these women have been exposed to shopping malls and the plethora of American sit-coms on television that portray a homogenous set of cultural values.

On the other hand, in terms of personal presentation, it is important to consider how these women are positioned relative to others in their local community. Although all the women do not fall within the middle-class designation used by sociologists or economists, they clearly engage with the modes of personal presentation characteristic of women who fall within the economic and cultural category of “middle-class.” This style of personal presentation might be loosely characterized as feminine, and professional or semi-professional, with hair



and make-up use that reflects the images of feminine beauty that dominate Western media. One example of this style of presentation might include hair that has been coloured, often but not exclusively a shade of blonde; conventional make-up use such as foundation and eye-make-up that might include any combination of the following products: eye-liner, eye-shadow, eye-brow pencil, cover-up and mascara; nails that are manicured and possibly painted; use of jewellery that is mainstream in style rather than radical, and styles of clothing typical of displays in conventional local women's clothing stores such as Sears or the Bay.

The two criteria, being globally relatively privileged and adhering to White, middle-class standards of female appearance are significant qualifiers in my study, which aims to examine knowledge, beliefs and practises related to Western beauty product consumers in the context of an increasingly fractured global production machine.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used in this study included both qualitative interview-based research and interpretive text analysis of works on globalization to examine the extent to which there is a convergence among feminist analyses of beauty, global capital expansion and gender. The interviews with ten Saskatoon women were guided by forty-one questions and tape-recorded. The focus of the interviews was two-fold: 1) the participants' practices and beliefs regarding beauty product consumption; and 2) the awareness the participants have about the role their beauty product consumption has within the global context. That is, to what extent do the

participants link their consumptive patterns to the exploitation of Third and Fourth World people in production?

My method of attaining participants was via opportunistic sampling. I approached women whom I encounter in the middle-class neighbourhood where I live, or in professional or commercial contexts. Neighbours walking dogs or out in their yards, retail store personnel and health care personnel were among my pool of possible participants. This method was very useful as it allowed me to choose participants whose outward appearance suggested White, middle-class values. Although my participants varied widely in terms of age, educational background and income, there is a fair amount of homogeneity in this group as they are chosen according to a standard that I recognize within my cultural milieu. Since my purpose is to study the beliefs and practices of a sample group of globally privileged Western women regarding beauty product consumption, a fairly homogenous participant group does not present problems for this research.

There are many advantages to a lateral study of this kind. One of the values of this method of attaining participants is that it allowed me to study women who fall (broadly speaking) into my socio-economic peer group rather than studying “down,” which has power implications that may be problematic in a feminist research project. As well, in studying my own community, I was able to avoid the problem of self-presenting as an outsider, a difficult position from which to gather qualitative data. Researching from an insider position is likely to result in greater trust between the participants and the researcher and also accords the researcher familiarity with the language and values expressed by the participants. Therefore,

the possibility of appropriating knowledge or misunderstanding and misrepresenting participant data is reduced.

I conducted standardized open-ended interviews with each of the women. (See Appendix A for interview questions.) These interviews were recorded with each participant's pre-approval, then transcribed and analyzed. A standardized open-ended interview was suitable for my research because it elicited responses to specific questions while still encouraging participants to explore their thoughts and experiences, adding information they thought relevant, within a conversational format. Thus, the responses I received appeared to be both thoughtful and genuine. Using the theoretical tenets of a materialist feminist critique of globalization and the beauty myth, themes emerged which provided categories for analysis of the transcripts. In analysing the transcripts, interview question responses were grouped into the thematic categories so that I could answer specific research questions. As well, further themes emerged out of the raw data itself and became part of new or subcategories for analysis.

Interpretive text analysis involved critically analyzing and synthesizing a number of works dealing with global economy, colonization and the gendered politics of beauty. These materials, which include books, journal articles, films and Internet resources, have been analysed and interpreted with a materialist feminist lens, which is grounded in recognition of the underlying materiality of all ideological and socio-economic processes, and also of the gendered nature of the politics surrounding these processes. Thus, the roles of both the consumer and producer of beauty products is analysed according to material origins and effects.

As well, my interpretation of texts is grounded in post-modernist discourse, which rejects the modernist ideology of Western development, and the related pro-globalism rhetoric.

### **Limitations to this Research**

This research will lend commentary to the consumption patterns and beliefs of a small group of White, Saskatoon women and is therefore legitimate research to add to the growing body of scholarship covering the topic of globalization and of women's participation in the beauty industry. In linking the two, the research will address a significant gap in the literature. Furthermore, the anti-globalization literature amassing does not generally include investigations into the experiences of the White, Western consumer. Instead, the experiences of "Third World" producers tend to be the focus of current research.

However, my research is limited in terms of comprehensiveness. As a qualitative study, this research involves only ten participants all based in Saskatoon. Therefore, the results reflect in-depth but not widely representative data. As well, the participants are all women whom I encounter within the sphere of neighbourhood and professional or commercial transactions. As I chose all the participants based on my interpretation of their styles of physical presentation, my own biases must be considered as limiting factors in this research. Because of my social location as White woman with middle-class, prairie roots, who identifies with the conventionally feminine style of presentation that characterizes my participants, I am an insider in terms of my relationship to the participants. In this

sense, I am studying women I consider my peers in broad terms of social, cultural, ethnic, class and gender identifiers.

Another bias that should be identified lies in the questions themselves. The questions I designed ask women to talk about their choice of particular beauty products, their thoughts and feelings are about the products, and their thoughts and feelings regarding themselves as beauty consumers. Their responses must, thus, be considered in the context of questions that invite women to engage with a dominant popular view of femininity and beauty. Another possible limitation is related directly to the interview style of research employed, which does not involve formal empirical observation of behaviours. I have relied almost entirely on what my participants said in interviews, interpreting these data in the context of anti-globalization literature, beauty myth literature, and my limited initial observations of the participants' physical self-presentations.

Another limiting parameter of this research is that it deals specifically with women excluding men. It is, however, noteworthy that similar social forces are coming to bear on men. The increased commercialization of male beauty is evident in media messages that target men. Images of sculpted, young male bodies with perfect skin and hair are becoming more visible on the covers of popular magazines, in movies and on television broadcasting. Correspondingly, research has shown that men are increasingly represented among the numbers of Westerners with eating disorders and self-image problems. (Issues for men). That men are beginning to suffer mental health problems related to image in apparent correspondence with a growing emphasis on male beauty in the media definitely

provides useful discussion material about the general effects of media representations of beauty on self-esteem. However, this research project's focus on women, globalization and the beauty myth does not include an analysis of men's experiences with image-based media representations.

With consideration for the limitations described, the strength of this research lies in its ability to lend commentary to processes of globalization and beauty consumption. This research will represent an examination of narrow but highly focused data that are largely missing from globalization literature. By intersecting globalization with the Western beauty myth, and by examining the beliefs and consumption patterns of a small group of Western women, this research constitutes the beginning of a conversation linking the colonization of the female body with the colonization of Third World economies with a particular focus on the role and experiences of the Western consumer.

### **Theoretical Grounding and Definition of Terms**

Patriarchy is the ideological and structural umbrella under which the beauty myth, colonization, and globalization exist. An informed discussion of beauty consumption under globalization requires that I examine the global economic context. Thus, my examination of beauty product consumption will be grounded in the theoretical and historical roots of Western capitalist consumption and within the Western beauty ideology or what Naomi Wolf has termed "the beauty myth." Capitalist consumption and expansion, like the beauty myth itself, can be understood as a facet of the larger patriarchal context, which is based in modernist values. Under patriarchy, colonialism, globalization, consumerism, and the beauty

myth are logically inter-related. In order to discuss these terms, a working definition of each is here provided:

### ***Patriarchy***

Patriarchy is the framework for all cultural, political, social and economic systems in the Western world. Renzetti and Curran (1999, p. 3) define it as a “sex/gender system in which men dominate women, and what is considered masculine is more highly valued than what is considered feminine.” Feminist scholar Diana Relke theorizes four pillars upholding patriarchy: the state, literacy, militarism and a gendered division of labour (D. Relke, WGST 898.3 lecture, October 22, 2000). In the film “Gods of Our Fathers,” military historian Gwynne Dyer calls patriarchy the heart of all inequality (Mullins, 1994). Patriarchy began about 5000 years ago with the beginning of the state, although it has roots extending to 10,000 years ago with the beginning of agriculture. It is within the context of patriarchal global societies that globalization, consumer capitalism and the Western beauty myth thrive. Because patriarchal ideology and political structures comprise the very framework of all other ideologies and economic structures, it has become insidiously invisible; patriarchy has become the proverbial forest unseen for the trees. Therefore, I begin by seeing and describing the patriarchal conditions under which women construct social realities and forge their economic and social survival.

The following facts about women’s economic well-being in the global economy outline the gender inequalities at work under patriarchy. Women working in the paid economy earn less than working men. In some places they

earn as little as 30% of male earnings. The greatest wage gap exists in “Third World” or “developing” nations. In Europe, women earn only 73% of male earnings, and in Canada in 1993, women in full-time employment earned an average of 72% of men's earnings. As well, women as a group comprise the majority of impoverished people and have been most affected by globalization's neo-liberalization policies that have resulted in the erosion of public services. In fact, over 20% of the world's women survive on less than \$1 (U.S.) per day (“Women do two-thirds,” ACTU, 2003).

Furthermore, women are typically over-represented in part-time, casual, and temporary work with the associated low pay and lack of benefits. Women over the age of 65 are half as likely as men to receive pension income. In the world economy women employed in waged work usually occupy positions with little or no authority and do the majority of unpaid domestic and caring work, including child-care, elder care and domestic work. Finally, women and girls are becoming increasingly exploited in the global sex-trade. It is within this broader global patriarchy that globally relatively privileged Western beauty product consumers are studied.

### ***Globalization***

The term “globalization,” rather like the term “patriarchy,” is used in a variety of differing contexts and discourses with an equal number of differing connotations. For the purposes of this research, the term “globalization” will be understood to refer to a process with roots extending to the pre-colonial era of Western expansion and culminating in a huge shift in global economics marked by



the advent of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1986 which concluded with the present WTO policy framework in 1995. This thesis is premised on the idea that globalization is in fact the most recent stage in the evolution of colonialism. The heart of the WTO's policies involves the facilitation of a free-trade style global economy so that the term "globalization" in effect means the globalization of capitalism. Therefore, WTO policies privilege trade interests over national, environmental, and human-rights.

A primary aspect of globalization has been the restructuring of the production/consumption process. In a globalized world, the collecting and processing of raw materials is often fractured from the processing of market items, which itself may be fractured into two or more locations. The marketing and consumption location is generally far-removed from any of the production locales. Furthermore, the stake-holders are often trans or multinational corporations. The interests and roles of the people involved in production and consumption are minimalized and alienated from the interests of distant, bureaucratic corporations.

Another aspect of globalization significant to this research is the social reproduction of work, particularly women's work. The global sweatshop tends to employ a majority of women and girls to do repetitive menial tasks for which the workers are very poorly paid since the labour is considered "unskilled." As I will elaborate on in Chapter Four, the "unskilled" labour often requires fine motor skills and familiarity with duties that women often learn in their domestic roles at home.

Anti-globalism movements have grown increasingly vociferous all over the

world in response to the effects of the WTO policies. Generally, the anti-globalism movement is reacting to the spread of American capitalism and the consumerist culture that supports it, through economic liberalization and the resultant corporatization of national economies. Under globalization, liberalized economies and structural adjustment programs, (SAPs) have amounted to economic and cultural trends that have strengthened the power of industrialized Western nations with deleterious effects on “Third World” countries and on marginalized peoples in Western countries. The poor, often represented by women, in both Western and “Third World” regions have suffered the most as a result of these economic changes. (Allen, 1995; Clarke, 1999; Goldsmith, 1999; James, 2000; Klein, 2000; Lim, 1997; Menzies, 1996; Nader, 1993; Norberg-Hodge, 1999; Robbins, 1999; Shiva, 1997; Thompson, 2001; Weigersma, 1997). A more detailed description of globalization is found in Chapter Three of this thesis.

### ***Modernity and Postmodernity***

Modernity originated with the historical period in the Western world known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by belief in the absolute power of reason, science and order (Burke, 2000). Economically speaking, which accords with the parameters of this thesis, modernity is rooted in values such as individualism and a belief in the absolute objectivity of the marketplace. These two ideas clearly support a capitalist economy. Capitalist expansion, as the foundation of globalization, is rationalized by the modernist idea that human progress ensues from “reasonable” action and market objectivity. The cost of other cultures and economies is seen as natural and inevitable in this process

(Burke, 2000).

Postmodernity, as its name suggests, followed modernity and is characterized by its negation of modernist themes. Postmodernism is based in a theory of non-theory. It rejects the idea of the power of reason as an objective tool and the absoluteness of any epistemology, instead viewing both as local and contextualized by the particular cultural and historical locations out of which they emerge. Thus, postmodernism can be thought of as “epistemological relativism” (Castelein). John Castelein refers to postmodernism as “a mindset of heightened awareness of the relativity of all human claims to objective truth and absolute certainty . . . In this epistemological sense a person is postmodern who is explicitly aware of choosing one worldview among many plausible alternatives” (Castelein).

My discussion of globalization is based in a recognition of the modernist roots of global capitalism, but it deconstructs the “rationalism” of the free market with postmodernist analysis which recognizes the perspective of the privileged at work in globalization theory. Likewise, my analysis of the Western beauty industry’s effects is rooted in an understanding of the larger globalized economy in which it exists.

### *Neo-Colonialism*

Like its predecessor colonialism, neo-colonialism refers to a Western imperialist economic and cultural approach to “Third World” countries. As an extension of Western expansionism colonialism, Western expansionism involved the global colonization of “new” and “primitive” worlds for the economic profits of the colonizing (Western) nations. As a continuation of this expansion,

globalization involves a more recent form of colonization known as “neo-colonialism.” The Diversity Dictionary’s definition of neo-colonialism deconstructs the rhetoric of modernist “development” schemes.

[Neocolonialism is a] term for contemporary policies adopted by international and western "1st world" nations and organizations that exert regulation, power and control over poorer "3rd world" nations disguised as humanitarian help or aid. These policies are distinct from but related to the "original" period of colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas by European nations.

Neo-colonization differs from colonization in method more than effect.

While colonization involved direct military control exerted over “Third World” nations, neo-colonization involves economic control, the details of which will be discussed later in this thesis.

### ***Beauty Myth***

The “beauty myth” is a term coined by Naomi Wolf (1990) whose book by the same name is an important resource in this research. In my research, I use the term “beauty myth” to signify a hegemonic and homogenous standard of beauty for women insisted upon in the Western world. Wolf defines the beauty myth as a cultural narrative in which beauty is a measurable form of currency that women must have in order to succeed in life and in love. She argues that the beauty myth functions as a patriarchal tool, the most cruel and insidious to date. It is promulgated by media as a patriarchal response to women’s increasing power and visibility in a male-dominated world. Its insidious cruelty lies in impossible standards including, but not limited to, an insistence on perpetual youth, thinness and blonde hair, which are often combined with secondary features such as large

breasts and generally, white characteristics.<sup>1</sup> In Chapters Two and Three, I will discuss how the myth functions to attack women in a most insidious way by setting a standard carried by various powerful media and inevitably internalized by the women who consume the media messages, with an oppressive and silencing effect. I will also describe how the beauty myth oppresses women in Eastern and Southern locations as well via globalization's transporting of Western and Northern media and values to geographical and cultural locations far-removed from themselves. I will show theoretical links between globalization and the beauty myth as both function as forms of colonization. Because it cannot be attacked as intrinsically unfair, as employment equity and economic discrimination can, the beauty myth is particularly dangerous. Its ultimate effect is to undermine women's confidence and refocus their attentions on attempting to attain the beauty standard, rather than on issues of social and political justice.

### ***Two Thirds World and Poor Nations***

Up until this point I have used the term "Third World" which originated in the cold war era following WWII. Capitalist countries such as the United States adopted the term "First World" while communist countries such as the USSR were referred to as "Second World" countries (Charlton, 1997). Nations that were former colonies had become booty to be fought over by the competing West and East. These nations came to be referred to as the "Third World" (Visvanathan,

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<sup>1</sup> There is a growing trend in the dominant beauty ideology to represent racialized women as "beautiful." However, these women are chosen for their physical similarities to typically white features. As well, this tendency to construct racialized women as beautiful should be understood with reference to a discourse Edward Said (1979) has called Orientalism. According to Orientalism, the Other is constructed specifically "not-White" and therefore exotic, primitive and sometimes erotic. Constructions of the Other inevitably serve to define the dominant group.

1997). However, the politics of the term is problematic because of its implication of hierarchy and peripherality. The term “developing countries,” which is often used interchangeably with “Third World,” is also problematic because it implies immaturity as well as a proper direction for “development” which is inevitably westward.

A new term that is less problematic than “Third World” or “developing world” is “Two Thirds World” which has economic implications rather than political or geographical ones. The term “Two Thirds World” refers to the fact that at least two thirds of the world’s population lives in impoverished conditions. This term is useful because it takes into account “Fourth World” people – those who live in the First World geographically, but under Third World economic conditions. Both Third and Fourth World people are involved in the production of beauty products, which are, to a large extent, consumed in Western cultural environments. China and Japan are also places of high consumption but are not considered in this thesis because the focus is specifically on Western consumption. For convenience and readability I will interchange the term “Two Thirds World” to refer to economic delineations with the term “poor nations” to refer to delineations that are both geographic and economic. “Poor nations” will refer to nations that, generally speaking, are located in Southern or Eastern hemispheres, and are nations such as those in South America, Africa and Asia often referred to as Third World in popular discourse. “Poor nations” is a useful term because it refers to countries characterized by very low GNP’s and huge debt loads comparative with many Northern and Western nations, and this distinction is a significant factor in my

discussion about globalization. As well, the geographic implications in the term “poor nations” are significant since the majority of production takes place in geographical areas removed from North America and Europe where a large majority of consumption takes place.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONSUMING THE BEAUTY MYTH

### The Beauty Myth as Oppressor

As alluded to in Chapter One's *Definition of Terms*, the beauty myth, as Naomi Wolf (1990) defines it, is a cruel and unattainable standard of beauty imposed on women via regular, repetitive subjection to Western and Northern beauty product advertising and other media like cinema movies, television shows, pornography and popular magazines. Wolf's (1990) argument that women have never before been subjected to such harsh standards of appearance is believable: While it is true that upper-class Western European women have been subjected to painful and sometimes dangerous corsets and upper class Japanese women have been subjected to deforming foot-binding in the past, today's beauty myth is inflicted on women of all socio-economic classes and all ethnic phenotypes via unavoidable media imagery. Via invasive and dangerous surgical interventions, women's bodies are permanently transformed, and via highly advanced technologies, cut and pasted and airbrushed to create images of female beauty impossible to attain. These images, often pornographically displayed, set a standard of "beauty" that has resulted in wide-spread eating disorders, depression and low self-esteem among women. As Wolf (1990) notes, there has probably been some form of a beauty myth for as long as patriarchy has existed. But, like globalization itself, the beauty myth functions as a colonizing process that has reached an unprecedented level of power over its subjects.

I have defined three pertinent qualities about the beauty myth that render its power so pervasive and harmful: 1) The myth sets a standard that is extremely



narrow, excluding a majority of white women and even more Asian, Indigenous and Black women. The myth's insistence on slimness means that a majority of women who are "average" or "fat" by popular standards, are outside of the beauty standard. Furthermore, the standard's general preference for slimness coupled with large breasts, characteristics unlikely to occur often in the same body, have resulted in a large number of women "choosing" surgical implants to give them the required breast size, while simultaneously feeding into a multi-billion dollar diet industry. As Wolf (1990) points out, the numbers of women ill with eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia appears to be related to the popular representation of feminine beauty as necessarily slim. Furthermore, the beauty ideology that usually represents beauty in the form of Caucasian features mean that Black women's body type which often includes more rounded buttocks and facial features with wider noses and kinky hair, render these women necessarily outside of the beauty index. Similarly, Asian women's slanted eyes do not fit into the prescribed Western beauty standard. As referred to in Chapter One, there is a place in the dominant beauty ideology for racialized women, but this place is circumscribed by a discourse of the exotic "Other" which is inevitably rooted in colonialist discourse.

2) Even for the few women deemed "beautiful," the myth's standard may only be fulfilled temporarily as women age. Thus, the currency that beauty provides women is only a short-lived peak rather than the plateau of success that men may experience based on their power, wealth and status. As men age, they may retain their power, popularity and even sex appeal. Consider, for example, the appeal of Jack Nicholson, Hugh Hefner and Bill Clinton, all men over 60 years of

age. These men maintain economic power, popular appeal and the ability to attract the attention of young and “beautiful” women. In contrast, older women are conspicuously invisible in the media or are represented as decidedly not sexy or powerful. Even female news anchors are generally young and “beautiful,” while many male news anchors are grey haired and plain looking.

Very quickly, in spite of their “beauty” and their contributions to the world, actress and feminist activist Jane Fonda, actress and United Nations Children’s Fund campaigner Audrey Hepburn, and actress and founder of a national Aids Foundation Elizabeth Taylor faded out of media focus as their youth gave way to maturity, then old-age. The sparse media recognition they enjoy in “old” age reveals them looking much younger than their true ages; armed with hair colour and cosmetics, aided by cosmetic surgery, and in Fonda’s case, an extreme physical work-out regime, these aging beauties must work harder than they did when younger, to maintain a socially acceptable appearance.

3) Finally, the hegemonic beauty myth is perpetuated to an unprecedented extent transnationally via the advanced technologies of television, cinema, Internet and radio functioning as tools of Western capitalist consumer advertising. The ubiquity of pornography, television advertisements, sit-coms and even news shows carry the dominant beauty ideology in images of Cindy Crawford selling Cover Girl cosmetics and Madonna’s pornographic “Material Girl,” to communities where the majority of women do not resemble the White, Western beauty icons, and where attaining safe drinking water may be a greater priority than the maintenance of a youthful, blonde appearance. Even in North America where the

beauty industry's mandate originates, women are exposed to images of unattainable beauty hundreds of times each week. Without soliciting beauty advertising, we are subjected to images of "beautiful" women, and admonished directly or indirectly to lose another ten pounds or do something about that "fly-away hair," or those "extra pounds" in grocery store magazine racks, television advertisements, internet pop-up ads, city bus advertisements, radio, and billboards. Beauty messages reach us inferentially too, in the visibility of women who embody the beauty myth's standard and the relative invisibility of those who do not, in various news and entertainment media.

Given that these images occur in the context of a patriarchal society in which women's value is overtly linked to their appearance, the hegemonic beauty standard is particularly cruel. Generally speaking, advertisements for products follow a simple formula, which involves first creating insecurities in the viewer, then offering to assuage the insecurities with a product. The impact of the insecurity-inducing message impacts doubly on women who have already learned the importance of beauty to their status as women. Beauty advertisements frequently imply or explicate the inherently inadequate female body. A particularly offensive advertisement is described by Jean Kilbourn in her first "Killing Us Softly" film in which she refers to a TV Guide advertisement warning the reader that "feminine odour" is "everybody's problem." This advertisement's message that the very material core of our femaleness is immanently repugnant is deeply destructive to our sense of ourselves as women. Commonly, beauty advertisements tell women to worry that our skin is too old and wrinkled, our hair too thin or grey, and our bodies

not sexy enough. In a barrage of textual, oral and visual messages, we are told that we are simply not good enough and may not be loved as a result. Wolf (1990) describes how even innocuous items like crackers are sold with a damaging message to women: “With Wheat Thins crackers, ‘you don’t have to hate yourself in the morning’” (p. 75). The obvious play on the double standard of sexuality, through which women have traditionally been divided into two camps - those who are sexual (bad girls) and those who are virginal (good girls) – is made light of in this tongue-in-cheek cracker advertisement’s implication that fat women (and sexually active women) are unlovable. The message is especially dangerous appearing as a “humorous” play-on-words. This frightening acceptance of misogyny in popular parlance suggests that a profound hatred of the female body, especially as it grows large and takes up space, or matures into sexuality, underlies the “playful” jingle.

Feminist academics have identified this barrage of misogynistic messages as inevitably harmful. Naomi Wolf (1990) even compares the beauty myth’s effects to the Medieval German torture chamber, the Iron Maiden. The Maiden was an iron coffin-like box shaped like a woman wearing a smiling face. Cruelly ironic to this outer façade, were long metal spikes inside the box that pierced the victim, inflicting a slow, painful death by blood-loss or starvation. Meanwhile the outer case’s face smiles sweetly. Wolf sees the popular beauty myth as a kind of Iron Maiden because the women trapped within it wear prettily painted faces, but inside may be suffering from internalised misogyny and/or anorexic submission. “The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly

rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs our attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies" (Wolf, 1990, p. 7).

When women have been properly frightened into submitting to the myth, beauty advertisers have achieved their mission, with the result that women *en masse* spend money trying to look "beautiful." Having interpellated an ideology that includes a fear of our own bodies, women's energy is redirected from the real threats with which we are faced. Wolf argues that "the international consequence of indoctrinating newly enfranchised women into the Rites of the beauty myth is that they are politically sedated" (p. 101). Statistics show that as a group women are more economically and physically vulnerable than men, so logically, should have more reason to resist status quo institutions. Women are more often victims of sexual assault, spousal abuse and hiring inequities than men. But "politically sedated" or frozen with fear, we have been taught to believe in our inherent unattractiveness, hence unloveability, and from this demoralized position are less likely to believe in our right to challenge authoritative voices.

As a basis for understanding how the myth functions to hurt women, it is important to examine its particular location at this nexus of history and geography, a location in which women hold significant political and social power compared with previous eras. Wolf argues that women's new freedoms, including (at least in theory and in law) equal access to education, political office, and social status, are being resisted by hegemonic forces in the form of the beauty myth. In other words, the beauty myth is a backlash to feminism. Wolf (1990) argues that three primary

tactics are used to promote the beauty myth - hunger, fear of a chaotic future, and indebtedness – expressed through advertisements that encourage us to eat less and to fear our bodies’ natural aging process as something “out of control” requiring intervention and “protection” (p. 103). These three tactics, she explains, are the same ones that have been used by political leaders throughout the world to keep an “aggrieved population humble and acquiescent . . . women have gained the whole world but profit little because they fear themselves, their fat, their wrinkles, their bodies” (p. 103). From here, it is easy to see how the beauty myth functions as an apparently innocuous but actually insidious form of control over women. The injustice of denying women equal access to political or employment opportunities is obvious, while the insecurities and subsequent “political sedation” created by a demoralizing beauty standard are less immediately discernible.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Technology’s Role in Spreading the Dominant Beauty Ideology***

The beauty myth’s standard, perpetuated by ubiquitous media imagery and text, has become internalized not only by women in the Northern and Western locations, but also, with cultural modifications, by women in Southern and Eastern locations who are exposed to more Western advertising and products under globalization. The beauty and fashion industry is located at a particularly interesting intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. As a sector of a global capitalist economy, it is an enormously profit-oriented industry, which has the capacity through increasingly sophisticated and pervasive media to influence the beliefs and practices of a market of unprecedented size. More than ever before,

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter Three includes further discussion about how the beauty myth, propagated by the fashion and beauty industry, is theoretically and materially linked to colonialism.

technologies such as television, radio and the Internet globally transmit a dominant beauty ideology in which high-pressured, flashy insinuations on a very narrowly defined White, youthful beauty at all costs seems out of place and even ludicrous.

Wendy Chapkis (1986) comments on the absurdity and obvious racism of the hegemonic beauty standard:

Adults thus [in reference to beauty contests] continue to pose the question “who is the fairest” as though it were meaningful, even when the category of “them all” includes women of diverse races and nationalities. Indeed, female beauty is becoming an increasingly standardized quality throughout the world. A standard so strikingly white, Western and wealthy it is tempting to conclude there must be a conscious conspiracy afoot. (p. 37)

Only a few years later, Wolf would extend Chapkis’s argument to her own assertion that a conspiracy does exist in the form of a backlash to feminist advancements.

It is important to note that the Western beauty ideology has not been accepted in Eastern and Southern locales to the same degree that it has been in Western cultural locales. Significantly, though, a trend of succumbing to the White Western ideal has been noticed in the representations of media icons of colour and in the sales of beauty products and practises geared toward a “whitening” effect. For example, cosmetics companies are marketing and selling bleaching skin creams to women and men of colour all over the globe (YouthNet UK) with names like “Clear Essence,” “Fair and White” and “Maxi White” (Cordially Yours Web Cite). The media icon Oprah Winfrey, a Black woman, presents herself with straightened hair, while Black rock star Michael Jackson has had his body surgically and medically altered so that he looks Caucasian. However, the Western beauty ideal is also

rejected or modified by Black, Asian and Indigenous peoples living according to non-Western cultural models. Patience Elabor-Idemudia, a Black Canadian sociologist, reports that in her experiences, many Black, well-informed, Nigerian people frown at the use of skin-whitening creams and view users as having low self-esteem or an identity crisis (P. Elabor-Idemudia, personal communication, May 29, 2004). Likewise, media pop-idol Michael Jackson has received a significant amount of criticism for “trying to be White” and is often considered an oddity for this reason.

In evidence of the persistence of cultural differences in social constructions of beauty in spite of the globalization of a dominant ideal, Doctor Patience Elabor-Idemudia told me that when she visits Nigeria, her friends and family tell her she looks thin. Yet in Canada she is told that she appears heavy (P. Elabor-Idemudia, personal communication, May 29, 2004). This anecdote reveals that a universal standard of body size does not apply to both countries. It also lends credence to the suggestion that while there is evidence that Asian, African and South American women have, to some degree, accepted the dominant beauty ideology, this acceptance is limited and often modified to suit local cultural norms. Not unlike the Western world’s practise of appropriating artefacts and ideologies from other cultures and adapting their use and meaning to fit Western ideologies, Western artefacts and ideologies are in turn appropriated then adapted to fit the needs of the culture in question. A difference is that Western cultures tend to have globally dominant voices in terms of technological, economic and political might.

### ***Implications of the Beauty Myth in a Globalized World***



It is true that in North American media such as television and magazines, we are seeing more representations of “beautiful” Asian, South American and Black women. (However, we rarely, if ever, see popular images of “beautiful” Indigenous North American women.) But even Black and Asian “beauties” such as Halle Berry and Lucy Lu have physical characteristics that conform to the hegemonic beauty ideology. For example, as a Black woman, Halle Berry’s skin tone appears quite fair, and she has a very narrow nose. Likewise, the Asian Lucy Lu is relatively tall with rather roundly shaped eyes rendering her appearance within the standards of the White beauty index. Furthermore, the appearance of “ethnic” beauties in Hollywood’s line-up does not necessarily attest to a broadening of the beauty index parameters. Instead, non-White “beautiful” women occupy a liminal position as both inside and outside of hegemonic beauty standards.

Edward Said has argued (Alternative Radio, 1993) that akin to colonial discourse, Orientalist discourse represents the Other as an exotic and often erotic trope. Certainly this exoticizing/eroticising of the Other has been a European colonial tradition evident in the dehumanizing display of Sara Baartman as the Hottentot Venus to “scientific” Western eyes, in the romanticized images of “primitive” Haitian girls and women by the French painter Paul Gauguin, and in the long colonial history of eroticising Asian women as “naturally” sexually skilled and available. Lillian Robinson (1994) describes the language of sex tour operators in Thailand today who speak of Thai women as “slim, sunburnt and sweet. . .

masters of the art of making love by nature” (p. 256).<sup>3</sup> While Asian cultures have their own traditions of subjecting women to various levels of domestic and sexual subservience, European colonials added another layer of oppression to Asian women by further “Othering” them based on racist ideologies and the primitivism associated with modernist discourse.

Said (1979) argues that at the roots of colonial ideology, Orientalism is less about Oriental peoples than it is about Westerners in that it functions as a cultural gage to define a Western identity. The theory is that by describing a set of characteristics ascribed to the “Other,” Europeans have identified themselves, as “not-Oriental” or “not Other.” Integral to this idea is Western superiority, which means that the Orient is necessarily perceived as inferior and backward.

Orientalism encompasses the construction of a vast and complex Orient that Westerners “discovered” in the colonial period, consequently examining, displaying and giving meaning to peoples and artefacts through military, scientific, anthropological, linguistic and cultural disciplines (L. Bell, ART 323.3 lecture, May 21, 2001). The Western imagination has constructed an Orient in which prominent features include harems wrought with primitive sexuality, strange religions associated with savage men, and generally unenterprising (lazy) people. Oriental peoples are constructed as inherently more primitive, hence more sexual and violent, and less moral and “civilized” than Western peoples. “Mysteriousness” is often suggested or explicitly associated with the Oriental Other. This construction of the Orient amounts to an adventuresome playground for the West to examine,

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<sup>3</sup> Western eroticisation of the female Asian “Other” was particularly clear in the Vietnam War when Thailand and the U.S. government contracted an agreement to provide American soldiers with “rest and recreation services” (Robinson, 1994, p. 255).

explore and enjoy, while ultimately exercising political, cultural and economic control (Bell, 2001). Said (1979) argues that Orientalist discourse has ultimately functioned as a theoretical control mechanism for European imperialism.

The Western beauty myth has also functioned as a colonizing and Othering tool of the dominant powers. The myth colonizes the bodies and minds of women by interpellating them into believing that attaining beauty is very important to their social and inevitably economic status. The colonization has been successful when women focus their energies on trying to attain beauty by purchasing and using beauty products such as cosmetics, hair products, fashionable clothing and accessories and submitting themselves to diets and exercise routines geared toward attainment of the perfect body. At the extreme end of beauty consumption are women who voluntarily submit to surgical alteration of their bodies in their goal of achieving beauty. Like raw materials, women's bodies are seen as potential needing to be processed. The superior stance taken by the colonizers of India, Africa and the Americas that engaged in missionaries to "save" the natives from their "primitive" state and that attempted to impose on them an ideology in keeping with the colonizers' culture is not unlike the superior stance taken by the beauty industry which insists that women's status is directly related to being "beautiful" according to its own limiting criteria. Thus, "beauty" becomes analogous to "civilization" – both are constructed as naturally desirable goals.

However, although I recognize a clear relationship between imperial colonization and the colonization of women's bodies through the beauty myth, and that this relationship functions on both analogous and concrete levels, it is important

to recognize nuances in colonialism. Clearly, the processes of colonization that are exacted through beautifying behaviours are related but different in form to the colonization processes inflicted on Asian, American and African peoples by Western nations that relied on militarized force and policies of genocide.

***The Beauty Myth as Commercialized Classism, Sexism and Racism***

Since middle-class women have been sequestered from the world, isolated from one another, and their heritage submerged with each generation, they are more dependent than men are on the cultural models on offer, and more likely to be imprinted by them.  
(Naomi Wolf, 1990, p. 58)

Wolf (1990) provides strong evidence that the beauty myth's impact falls particularly hard on middle-class women because traditionally they have been locked into the "domestic sphere," isolated by a barrage of social fictions about what is naturally feminine (p.10). Thus, educated, relatively free and economically advantaged First World women "do not experience the fullness" of our freedom because we are enslaved by "a secret underlife poisoning our freedom" (p.10). This "secret underlife" is the self-hatred behind eating disorders, cosmetic surgery and the consumption of beauty products. According to Wolf (1990), it is caused by the beauty myth, which she summarizes in this excerpt:

The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. (p. 12)

As Wolf (1990) explains, “none of this is true.” Instead of being a natural and absolute quality, beauty is a currency system based on politics.

The specifics of what makes a woman “beautiful” and even the supposed “natural” desire for women to attain it and for men to desire such women are culturally specific rather than natural or universal. Wolf shows us that other locations in history and culture challenge the Western ideal. Among the Maori people of New Zealand, for example, a “fat vulva” is considered beautiful, while the Padung of Thailand see beauty in droopy breasts (Wolf, 1990, p.12). Flesh that is fat or hanging may be associated with older women who have been relegated outside of the dominant beauty ideology. Clearly, these ideals contrast profoundly with the female beauty images that we see in Western media.

Moreover, the idea that beauty is embodied specifically in the female form is neither universal nor ahistorical. Classical Greek society focused on beauty in the male body, idealizing its perfect form in sports - especially the Olympic Games - and in art. The socially common practice of marrying for legal progeny while simultaneously maintaining homosexual relationships with young, beautiful men was consistent with the idealization of male beauty. Furthermore, the Western tropes of the “naturally” polygamous male able to attract young and beautiful women and the “naturally” monogamous woman whose sexual attractiveness fades with age is quite specific to patriarchal societies. Pre-patriarchal societies from the Mediterranean region prior to 700 B.C. mythologized stories about a queen who yearly took a new young male lover to mate with, then disposed of him. Traces of

this myth are evident in the story of Venus and Adonis, and of Isis and Osiris among others (Wolf, 1990).

Even today, the Nigerian Wodaabe culture is matriarchal. In contrast to Western societies, Wodaabe women tend to be economically strong, while men's physical beauty is greatly valued. In fact, the Wodaabes hold contests in which women judge the beauty and attractiveness of men, who spend hours applying enticing make-up and clothing before presenting themselves seductively for the women's approval (Wolf, 1990, p.13). At these contests, it is customary for women to choose a mate. Even a married woman may choose another man for sexual relations or a permanent relationship if she finds someone physically more attractive than her husband. It is interesting to note that in the patrilineal, patriarchal West, men are economically dominant and typically judge women's beauty, while in an African culture in which women dominate economically, men are subjected to beauty standards and judgment. This reversal suggests an inverse relationship between economic power and physical objectification. Wolf (1990) explains this inversed relationship thus: "Women are mere "beauties" in men's culture so that culture can be kept male" (p. 59). The salient issue is that the Western beauty myth is culturally rather than biologically determined. Moreover, culturally speaking, the social prescriptions for femininity have political implications.

### **Choice**

The question of women's choice regarding gendered self-presentation in a patriarchal context requires an analysis of the material conditions in which the

choice takes place. Choice, or the lack of it, does not exist in absolute terms. In terms of beauty praxis, choice is circumscribed by political, cultural and social parameters. Feminists have argued that as an expression of patriarchal values, the hegemonic beauty ideal is a site for analysis and struggle. The issue of whether or not women who adopt the hegemonic ideal do so freely or coercively has been contentious among feminists. Some women have argued that presenting themselves according to popular standards is their personal choice, and as such should be supported by feminists. Others, maintaining that the “personal is political” argue that women cannot simultaneously succumb to patriarchy while resisting it.

In addressing this issue, Jennifer Saul (2003) argues that the two sides are not incompatible. She agrees that styles of self-presentation fall into the realm of individual choice; however, those choices occur within a broader cultural and political context. To argue that a woman has the right to the enjoyment she may associate with shopping for and using beauty and fashion products does not detract from Saul’s assertion that these behaviours are appropriate objects of feminist analysis. In the following example Saul (2003) explains her point:

Suppose that there came to be a fashion in twenty-first century America for adult female foot-binding, and 90 percent of women had their feet bound, rendering it difficult to walk and causing permanent damage. Imagine also that these women reported that they genuinely wanted this, and found it enjoyable. The fact that women reported their experience in this way would not keep us from worrying about the fashion and its effects, or from criticizing it. And that seems the right reaction. (p.142)

Similarly, genital cutting, commonly practised in some African and Middle Eastern cultures has been a topic of analysis and concern among feminists both East and West. It may appear that by assigning political implications to subjective experiences feminists are engaged in acts of patronizing dispossession. However, all experiences occur within larger sociological patterns that are limited and defined by culture, which is always politically laden. Inevitably the difference between subjective experience and outsider analysis is simply one of shifting perspective. One need not discount the other. It is possible for a woman to choose the path of least resistance in terms of self-presentation in a world in which her appearance will be immediately and harshly judged, with awareness that she has made that choice.

Another perspective on the subject of women's styles of self-presentation is related to cultural conditioning. The structuralist Ferdinand Saussure said that since language is based in binary opposition, such as good/bad, white/black or female/male, and since we think in language, we think in binaries. Our thoughts are limited by the tools – the language - available to us. Similarly, our understanding of experience is mediated by the limited tools of cultural meaning. For example, women who enjoy “beautifying” themselves by applying make-up and perfume are participating in behaviours considered naturally “feminine” as opposed to masculine. If, given the two culturally prescribed binaries, a woman identifies as “feminine,” she is likely to behave in accordance with the cultural practises attached to femininity. That is, she is likely to use the tools that have constructed her very identity.



A third perspective involves the outright rejection of the hegemonic beauty ideal. In *Pretty in Punk*, Lauraine Leblanc (1999) describes her choice to resist the dominant beauty ideal by adopting a Punk image. Resisting popular beauty standards inevitably requires courage. Any kind of political activism requires vision, effort, time, and material support. If presenting ourselves in counter-culture ways is likely to result in not being hired for the job that allows us to survive, then we are not likely to engage in that kind of self-presentation. In order to reject the normative standard of self-presentation, it is probably fair to suggest that one requires a certain survival safety net. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the first wave of feminism originated among White, middle-class women, for these women had the material means to engage in the struggle. Unlike their working class sisters, they were often educated, materially comfortable and unemployed, therefore not bound by survival needs.

The issue of choice regarding gendered social behaviours is disputatious because of the patriarchal cultural circumvention of any specific “choice.” Furthermore, the association of some feminisms with postmodernism, which emphasises the possibility of a number of truths rather than one “Truth,” directly implicates any notions of objectivity. According to postmodernist feminism, reality is mediated by unique compilations of biological, historical, cultural, social, economic and political factors. Thus, all epistemologies are historically and socially located hence have no claims to universal objectivity. Accordingly, as a Western, White, middle-class, lesbian woman of Ukrainian descent living in the Canadian prairies, I cannot claim a thorough understanding of the choices of a

woman whose social realities may differ from mine. Georgen Gilliam (2003, par. 6) expresses the notion of multiple points of view thus: “Postmodern Feminism is the ultimate acceptor of diversity. Multiple truths, multiple roles, multiple realities are part of its focus. There is a rejection of an essential nature of women, of one way to be a woman.” Postmodernism has moved us beyond the 1970’s dictum, “the personal is political” to a more middle ground in which many feminists have come to realize the need for cautious respect of differences between women whose cultural, physical, socio-economic, or sexual realities differs from their own. There are many “right” paths of resistance and liberation.

Given these cautions, it is still true that since personal experiences occur within culture, which socially constructs all meaning, feminist analyses of the ideology and praxis of feminine beauty constitute valid examinations of sociological signs. As Jennifer Saul (2003) argues, “women’s beauty-related pursuits are not criticisms of women who engage in these pursuits. Instead, they result from the examination of cultural patterns” (p. 142). As Saul convincingly relates, women are not “choosing” to make themselves look more African, Indian, or Jewish, for example, but are inevitably “choosing” to conform to a standard of beauty that has racial and political overtones. Black women, for example, have their hair straightened in great numbers. Saul reports that 68% of *Essence* readers in 1989 had their hair straightened (2003, p. 143). Eugene Kaw (1998) tells us that Asian women are having their eyes surgically altered to appear more Western. She notes the medicalization of racism expressed in Western doctors’ discourse.

Quoting from one “Dr. Smith” she recounts his description of the Asian face as one inherently lacking in positive traits:

The social reasons [for Asian Americans to want double eyelids and nose bridges] are undoubtedly continued exposure to Western culture and the realization that the upper eyelid *without* a fold tends to give a *sleepy* appearance, and therefore a more *dull* look to the patient. Likewise, the flat nasal bridge and lack of nasal projection can signify *weakness* in one’s personality and by lack of extension, a *lack of force* in one’s character. (Kaw, 1998, p. 175)

The words Kaw has italicized indicate the negative personality characteristics that are medically associated with Asian facial traits. In a clear example of the practice Said calls Othering, Asian characteristics, like the characteristics of any colonized people, are equated with the opposite of the colonizing culture. Clearly, women’s “choice” to engage in the beauty myth must be seen within a larger context in which hierarchies of class, race and gender dictate what is “beautiful.”

### ***Althusser, Interpellation and Choice***

Structuralist Louis Althusser theorized that individuals are “interpellated” or called into their positions as subjects by conforming to community values. In other words, people obtain a sense of their proper place in society, self-esteem, and a sense of power within their society, by conforming to the dominant ideology (L. Forsyth, WGST 898.3 lecture, November 16, 2000). Ironically agency, albeit a compliant sort of agency, is obtained by a process of succumbing to social pressures to conform. Thus, a subject performs his or social identity by conforming to the roles, including gender roles, dictated by that society. Choice then, according to Althusser, is an illusion (Forsyth, WGST 898.3 lecture, November 16, 2000).

In the Western-style globalized world, the mass media plays a very significant role in both reflecting and creating social ideologies. Naomi Klein (1990) speaks of the mass media's advertising power as reaching its apex with the brand. The brand name brought us not only products, but feelings, values and identity. If, as Klein suggests, consumers become immune to advertising after awhile, then advertisers must forever present sharper, "edgier" messages to consumers. Similarly, the relatively bland sit-coms and soap-operas of the 1960's and 1970's have grown into shows full of increasingly graphic sex and violence. The newest genre, the reality show, has reached a penultimate degree of voyeurism, by featuring the less savoury aspects of human behaviours as "entertainment." While some individuals' engagement with media representations may involve criticisms and even rejections of messages conveyed, many continue to acquiesce to the authority of the highly technologically mediated messenger of those messages. Whether we choose to reject or accept the mass media in our lives, the majority of Westerners are inundated with mass media messages on a daily basis, which logically, must be having some effects.

Althusser's theory of subjectivity through interpellation is helpful in understanding the relationship between the individual and the mass media. Kerry Braye (2001) explains:

The subject (viewer, listener, reader) is constituted by the text, and the power of the mass media resides in their ability to 'position' the subject in such a way that representations within the text are reflections of everyday reality. Once interpellated, subjects become part of a unified social structure (Curran, 1977: 25). For example, the interpellated subject of the home gym advertisement would thus order the gym; behave as if bodybuilding as rigorous exercise was a necessity, something of central importance. (Par. 8)

It is easy to see how beauty advertisements function in the same way. Women view or read the advertiser's text then behave as if it is very important for their bodies to look a certain way, and spend time and money in attempting to achieve this look. There is clearly a large grey area between being fully interpellated by these messages and resisting them, and I would expect that the majority of Western women who consume such messages are located within this large grey area. However, the binaries serve as useful tools to understanding how individuals may interact with media messages about gender and the beauty myth.

### **Materialist Feminist Analysis of Capitalism**

If individual subjectivity is a product of interpellation according to a particular culture's dominant ideology, then the production of culture itself must be understood, in order to analyze women's beauty-related behaviours within that culture. Materialist feminists argue that all ideologies are rooted in underlying materialities. According to this discourse, the dominant beauty ideology is also materially rooted. Rosemary Hennessy and Chris Ingraham and (1997) offer a theory of capitalism, which serves as an underlying foundation for my discussion about the political implications of Western beauty ideology:

Under capitalism, the production of the means to satisfy human needs has taken the form of relations of production in which resources that are collectively produced are not collectively controlled or shared. Those few who own or control the forces for producing (technology) what is needed to satisfy human needs do so because of the surplus value (profit in the form of capital) that they accrue through the unpaid labour power of many. Knowledge making is an integral material aspect of this arrangement because knowledges – what is considered true or the ways things are – can legitimize how labour and power are divided. For this reason, culture – the domain of knowledge production – is both a stake and a site of class struggle. Historically, the

oppression of women and people of color through patriarchal and racist ideologies has been necessary to and embedded in this fundamental structure of capitalist production. (p. 4-5)

The idea that epistemology is both culturally and economically based is highly significant in how we define both the impetus and effects of the beauty industry. For example, on a very broad level, globalized capitalism is the structure in which the beauty industry functions. Since capitalism is systemically structured to maintain the oppression of certain groups of people in order to maintain its profit-making goal, and since the beauty industry is a thriving sector of global capitalism, then clearly, the associated culture of beauty consumption must be imbued with the tools of social oppression. Hence, capitalism promotes an ideal of feminine beauty that is primarily about being young, White and thin. This image helps to maintain the social tropes of men as strong, rational, and powerful and of women as weak sexual objects for male pleasure. These identities obviously have huge implications in terms of power and the social division of labour.

All of these links though, do not answer the question, why is the beauty myth as powerful and pervasive as it is? To answer this question, it is important to begin with the historical roots of the beauty myth. The myth's rise to power is directly related to both the rise of capitalism and the rise of women's political and economic power.

### **Historical and Political Roots of the Beauty Myth**

It may seem anomalous that when Western middle-class women wield more economic and political power than ever before, the beauty myth is as strong as it is. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, Wolf (1990) argues that it is precisely this

social context of growing female power within the context of patriarchy that provides fertile soil for the beauty myth to flourish as a backlash. The myth's power, she explains, began to climb in the middle 1800's coinciding with the Industrial Revolution and the growing appearance of the social category of the middle-class woman. At this time, technology was in a growth spurt. New technologies such as photography meant that for the first time images of "beautiful" women could be disseminated to the masses. Concurrently, the Western world was becoming increasingly urbanized, and the social class of the stay-at-home housewife grew to complement the role of the husband who worked at the factory. To maintain this pattern, social myths of the natural division between a public and private sphere developed (Relke, 2001). Part of the social myth-making involved the beauty myth, which "masqueraded as [a] natural component of the feminine sphere, the better to enclose those women inside it" (Wolf, 1990, p. 15). Since feminist gains from the late 1800's had culminated in political and civic freedom in the first wave of feminism, followed by reproductive and economic freedoms in the second wave, the beauty myth's hold became increasingly important:

This reimposed onto liberated women's faces and bodies all the limitations, taboos, and punishments of the repressive laws, religious injunctions and reproductive enslavement that no longer carried sufficient force. Inexhaustible but ephemeral beauty work took over from inexhaustible but ephemeral housework. As the economy, law, religion, sexual mores, education, and culture were forcibly opened up to include women more fairly, a private reality colonized female consciousness. By using ideas about "beauty," it reconstructed an alternative female world with its own laws, economy, religion, sexuality, education, and culture, each element as repressive as any that had gone before. (Wolf, 1990, p.160)

Wolf's use of the term "colonized" in reference to the beauty myth's effects on women is noteworthy. Maria Mies (1987) describes the process of "housewifization," which coincides with the colonization of non-Western peoples. This process exemplifies a patriarchal construction of a social category that would come to define half the population. Mies engages with the theory of Werner Sombart, who argues that housewifization began among the aristocratic mistresses of kings and merchants dealing in foreign produce. He suggests that while kings were sending emissaries to foreign lands to procure exotic items, their wives and mistresses were creating the needed luxury market for these ventures (Mies, 1987). The social category of the domestic engineer, which derived from the domestication of luxury, fell to the unemployed upper-class wife (Mies, 1987). Once the housewife was a strongly entrenched social category in Europe, it was transplanted to the colonies, which were being subjugated into Westernization. As Mies explains, while European men were colonizing their own wives at home, they were colonizing whole nations across the seas.

Therefore, the beauty myth's hold over middle-class women is rooted in Western expansionism. As the industrial revolution spawned the invention of the middle-class housewife and spread through the rise in image-making technologies, the growth of capitalism brought with it the need for a consumer. The feminist movement that would follow provided more reason to keep women oppressed, so the growth of a beauty industry focused on women's bodies and encouraging women to purchase products to enhance their looks was a patriarchally logical



result.

As consumers of beauty products, Western women are doubly victimized: First, they are socialized through myriad cultural messages into some level of belief that their value as women is rooted in their physical attractiveness. Then they are socialized to see themselves as the primary consumers in a society premised on a huge social myth about consumption. In the West, the idea that freedom and choice are cornerstones of democracy seems to have become translated into the idea that freedom means being able to sell and buy whatever we choose – thus, “freedom,” in Western terms, is rooted in capitalist consumption. Women, as a traditionally marginalized group in Western patriarchy, may be particularly vulnerable to the promise of power and freedom held within our social myth about consumption. Every social “problem,” from body odours, to feeling depressed to ageing has a “solution” that can be bought at the mall. Thus, women learn that it is important that they remain as young and as “beautiful” as possible, avoiding the “evils” of fat, age and graying hair by buying the right product.

### **The Myth’s Power: How Does it Work?**

Given feminism’s progress in the last century and a half and Western middle-class women’s dramatically elevated economic and political power, how does the beauty myth maintain its hold over women? Western middle-class women are more educated and have less material restraints than ever before, which suggests that they need not supplicate themselves to an ideology that places unreasonable demands on them. Yet, in spite of education and economic power, women still spend hours, dollars, and emotional energy on trying to meet the myth’s

expectations. Even (and perhaps specifically) the most successful women may harbor inner fears about their weight, aging bodies and sexual attractiveness. Beauty magazine covers with titles like “Lose Weight, Get Energy, Destress Now!” . . . “Two Weeks to a Better But” (*Marie Claire*, July 2003) and “Get Naked! Does Stripping Down Stress You Out?” (*Cosmopolitan*, July, 2003) speak volumes about the messages women are buying.

Among my research participants, the women who reported higher media consumption in the form of television and beauty magazines generally expressed lower levels of confidence in their appearance than those who consumed less popular media. Five out of the ten women who participated in my research admitted to reading beauty magazines and familiarly named favorite titles. Two others, although answering that they did not read beauty magazines, later made references to reading them when in public waiting rooms. The women who reported that they regularly read popular women’s magazines tended to rate their own beauty lower than the women who did not read beauty magazines. For example, Susan who reads *Elle*, *Vogue* and *Shape* rated her level of satisfaction with her appearance as only four out of ten and made frequent disparaging comments about herself during the course of the interview. These comments were always made in a humorous fashion – “How do I get ready in the morning? Put a paper bag over my head! Just kidding!” – but still speak of her insecurity regarding her body. Conversely, Linda, who does not read women’s magazines, expressed greater confidence about her body and defined beauty according to her personal values rather than the popular beliefs.

Wolf argues that beauty magazines offer women a locus of women's culture within a context in which male culture is predominantly reported and reflected in the mass media. Thus, women may find a sense of solidarity in reading women's magazine where, ironically, along with the beauty ads, many feminist issues are brought to the mainstream (Wolf, 1990). Articles about how to survive rape, how to cope with a family and a career, and how to make sure your sexual needs are met are as common-place as the ads that tell us our thighs are too wide and our skin too flabby. Symbolically, it is as if the beauty ads with their esteem-lowering messages are the price we must pay to read the empowering feminist editorial. Materially, the advertisements literally pay the price of production so hold the power to dictate the tone of the advertising messages and even some of the editorial itself. Gloria Steinem (1995) describes the difficulty she experienced as editor of *Ms Magazine*, a no-longer-existent feminist publication, in trying to balance economic need with editorial integrity. Beauty product advertisers' economic support was contingent on editorial support for the use of beauty products. Steinem's struggle echoes the struggles of my participants and probably many other women who must balance their need for social and economic survival against their own integrity.

Thus, women's magazines function simultaneously as a medium for women's voices, while simultaneously preaching the dominant capitalist prescription for femininity. In this way, not unlike the fractured voices of the women with whom I spoke, the beauty magazines voice a kind of Orwellian "doublespeak," which may leave the audience, like the proletariat in *1984*, unable to distinguish fact from fiction in the "crazy-making" text. Jennifer Saul (2003) epitomizes the dominant

culture's message to women in the following statement: "a key message of many of these norms . . . is that women are, by and large, *simply not good enough*" (p.152). She quotes from an advice manual in which women are admonished to make the following beauty resolution: "*I hereby resolve to be more attractive!*"

Our cultural narrative is one in which we have learned that interesting things happen to beautiful women, not plain ones (Wolf, 1990). In fairytales and folk-stories, the heroine is always beautiful and often juxtaposed against a plain or ugly woman who plays the antagonist. According to the findings of Maureen Baker (1985), who studied the aspirations of adolescent girls, even young girls know that they have two mutually exclusive options: These girls saw that the "attractive" and "fashionable" girls received more attention from boys than the "smart" ones (p. 98). Since Baker's findings also report that girls were more likely to see themselves as married in their adult lives than boys were, her study suggests that sexual/romantic relationships were more important to girls than being "smart." Congruently, these girls would expend a significant amount of effort toward the achievement of "attractiveness."

Baker's data also links popular media consumption with beauty-oriented goals. She found a positive relationship among girls, between television consumption and a lower career oriented attitude. She hypothesises that watching television focuses girls' attention on appearance and glamour rather than on achievement and education. This plausibility is sound but disturbing, especially since in Baker's study, significantly higher percentages of girls than boys listed television watching and shopping as preferred leisure activities.

The culturally prescribed tropes of the beautiful, loved woman or the plain, unloved woman, is apparent in both traditional and popular texts. As Wolf (1990) describes,

women are allowed a mind or a body but not both. . . [Consider] Leah and Rachel in the *Old Testament* and Mary and Martha in the New; Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* . . . Ginger and Mary Ann in *Gilligan's Island* . . . Mary and Rhoda in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*; and so forth. (pp. 59-60)

As Wolf's work suggests, the plain/beautiful trope is all too familiar to Western media consumers. As women, we learn by it that we can be *either* beautiful and desirable *or* plain and socially rejected. These two binaries have implications for the issue of choice in terms of participating in the beauty myth. When one of the "options" is to be unloved, we are likely to become fearful of failing as women and work harder to become "beautiful" so that we will be loved. While this conclusion represents a simplified analysis, it provides a useful model for understanding the simplified either/or binary presented by the beauty myth. Our social and physical survival depends on being beautiful.

My research strongly supports this idea. All of the ten women I interviewed stated that their appearance is very important to them, and that they would not consider going to work without first applying make-up. Each of the interviewees described fairly extensive rituals of preparing their bodies both for work and for a social night out. The average amount of reported time spent getting ready to go to work was 35 minutes. When I asked them how using beauty products affected their social and professional lives, the overriding response was that beauty products were important. Tanitia, who underwent cosmetic dental surgery, stated that its effect

had been on her self-esteem, which she felt affected her social and professional relations:

- Tanita: The change was in me because I felt better about myself. So I don't know that there was really any kind of direct affect on how other people saw me. Because some people didn't notice the difference, but it made a big difference on how I felt about myself.
- Kim: Would you say it increased your confidence?
- Tanita: Absolutely.

Similarly, Mary reported that using make-up was important to her self-esteem:

- Kim: In what way does using or not using beauty products affect your social or personal life?
- Mary: It definitely boosts my self-confidence. It puts me in a good mood. If I put something on and I'm not happy with what I'm wearing and I go out, I tend to be a little withdrawn because I'm looking at what everyone else is wearing and it drives me crazy. . . . if I'm not completely 100% happy with my appearance that night or that day then I do find myself really withdrawn from the crowd. I'd rather just be a couch potato and watch TV or just spend it with family.

Generally, self-esteem was a theme often repeated when the women in my study talked about how beauty product use affected them. Often the respondees explained that looking "clean and neat" was important, or that hygiene, rather than beauty was the issue. Yet they described a routine of preparing for work that extended well beyond merely cleaning their bodies. Hair is washed and conditioned then moussed and sprayed before being blow-dried, curled, or straightened. Faces are toned, moisturized then made-up in careful step-by-step routines. This contradiction between the stated importance of being simply clean

and tidy versus the actual getting-ready activities, which involve elaborate and sophisticated use of make-up and toiletries, is exemplified in my interview with Collette:

Kim: And how do you feel that using beauty products affects your professional life?

Collette: I think it's important to look good at work, you know, look presentable and neat and tidy rather than come to work looking tired and drawn out. Stuff like that. So for me it definitely is important.

Kim: Would you come to work without makeup?

Collette: Never, never, never!

Although feminism has become mainstreamed since the second wave, my research corroborates with Naomi Wolf's claim that the beauty myth has held fast in spite of women's recently gained freedoms. Wolf (1990) argues that the beauty myth of today has served to replace the "feminine mystique" of the 1950's as a social tool of repression.

Feminists, inspired by Friedan, broke the stranglehold on the women's popular press of advertisers for household products, who were promoting the feminine mystique; at once, the diet and skin care industries became the new cultural censors of women's intellectual space, and because of their pressure, the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood. The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; "beauty pornography" – which for the first time in women's history artificially links a commodified "beauty" directly and explicitly to sexuality – invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth. (Wolf, 1990, p. 11)

Because it functions at a hidden level beneath legalities and human rights policies, the beauty myth may be the last bastion of women's oppression and perhaps the hardest to destroy because its oppressive nature is generally not

immediately recognizable. Furthermore, the illusion that it is a woman's personal choice to present herself as she likes since there are no overtly coercive structures such as military or legal forces insisting that she have breast implants or spend thousands of dollars annually on beauty products and services, is an argument that may seem sound. But this highly contestable appearance of choice, as I argued previously under the heading "Choice," is a factor that only serves to make the myth's power particularly insidious, and hence a less obvious target for resistance.



## **CHAPTER THREE: COLONIAL TOOLS**

### **The Western Colonizer**

Both the beauty industry and capitalism are linked with colonialism. Western expansion prevailed in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16th century explorations which were largely mobilized by a profit motive. Gold, slaves, land and raw materials were sought to enrich the European empires. Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the explorations became colonizing projects in which Asian, African and South American lands and peoples were politically, economically, and culturally usurped by European imperialists. These colonial projects were supported by a discourse of modernity, which on the grounds of the absoluteness of reason, proclaimed the West's inherent right to spread its might onto other lands and peoples in order to bring them into more "civilized" states. In post-colonial times, however, the same principles of colonialism have manifest in the rhetoric of pro-globalization forces, with terms such as "global village" and "smaller world." In fact, globalization amounts less to a gathering of people into the fold of one great village than to an expanding global marketplace that fractures economic and cultural processes and deepens the divide between capitalists and proletariat. In this global world, the West, and particularly the United States of America, dominates. Through SAP's the Western world has restructured the economies of poor nations in order to meet Western cultural and economic demands. Policies of the GATT, NAFTA, and most recently, the WTO have systematically undermined Asian, African and South American countries' attempts to maintain national power over economic and cultural matters. These policies are supported by the World Bank and the

International Monetary Fund, both heavily Americanized institutions. Today, colonization has therefore become what anti-globalism thinkers refer to as neo-colonialism, which refers to the colonization of a country by economic rather than military force. Whether the colonial power is supported by military might and religious/educational indoctrination or by economic might in the form of restructured domestic economies and the mandates of multi-national corporations and indoctrination through advertising, the effect is much the same. Southern and Eastern nations' economies and cultures are inevitably being driven by Western profit motives.

### ***Cultural Implications of Globalization***

Globalization with its Western style hegemony, has affected not only the economies of Southern and Eastern nations, but also the cultures intertwined with these economies. Through widespread marketing techniques mediated by increasingly sophisticated information technologies, people in small agricultural villages in India, Africa and South America are being subjected to inappropriate images of Madonna's *Material Girl* ideology and Coca Cola lifestyles. Helena Norberg-Hodge (1999) argues that globalization has not created anything that can fairly be named by the quaint term "global village" as its proponents' rhetoric promised, but rather a "monoculture" that is destroying the cultural identities of individual regions and communities. This monoculture is inevitably Western, and specifically American. She notes that the erosion of cultural integrity was a conscious goal of the colonial developers that preceded today's neo-colonists. The following colonial mandate described by anthropologist Goodenough reveals the

unconcealed goal of cultural genocide: “Modify circumstances or deliberately tamper with the equilibrium of the traditional culture so that change will become imperative. Attempt to change underlying core values before attacking superficial customs” (Quoted in Norberg-Hodge, p. 104). Such blatant disregard for the values of a whole people appears quite barbaric in the context of recent anti-imperialist and feminist discourses. However, it may be revealing regarding our understanding of the ideological basis for globalization. Inevitably, the profit-driven motivation for globalization has not prioritized respect for cultural identity or even issues of human safety and well-being.

Norberg-Hodge describes the fall of the Ladkhi culture as a result of globalization. The Ladkhis are a traditional people of Tibet who, until recently, did not use money but enjoyed a high standard of living with beautiful art and architecture and a lifestyle demanding only four months of work per year. Norberg-Hodge reports that since the advent of Western tourism and Western investments, the Ladkhis now wear wristwatches they cannot read, apologize for their traditional meals if they cannot afford instant noodles, and show obvious signs of discontent and insecurity as a result of exposure to Western materialism (p. 196). The area has become integrated into the global economy, which means that the Ladkhis are beginning to grow cash crops for export rather than subsistence crops, and are now purchasing imported foods. Norberg-Hodge describes globalization as a culturally impoverishing force on the Ladkhi people:

Ironically. . . modernization – so often associated with the triumph of individualism – has produced a loss of individuality and a growing sense of personal insecurity. As people become self-conscious and insecure, they feel pressured to conform, and to live up to an idealized

image. . . in Ladakh, as elsewhere, the breaking of local cultural, economic and political ties isolates people from their locality and from each other . . . Competition for scarce jobs and political representation within the new centralized structures increasingly divides people. Ethnic and religious differences began to take on a political dimension, causing bitterness and enmity on a scale hitherto unknown. With a desperate irony, the monoculture – instead of bringing people together, creates divisions that previously did not exist. (pp. 196-197)

Clearly, the imposition of Western consumerism has had a jarring effect on cultures not based in a consumption ideology. Particularly noteworthy is the loss of individuality and shattering of personal identity experienced by the globalized Ladkhis.

Similarly, the loss of a strong and healthy individualized sense of self is experienced by many women in response to beauty advertisements. The rise in eating disorders, cosmetic surgery and depression associated with so many First World women has been linked to media images of “perfect” women. Like the imperial colonists, advertisers’ goal is to destroy the ideology and identity of their victims by creating insecurities that lead to consumption of imposed ideologies and products that economically benefit the capitalist pulling the strings.

### **The Beauty Myth as a Colonial Tool**

As a significant sector of the global capitalist economy, the beauty industry’s effect amounts to a particularly concentrated kind of colonization since it exists within a broader patriarchal framework in which women’s value is associated with their appearance rather than with more controllable attributes and skills. Not unlike other colonized peoples, women all over the world are being taught that their very nature (in this case their bodies) is inherently inferior and in need of profound change.

The imperialist's insistence on the inherent superiority of his own culture has economic and ideological implications (Robbins, 1999). Like the imperial colonizer, the beauty industry first destroys the existing value system in order to impose its own profit-driven system of values on the victims. Thus, we are inundated with advertisements that imply that only very thin and young women with typically Caucasian features are attractive; we learn that our soft flesh, silver or kinky hair, hanging low or small breasts are not attractive, and we try to squeeze or pump up our actual bodies into the narrowly fitting beauty myth's standard. The effect of beauty advertising is that in 2003, the cosmetics industry grossed \$95 billion globally (Encyclopaedia, 2004).

Like raw materials used by colonizers for profit and power motives, women's bodies are similarly colonized by the beauty and fashion industry. Like the landscapes of Africa or India, women's bodies are seen as rich with potential and needing only to be "developed" and processed by the "civilizing" forces in order to yield currency. In the case of women's bodies, the beauty realized by the "civilizing" force is our currency (Wolf, 1990) tradable for money and status. The "civilizing" force is the predominantly male-owned corporate advertisers and producers who are backed by technological expertise and the capacity for mass communication.

The political implications of the beauty myth have racist, classist and sexist dimensions. Wolf argues that the politics of appearance inevitably reflect prescribed behaviours as well as appearance. "The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that the period

considers desirable: *The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*” (Wolf, p. 13 -14). For example, clothing styles for women have traditionally been restrictive of movement but suggestive of sexuality. High heels restrict running but emphasize the curve of a woman’s calves. Dress styles have often limited free movement while accentuating physical shape. The Western beauty ideal represented in posters, magazines, television, videos and movies is generally of a young, slim, usually White woman. Often breasts are emphasized by revealing clothing or exploitative camera angles. The breasts, more often than not are celluloid perfect and larger than is typical of the small-framed women bearing them. Blonde hair predominates. If Wolf is right, that the beauty myth is actually prescribing behaviour, then what does the image of beauty say about socially desired female behaviour? Youth and thinness convey desirability linked to immaturity and powerlessness. As well, the image of thinness suggests that women are attractive when they take up as little space as possible (Kilbourne, 1999). The overt emphasis on large breasts implies that the ideal woman is sexually available to men. Although Whiteness is often considered a biological factor rather than a social prescription for behaviour, it functions to symbolize Western middle-class values, and as such constitutes a code for imitable behaviour. If one can not actually *be* White, then one can at least emulate the White dominant values, lifestyle and to varying degrees, appearance.

### ***“Cosmetic” Surgery as Colonization of the Body***

Although as Naomi Wolf points out, ideas about beauty in the female body existed long before patriarchy or modern capitalism, the beauty myth’s power

today is unprecedented, as evidenced in the industry's profits. Even worse, the beauty industry has achieved a new level of colonial violence in the naturalization of "cosmetic" surgery as a means to conform to popular beauty standards. As Jennifer Saul (2003) argues, there is nothing merely "cosmetic" about permanently altering the body! However, we see the naturalization of cosmetic surgery in the incidence of the popular American reality show "Extreme Makeover" in which "ugly" people are transformed into "beautiful" people and the whole process filmed for viewer entertainment. These transformations are dramatically celebrated with tears and gasps from the family and friends of the previously "ugly ducklings." The message conveyed by popular media such as this television show, that the attainment of "beauty" at any cost is no less than a life-transforming miracle bringing both success and happiness is widespread and common. It is hard not to see this phenomenon in the same light as colonial missionary projects, in which the "ugly" native is miraculously made-over into a "civilized" being by the light of Western progress. Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1998) theorizes cosmetic surgery as a form of colonizing women's bodies:

A woman's desire to create a permanently beautiful and youthful appearance that is not vulnerable to the threats of externally applied cosmetic artifice or to the natural aging process of the body must be understood as a deeply significant existential project. It deliberately involves the exploitation and transformation of the most intimately experienced domain of immanence, the body, in the name of transcendence: transcendence of hereditary predestination, of lived time, of one's given 'limitations.' What I see as particularly alarming in this project is that what comes to have primary significance is not the real given existing woman but her body viewed as a 'primitive entity' that is seen only as potential, as a kind of raw material to be exploited in terms of appearance, eroticism, nurturance, and fertility as defined by the colonizing culture. (p. 156)

The level of social acceptance for costly, permanent, and potentially risky interventions such as cosmetic surgery are shown in a recent incident affecting the relatively conservative mid-sized prairie city of Saskatoon. Controversy over a local bar owner's advertisement that the winner of a beauty contest he was hosting would receive breast implants resulted in the prize being changed to a cash reward in the amount of \$5,000 (Haight, 2003). However, the fact that nineteen women applied to enter the beauty contest, knowing that breast implants were the prize, is very significant. The economic value attached to women's ability to conform to popular beauty standards that are inevitably dictated by patriarchal corporate interests speaks volumes about the power exercised by the myth over women. Today, American cosmetic surgeons are reporting steady increases in cosmetic procedures; two million Americans had rhinoplastic surgeries performed in 2001 (Scheck, 2002, par. 20). One has only to look to the plethora of advertisements for cosmetics, "quick-fix" body work-outs and diets that are spread over grocery store magazine covers and that flash into our living rooms at every television commercial break, or at the profusion of Internet ads geared toward enhancing beauty and sexual attractiveness to know that the beauty industry is flourishing, and the consumer appears to be buying the message. Furthermore, the rise of the multi-billion dollar pornography industry and coinciding rise of body-image related eating disorders, both of which primarily prevail upon women, suggest further evidence for the beauty myth's powerful and ubiquitous effects (Wolf, 1990).



The rhetoric of “cosmetic” surgery as a “choice” masks the patriarchal consumer ideology that renders it a form of “coerced choice”<sup>4</sup> with economic implications for the medical profession and for the women paying for its services. Like the term “development,” which masks Western colonial forces behind an implied correct direction in which to develop, the rhetoric of “choice” regarding “cosmetic” surgery masks the reality of a politically-defined appearance goal. While there are obvious differences in the formal structures exerted upon the economic restructuring of whole countries and the less formal but nonetheless significant forces pressed upon women via direct and indirect beauty messages and interpellation, the analogy between the two presents a valid comparison of profit motivated processes of patronage. Whether considering poor nations’ “choice” to agree to Western development projects or women’s “choice” to adhere to the stringent beauty standards set, the rhetoric of choice is problematic.

As discussed in Chapter Two under “Choice” women “chose” surgery that inevitably conforms to a White hegemonic beauty ideal. Women do not “choose” surgeries to widen our noses to look more African, or lengthen them to appear more Jewish, or narrow our eyes to look more Asian. Neither are we “choosing” to look fatter or older, both embodiments that inherently suggest the right to take up space, power and wisdom, all “unfeminine” attributes in a patriarchal society. The choice to permanently – not “cosmetically” - change the body is contextualized in a profoundly sexist, racist and heterosexist culture that define success for women as conformity to socially constructed ideals of femininity. Social constructions of femininity in a patriarchal and capitalist culture function as colonizing tools to

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<sup>4</sup> The term “coerced choice” is borrowed from Kal Appelbaum (2000).

incite women to purchase products and services that bolster capitalist profits and maintain the hegemonic ideology of femininity. Inevitably the effect is circular: As more women become colonized by the beauty myth and achieve social and economic success, they replicate and embody advertisers' messages.

### **Ideological Pacification and the Creation of Docile Bodies**

A really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced because they love their servitude. (Huxley, 1977, p. xvii)

Huxley's description of the servitude-loving slaves recalls George Orwell's totalitarian state in which the proletariat are brainwashed into loving "Big Brother." Although, extreme, there is validity in the analogy between these brainwashed victims and the masses of women who have internalised an ideology which demands that they spend hours and dollars on cosmetically or permanently altering their appearances in order to meet the hegemonic standard of feminine beauty.

According to Edward Said (Alternative Radio, 1993), the colonized themselves play an important role. This is not to say that they are responsible for the effects of the beauty industry, but rather that they have allowed themselves to be interpellated by the dominant value system. Said attributes the acquiescence of the colonized to a form of indoctrination he calls "ideological pacification." Referring to the colonization of India, he explains that the subjected Indians were initially dominated by martial force, but that this coercion was not powerful enough to maintain India's subservience over such an extended period of time. Rather, the subjugation of India was supported by the Indians themselves once they had been

convinced that British rule was good for them. In the following quotation, Said describes the process of ideological pacification:

What we need to understand is how very often the force of, say the British army in India was very minimal in a way, considering the vast amount of territory that they administered and held. What you have instead is a program of ideological pacification whereby, for example, in India the system of education, which was promulgated in the 1830's, was really addressing the fact that the education of Indians under the British should teach the Indians the superiority of British culture over Indian culture. . . So it was force, but, in my opinion, much more important than force, which was administered selectively, was the idea inculcated in the minds of the people being colonized that it was their destiny to be ruled by the West. (Alternative Radio, 1993, p.15)

A strong similarity exists between the ideological pacification of the colonized in the imperial era and the advertising messages accepted by millions of people under Western consumerism. Like the European colonials, the advertisers' goal is to convince subjects of their inherent inadequacy so that they will respond favourably to the subsequent offer to "fix" the deficiency. The authoritative voices of Science and Religion, not unlike during the colonial era, are used by today's advertisers to suggest the inevitability and naturalness of women's efforts to beautify themselves. Wolf (1990) states that as patriarchal religion declined in the lives of modern women, a "new religious dogma" related to age and weight arose to control women (p. 11). Advertising has a long history of selling not only products, but also ideologies with political ramifications.

### ***Imperial Advertising***

The advertisement is historically rooted in the imperial colonial project as an emissary of ideological pacification. Nowhere is this more visible than in the British Pears soap advertisements. Anne McClintock (2000) describes the

nineteenth century British fetishization of soap as a harbinger of power to clean not only the British working class labouring in industrial factories, but also the “uncivilized” Black people of colonial Africa:

Both the cult of domesticity and the new imperialism found in soap an exemplary mediating form. The emergent middle-class values – monogamy (‘clean’ sex, which has value), industrial capital (‘clean’ money, which has value), Christianity (“being washed in the blood of the lamb”), class control (‘cleansing the great unwashed’) and the imperial civilizing mission (‘washing and clothing the savage’) – could all be marvellously embodied in a single household commodity. Soap advertising, in particular the Pears soap campaign, took its place at the vanguard of Britain’s new commodity culture and its civilizing mission. (pp. 304-305)

McClintock refers to one particular advertisement from the 1880’s, which is copied into this thesis. (See Figure One – Imperial Pears Soap Advertisement.) The advertisement includes two frames. The first reveals a White boy wearing a white apron, “the familiar fetish of domestic purity” benevolently helping a Black boy in a bath (McClintock, 2000, p. 310). In the second image, the Black boy emerges from the tub with a whitened body and an amazed expression on his still Black face. McClintock’s interpretation of the advertisement’s meaning is that while civilization may wash “clean” the “stigma of racial and class degeneration,” it cannot change the head, seen as the host of “rational individuality” (p. 310). The boy’s amazement, no doubt, reflects the colonists’ self-image of god-like intelligence and benevolence as they carried out their mission of bringing the “pale of civilization” to the “ignorant” natives.

## Figure One – Imperial Pears Soap Advertisement

(Bell, 2001)

McClintock also explains the meaning of dark skin to the imperial British:

For the elite, a sun-darkened skin stained by outdoor manual work was the visible stigma not only of a class obliged to work under the elements for a living, but also of far-off, benighted races marked by God's disfavour. From the outset, soap took shape as a technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration. (p. 308)

Because dark skin signified a low social class or race of person, it must be assumed that the Western European's comparatively pale skin conveyed the opposite meaning and thus signified a high social or racial class. This advertisement reveals as much about the British colonials' sense of their own identity as it does about their sense of the Other. In the same way, sexist advertisements about what socially desirable woman *are* is as much about what socially desirable men are *not*; i.e., men should not be soft, curvy and sexually vulnerable and should not spend a great deal of money and time trying to improve their appearances.

### ***Advertising as Ideological Pacification***

Functioning as a kind of patriarchal propaganda machine for consumerism, beauty advertising is linked to a long history of oppression through ideology. The anti-Semitic propaganda that was circulated all over Germany and the rest of the Western world led to the murder of six million Jews in the Nazi-lead holocaust of WWII. It was not unusual to see constructions of “Jewishness” characterized in demonic or animalistic portrayals in postcards, children’s books, and information posters. Propaganda aided in the social acceptance of the inhuman enslavement of thousands of Black Africans in the United States and aided the Western European project of colonizing Africa. Today, the beauty myth’s message, conveyed through the powerful tool of advertising via advanced information technologies has a particularly potent and extensive impact on the globalized world.

Kalman Appelbaum (2004) argues that in the globalized world, Western advertisers are a breed apart from previous inculcators because of the insidious appearance of providing subjects with choice. This appearance of choice renders the advertisers’ harm particularly insidious. Choice, though, must be contextualized:

The marketers’ ideology of choice and freedom implies a universal teleology of desire that designates the individual as the repository and end point of meaning and identity. . . The seduction of the developing world through soap, antacids, and pink novels may represent a brazen act of the latest historical form of colonization [of a certain sort] but it has the distinction of being a tyranny by choice. (Appelbaum, 2004, p. 113)

It is interesting to note Appelbaum’s use of the word “seduction.” When forced, seduction becomes rape, which has gendered implications. The concept of rape is often utilized in feminist constructions of the colonizing process of both the

earth and indigenous peoples. Likewise, the gendered implications of Western advertisers and “Third World” customers are significant for this study. Typically, heads of corporations and advertising agencies are White men, while assembly line workers who make the products sold are often women of colour. Obviously this binary does not take into account the many exceptions, but as an accurate generalization provides a useful trope. In terms of the beauty and fashion industry, most consumers are female with privilege and are generally located in Northern and Western geographies or heavily Westernized environments.

When we consider the actual content of fashion and beauty advertisements directed to women and contextualize them in global economy with gendered implications, their effect is augmented. Through a plethora of advertisements that are literally forced on us throughout the course of our days, women are admonished to improve our appearances in order to achieve the status of “beautiful woman” with the social and often economic status associated with that label. The following cover titles from beauty magazine commonly found in most grocery stores, pharmacies and convenience stores are typical: “Seven Surprising Reasons French Women Stay So Slim” and “65 Hot Things to Do to His Body” (*Cosmopolitan*, February 2003;) “Secrets to Flawless Skin” and “Sex Tips That Burn Fat” (*Marie Claire*, September, 2003;) “How Old Do You Look?” “The Quick-Fix Facelift” and “Figure of Youth-Reclaiming your Teenage Body” (*Vogue*, September, 2003.) These messages, along with those found on television, radio and Internet “pop-ups,” must surely affect women’s conscious and subconscious minds, even when we attempt to resist them. Jean Kilbourne reports that North Americans are each

exposed to the staggering number of over 2000 advertisements per day (Kilbourne, 2003). My own data based on interviews with Saskatoon women reveals that whether choosing an interpellated or resistant stance toward the hegemonic beauty ideal, women have, to varying degrees, internalized beauty advertisers' messages.

### **Conclusion: Women in a Patriarchal Colonialism**

Beauty and fashion advertising directed at women inevitably functions within a political and historical context in which the colonized people are feminised (rendered rapeable.) Viewed as part of the "natural" world, women and the colonies have traditionally been considered exploitable resources. As discussed earlier in this thesis, women's bodies have been exploited as raw materials to be mined for reproductive purposes or shaped according to patriarchally defined beauty standards (Morgan, 1998, p. 15). In a similar vein, Maria Mies (1987) argues that it is their productive capacity that renders both earth and women the focus of patriarchal colonization:

Women and subjugated peoples are treated as if they did not belong to society proper, as constituted from (male) wagedworkers and capitalists. Instead, they are treated as if they were means of production of 'natural resources' such as water, air and land. The economic logic behind this colonization is that women (as the 'means of production' for producing (people) and land, are goods that can in no way be produced by capital. *Control over women and land is, therefore, the foundation of any system based on exploitation* (1988, p. 5, italics mine).



## **CHAPTER FOUR: GLOBALIZATION - THE MOST RECENT FORM OF COLONIZATION**

At no other time in human history has the world been a better place for capitalists. We live in a world full of investment opportunities- companies, banks, funds, bonds, securites, and even countries-into which we can put money and from which we can get more back. These moneymaking machines, such as the Nike Corporation, have a ready supply of cheap labour, capital, raw materials, and advanced technology to assist in making products that people all over the world clamour to buy. (Robbins, 1999, p. 64-5)

### **Colonial Roots of Globalization**

The globalized economy that Robbins describes and that is generally considered to be approximately 25 years old actually has 500 year old roots. The “shrinking” world that facilitates Western economic growth began in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, Western European explorers, profiting from advancements in shipbuilding technologies, were traveling the world to “find” lands previously unknown to the West (Robbins, 1999). At this time, the feudal system was in decline and being replaced by a new merchant class. People such as Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Bartolomeu Diaz, Vasco da Gama, and Hernando Cortez, to name only a few, risked their lives in search of new lands (Robbins, 1999). Robbins argues that these explorers should more properly be termed “merchant sailors” because their motivation was ultimately economic, and that the opportunities from sending a vessel abroad for years at a time brought about the institutions that facilitated the growth of the modern capitalist system (p. 76).

Colonialism, the child of patriarchy, is about domesticating what Vandana Shiva (1999) calls the “feminine life-giving” forces and usurping their product for

political ends (p. 62). Scholarly analyses of the colonial era, as well as recent “Third World” development projects, reveal that women from both the colonizing and colonized nations suffered specifically under projects from the colonial era just as they are in the present era of globalization. Through Western colonization many women from the Two Thirds World suffered the added injury of a culture that “othered” them both as women and as racially “inferior.” Categories of women and indigenous populations have historically been the repositories of White, male fear and projection, or patriarchal aggression.

The competitive nature of the colonizing project suggests the hierarchy inherent in the capitalist economy with which it is associated. Herbert Aptheker (1968) describes colonization as a response to the perception of a competitive political climate:

The colonization program was central to the whole effort at supremacy. The more colonies you had, the less had the opponent. The colonies were sources of raw materials, and owning them relieved one of dependence upon foreign powers who hitherto had served as the suppliers. . . .The colonies were sources of manpower. . . and slaves. (p. 23)

The economic basis of the colonial project is portrayed here as a struggle between national powers over the “booty” in the form of land, raw materials and people as sources of cheap labour.

Constructed as “takeable,” the feminization of non-human nature is a short stretch to the objectification of a whole people, rendering them takeable (rapeable). Therefore, from both a theoretical and material level, colonialism, as the father of globalization, has been a process of patriarchal domination over feminized peoples

and resources. The industrial revolution that would follow bolstered the capitalist project by creating the need for greater consumption in response to increased production. From here, advertising and the invention of the social and economic category of the consumer were born (Robbins, 1999). It is within this context that beauty advertising came to dictate a young, thin, White and inevitably Western beauty ideology to women all over the world.

### ***History of Globalization***

As the term is commonly used today, globalization refers to a set of economic changes in the global arena that began with the end of WWII and the start of the Cold War. The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) was signed in 1947. GATT was “designed to provide an international forum that encouraged free trade between member states by regulating and reducing tariffs on traded goods and by providing a common mechanism for resolving trade disputes. GATT membership now includes more than 110 countries” (CIESIN). Following the Cold War, a process of economic restructuring has included the globalization of financial systems, the transnationalization of production, and, at the instigation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, a new regionalism that equals economic integration (Marchand, 1994). This economic integration is evident in the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) of 1988 and the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) involving the US, Canada and Mexico. Even before the NAFTA, an earlier version of free trade had been adopted in the Mexico/US border region. Instituted in 1965, the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), created a zone in which US-owned maquiladoras (factories)

imported parts for production without paying an import tax, assembled and produced goods (primarily electronic and clothing goods) at extremely low wages, then exported the products without paying an export tax. Thus, the BIP resulted in the growth of border maquiladoras employing large numbers of women, at very low wages comparative to US standards, and adopting “relaxed” labour, safety, and environmental standards (Marchand, 1994).

The most important shift in global economics materialized in 1986 when the GATT developed into the WTO in what is known as the “Uruguay Round.” This event represented a significant marker often referred to as the onset of globalization. Unlike the GATT, the WTO's mandate has been to facilitate trade relations at all costs, superceding national interests, human rights interests, and environmental interests (Allen, 1995; Clarke, 1999; Goldsmith, 1999; James, 2000; Klein, 2000; Lim, 1997; Menzies, 1996; Nader, 1993; Norberg-Hodge, 1999; Robbins, 1999; Shiva, 1997; Thompson, 2001; Weigersma, 1997). Also unlike the GATT, which was merely a set of rules for conducting international trade, the WTO has grown into a permanent intergovernmental organization with its own secretariat and mandatory agreements (Nader, 1993; Unesco, 2002). Furthermore, the WTO has blatantly pro-corporate interests and the power to supersede national policies regarding the environment, worker rights, safety standards and human rights in order to facilitate free trade between nations (Nader, 1993).

### ***SAP's and Liberalization***

In synchronicity with the globalizing process, a huge-scale domestic restructuring of poor nations by Western powers in the form of the IMF and World

Bank has occurred (Wiegersma, 1997). As a result of the debt crisis of the 1980's<sup>5</sup> and under pressure by the IMF and World Bank, many Third World nations "agreed" to structural adjustment policies. In order to ensure the repayment of loans provided to these poor nations, the IMF and World Bank created a system whereby they would only continue to refinance loans if the debtors agreed to restructure their domestic economies. These restructurings have involved cutbacks in public spending, the restrictions of incomes, privatization of government corporations and the direction of production toward exportation to the West instead of for domestic markets (Wiegersma, 1997). The effect of SAP's has been generally hurtful to the people of the countries affected, especially women, children and the poorest people. For example, cutbacks in public spending would include public education, infant care, health care and a variety of social programs that inevitably have the greatest impact on the most economically vulnerable people, and in particular, women.

Takiwi Manuh (1997) explains how women in Ghana have been affected by SAP's, which have targeted sectors of employment for redeployment that primarily involve women. She argues that women are not helped but hurt by the SAP's. Likewise, Deere, Safa and Antrobus (1997) describe negative SAP impacts on women in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic:

At the same time, structural adjustment policies are forcing families to absorb a greater share of the cost of survival as a result of the cutbacks in social services, such as health and education, and the elimination or reduction of subsidies on food, transportation and utilities. By shifting more responsibility for survival from the state to the household,

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<sup>5</sup> The General Introduction of *the Women, Gender and Development Reader* (Visvanathan, 1997, pp. 2-3) discusses the origins of the debt crises experienced by many underdeveloped countries.

structural adjustment policies are increasing the burden on the poor, especially women. (p. 267)

Some of the effects of SAP's in Jamaica have included an increase in the rate of children's malnutrition from 38% in 1978 to 41% in 1985 (Deere, et al., 1997). This situation is attributed to the rising costs of food prices and the decrease in healthcare. As well, more women have been forced to join the paid workforce as men are finding employment harder to achieve. Since women are paid less, there is more employment available to them (Deere, et al., 1997). Much of the work that women find, however, exists in the informal sector, where economic security and benefits are non-existent. In researching the effects of the NAFTA, Marianne Marchand (1994) found that the economic restructuring imposed on Mexico, Canada and the United States have resulted in greater economic insecurities for most people, particularly those already marginalized.

Gabriela and Macdonald argue that Mexican President Miguel De la Madrid (1982-1988) was coerced into accepting the SAP's imposed by Western powers (1994). The following statistics reveal the resultant decline in social well-being as a result: Public health spending dropped from 5.1% of the government expenditure in 1972 to 1.4% in 1986, and Mexican wages lost 50% of their purchasing power in the 1980's. The reductions in agricultural subsidies, health care, education, housing and other social programs have primarily affected women and the most impoverished peoples (Gabriela & Macdonald, 1994).

In concert with SAP's, the liberalization of global economies, referred to as "neo-liberalism," has functioned to support free trade by "relaxing" policies on worker rights. As Marchand (1994) argues, this neo-liberal economic trend has

served the interests of multinational corporations and eroded the rights of ordinary citizens. The “relaxed” standards for human well-being have allowed greater ease for profit-driven foreign investors. These changes in domestic economies have complemented the liberalization of trade relations between nations (Hansen-Kuhn, 1992). SAP’s and economic liberalization in Mexico have, according to John Cavanagh (2000) resulted in more millionaires, more poverty and more malnutrition. Clearly the benefits of globalization have been selectively and narrowly dispensed.

### **Feminization of the Global Assembly Lines**

Elson and Pearson (1997) explain that factory owners prefer to hire young women for the assembly lines because they are often more productive than men. In 1994, Marchand reported that 70 to 80 percent of maquiladora workers were female. Furthermore, young women are valued for their “naturally nimble fingers” and are seen as “naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline, and naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work” (Elson & Pearson, 1997). They are paid less than men because they are seen as secondary wage earners rather than primary wage earners (p.193). Fernandez-Kelly, (1997) a researcher who worked undercover in a Mexican maquiladora, tells us that in order to be hired, she had to visit a particular clinic to have her fitness level and reproductive status evaluated! The maquiladora did not hire pregnant women (p. 208).

Not unlike the Industrial Revolution of the Western world, globalization has created Fordist style production factories in which workers are exploited to serve

the profit motive of capital. These workers are ultimately considered “unskilled” and paid accordingly. This descriptor, however, contradicts the actual skill level necessary to operate, for example, textile machinery at the fast pace expected. In the following paragraph, Fernandez-Kelly's description (1997) of maquiladora labour speaks of levels of coordination and speed that would necessarily require significant training:

The particulars of “unskilled” labour unfolded before my eyes. The procedure demanded perfect coordination of hands, eyes and legs. . . Too much pressure inevitably broke the thread or produced seams longer than the edge of the pocket. The slightest deviation produced lopsided designs, which then had to be unsewed and gone over as many times as it took to do an acceptable pocket. The supervisor told me that, once trained, I would be expected to sew a pocket every nine to ten seconds. That meant 360 to 396 pockets every hour, or 2,880 to 3,168 every day! (p. 206)

Where do the maquiladora workers achieve the obviously required training for this “unskilled” work? Elson and Pearson (1997) suggest that the training is received at home as part of their female domestic roles. Because this training is “socially invisible” and “privatised” it is attributed to the women’s “nature” rather than their skill, and is thus classified unskilled (p. 193). In this way patriarchal values combine with a capitalist economic mode to exploit and oppress women workers.

The obvious vulnerability of the young, female, global assembly line worker resonates with the vulnerability of the Fordist worker. However, while similarities exist between the two, the global worker is distinguished because she is often female, thus particularly vulnerable in a patriarchal context. The global worker of today is also less likely to organize labour interests because of the many obstacles



presented by the factories themselves and the economic climate of global nations in general. A factory whose staff attempts to unionize may simply be shut down and transferred to another region or nation where people are more vulnerable and desperate for work. Moreover, social constructions of femininity resulting in “docility” and the added burden of financial concerns associated with single parents who are usually female, may play a part in inducing a fear-based reticence to defend worker rights.

### **Worker Migration and Disruption of Local Social Relations**

Changes in the domestic economies of some countries as a result of globalization have often resulted in changes in social structures. For example, in Mexico, a substantial number of workers are available to work in maquiladoras, in part due to the disruptions of millions of people in Mexican rural communities following the assault on the Mexican agricultural industry. The arrival of the transnational corporate farm or “agromaquila” has put many local farmers out of business. Previously privately-owned corn farms cannot compete with the corporate farm so have had to close down (Lehman, 1997). As women migrate to the big cities along the US/Mexican border to find work in the maquiladoras, their husbands, brothers and fathers have often been forced to cross the US border, usually illegally, to find temporary work, in seasonal agricultural, high-turnover manufacturing and in the service industries. Thus, families are split as men leave their communities in order to survive. The cheap labour they provide is attractive to American employers. However, as the numbers of migrant workers in the US

increases, it becomes harder to monitor working conditions and wages, so employment abuses are more likely (Lehman, 1997).

The US-owned corporate farms in Mexico also affect women. As men leave their rural communities to seek temporary work in the US, women are left to head their homes alone. Many women are also forced to leave their communities to seek work in the agromaquilas, or in the border maquilas. In this way, rural community life has been profoundly disrupted (Lehman, 1997).

The disruption of local social relations associated with the neo-colonization of poor nations under globalization hearkens to similar social disruptions of indigenous populations in the colonial era. Since the imperial project was based in a modernist ideology in which Western culture was viewed as the teleological end of cultural evolution, the “White man’s burden” of aiding “primitive” cultures to Westernize seemed a “natural” project. The project meant imposing a value system that mimicked the gendered hierarchy in Western Europe. Therefore, when the Imperial colonists imposed their educational, economic and legal policies on African peoples, the existing economic and social roles as they pertained to the sexes, were disrupted. Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen (1997) refer to Ester Boserup’s *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* in their discussion about the role of women in development. They support Boserop’s argument that European colonialism did not liberalize African women, but “contributed to their loss of status” (p. 43). The introduction of agricultural technology for the production of cash crops rather than subsistence crops presented the Africans with an enormous change to their economic and cultural ways. Even more significantly, Western

technology was only made available to the men, who were also taught to establish cash crops for export while women were relegated to the cultivation of subsistence crops, which were less “valuable” under the new system. Women, thus, often lost their control of lands that had previously been theirs (Benería & Sen, 1997).

Simultaneously women were taught the role of “proper women” which is to say the role of the upper class European housewife, which added to their dependent status.

Sue Ellen Charlton (1997) offers this brief summary about the effects of colonization on African women:

Although colonial regimes generally assumed that the people directly affected by these and other such policies would be men, the indirect effects on women included the opportunities and disadvantages presented by urbanization, the shift in female labour caused by the introduction of cash crops, the introduction of western diseases as well as of western cures, along with innumerable other changes in the traditional ways of life. . . . female instruction was largely religious and oriented toward helping the girls become better mothers and housewives (in the European sense). Technical or agricultural training, even in sub-Saharan Africa where the women had major responsibilities in farming, favoured boys heavily. . . the colonial emphasis on . . . making the colonized peoples more sedentary, and on shifting agriculture toward the production of crops for export worked to the detriment of women in a number of societies. (p. 11)

A more sedentary life-style and economic system based in cash crops would have enormously affected the lives of African women and men. With the new economic system came a new ideology and understanding of gender roles. The neo-colonial economic shifts in the globalized world have likewise had gendered implications for the colonized.

## **Effects of a Global Economy**

In general, globalization has had a decidedly negative economic impact on most of the world's populations (Robbins, 1999). As Kimbrell and Davis (1999) assert, Latin America's previously successful local economies were destroyed and replaced with imported technologically-based economies that serve the West. Edward Goldsmith (1999, *Empires*) compares globalized free trade to its predecessors, colonization and development, in that all involve bullying poorer nations into providing corporations with cheap labour and an export market.

Globalization has not only impacted negatively on poor nations, but also on vulnerable populations in Northern and Western nations. Canada, for example, has experienced a steady weakening of social safety nets like health care, unemployment insurance and social security. In the United States, the CUFTA resulted in larger compensation packages for wealthy executives and larger numbers of homeless and unemployed people. Since the standard of living is so much higher in the United States and Canada than in Mexico, the integration of the three economies under NAFTA without careful planning would, logically, result in a downward harmonization of standards and wages in Canada and the United States without raising them in Mexico (Cavanagh, 2000).

The globalized economy has also had negative effects on the environment and on people's health. For example, Taiwan is a country upheld by the West as "a model for all 'Third World' countries" (Goldsmith, 1999, *Increasing*, p.176) because of its enormous economic growth following Western development. Yet it has suffered severe environmental damage. The miles of virgin forest that once

covered the eastern coast are gone and replaced by industrial complexes; fertilizer use tripled between 1952 and 1980 leaving much of the land too acid for growth; and in Hou Jin, pollution caused by the Taiwan Petroleum Company has resulted in water that is so toxic it is actually combustible (Goldsmith, 1999, *Increasing*). In North America, the NAFTA has resulted in over 5,000 trucks crossing the Texas-Mexico border on a daily basis, many of them carrying hazardous chemicals. In the interests of promoting trade, all other safety considerations are demoted. The Mexican globalization related maquiladora has been blamed for environmental and health hazards. In May 1993, the Minneapolis Star Tribune printed an article reporting a high incidence of anencephaly - babies born without brains - on the Mexico/US border. This phenomenon was attributed to unregulated pollution. At this time, 18 families with children born anencephalic or with related birth defects were filing suit against 88 maquilas and businesses in the border zone for causing their babies' defects (Byrne, 1993).

Another significant change has been that women have been entering the paid work force in greater numbers concurrent with globalizing trends. For example, in Canada, 53% of all women over fifteen years old were employed in 1991, as compared to 41% in 1975 (Gabriella & Macdonald, 1994). Even more dramatically, in Mexico in the last 40 years, the number of employed women has tripled, although many Mexican women still work exclusively in the home (Gabriela, et al., 1994).<sup>6</sup> These numbers are significant because they seem to

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel and Macdonald extracted these numbers from Marta Lamasw, Alicia Martínez, Esperanza Tuñón and María Luisa Tarres in "Junctures and Disjunctures: The

reflect, at least in part, women's increasing need to be economically self-reliant, because they are single, single parents, lesbian, or married but in need of another income.<sup>7</sup>

The only positive effect of globalization has been in the form of cross-national resistance alliances strongly represented by women, which may be related to their growing numbers as exploited global workers. There is a growing international feminism, which is perhaps stronger in its inclusiveness than any of the other feminisms. This international feminism is, paradoxically, as much about respecting difference as it is about creating unity<sup>8</sup> (Gabriela, et al., 1994). Hope lies in the possibility that the new international activist community will be able to effect change by injecting some caring into the already capitalist economy.

### **The Politics of the Beauty Myth in a Global Context**

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then there is only one beholder in a globalized world, and he is located at the apex of a White, Western, patriarchal and

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women's Movement in Mexico 1970-1993" presented at the 18th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association Atlanta, 10-12, March 1994, p 5.

<sup>7</sup> It is also significant because recent studies reveal that whether or not they are employed outside of the home, women still carry out the majority of child-care and domestic work. Many women are thus doubly employed. It is easy to imagine how overworked women would be rendered even more vulnerable with exhaustingly long workdays added to the struggle of trying to live on a low income. The energy required just to survive would, no doubt, leave little for a high-risk labour movement.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriela references Nesiah Vasuki's "Toward a Feminist Internationality: A Critique of US Feminist Legal Scholarship" (Harvard Women's Law Review, Vol 16, 93, p 190) for the idea of a "'feminist internationality' which acknowledges differences. . . rather than a 'global sisterhood' which ignores them"(535).

capitalist global system. The beauty myth, that to be worthy a woman must be “beautiful,” and that beauty is comprised of universal and concrete qualities according to the Western hegemony, is growing and spreading with the rest of Westernization. As described earlier in this research the hegemonic beauty ideal involves youth, thinness and generally, Whiteness. If we were to add to this list of descriptors, the adjectives heterosexual and sexually receptive we would not be inaccurate in terms of the meaning implied in Western fashion and beauty advertisements. Beauty, then, becomes political: It is gendered, racialized, heterosexist and ageist. Woman’s bodies and minds have been constructed as docile in order to inflict this beauty myth on them, a myth that has itself historically functioned as a prescription for docility.

My study has involved an examination of local beauty product consumption and beliefs in the context of a globalized capitalism. As described in Chapter Two of this thesis, statistics reveal that the beauty industry along with its corollary “cosmetic” surgery is growing. As well, the pornography industry, primarily geared toward the male heterosexual gaze, is also on the rise and presently comprises 25% of global Internet use. Given these conditions, what significance do Western women as relatively privileged consumers, see in our own patterns of beauty consumption? Are we even aware of the role we play within a huge capitalist production and consumption machine in which so much of the production occurs across the globe in Asian and South American sweatshops while Western pop culture promotes higher standards of “beauty” and greater levels of beauty and fashion consumption? In order to answer these questions, I interviewed ten

Saskatoon women who present themselves according to middle-class standards of femininity (as described in Chapter One.)



## **CHAPTER FIVE: THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

### **Demographic Profile of Participants**

My participants include ten women between the ages of 18 and 55 years living in Saskatoon, a mid-sized prairie city in Saskatchewan. As I described in Chapter One of this research, by means of opportunistic sampling, women whose appearances conform to local, White, middle-class standards of femininity were invited to participate in my study. Ruling out women with obvious counter-culture styles of self-presentation was a conscious choice because the stated goal of this research is to study the beauty consumption habits and beliefs of White, Western women who conform to the hegemonic gender standards and who consume beauty products. The interviews with each participant lasted from fifty minutes to two and a half hours long. Interviews were taped with the participants' permission, and then each participant read and approved my use of the transcripts.

The participants in this study are a fairly homogenous group in that they are all White, female adults. There is a range of socio-economic status between these women, but whether their income is under \$20,000 or greater than \$60,000, they are all advantaged in terms of the larger global context, which is significant to this study. They also share the common culture of a mid-sized Saskatchewan city. While there is obviously a huge range of possible cultural, social, and geographical factors defining any individual Western consumer of beauty products, as a group, the ten women who participated in my research represent relatively mainstream attitudes (as qualified in Chapter One).

The reported age range of my participants is as follows: Three women in the 18 to 25 year age range; three women in the 26 to 35 year age range; two women in the 36 to 45 year age range; and two women in the 46 to 55 year age range. Nine of the ten participants agreed to report their household incomes on a demographic information form. The range of these incomes is from “under \$16,000” to “over \$60,000” with the following break down: Two women reported household incomes of less than \$16,000; two women reported household incomes in the \$16,000 to \$35,000 range; one women reported a household income in the \$36,000 to \$45,000 range; three women reported household incomes in the \$46,000 to \$60,000 range; and one woman reported a household income in the \$61,000 to \$80,000 range. Some of these women made references to spouses or children during the interview, and at least two of the women live alone. All of them are engaged in paid employment, and two are full-time students. As a group, they spend significant amounts of time and/or money on beauty and fashion products.

### **Participants’ Beauty Product Consumption**

As a materialist feminist, my understanding of beauty product consumption as a facet of the social construction of gender is that underlying material conditions provide an important framework for understanding the ideology and praxis of the hegemonic beauty ideal. The material conditions of consumption include the pervasiveness of media information and the reality of economic needs, which are inevitably mediated by social mores, which in turn are conveyed through media representation. In other words Western and Northern consumers, motivated by a desire for economic and social success or at least survival, seek social

approval, which is linked to owning the “right stuff” and looking the “right” way. For women, the “right” look is young, slender, blonde, and fashionably attired goals, the advertisements tell us, that are attainable if we purchase the right products.

The participants in my study described behaviours and beliefs that conform to beauty advertisers’ messages. Some of the data reveal a certain disparity between belief system and practice. For example, two women hold belief systems that could be characterized as feminist and anti-consumerist. However, these women’s fashion and beauty product consumption, although lower than some of the other women, still indicates a degree of conformity to hegemonic beauty standards. (Details will be discussed later in this thesis.)

All of the participants use cosmetics and toiletries on a daily basis, although there is a range of difference in specific product use. Face powder, foundation, lipstick and mascara were most often cited with seven to nine of the participants reporting a daily or regular rate of use. Among toiletries, the use of moisturizer, fragrance and hair products was 100%, meaning that all the participants use these products regularly. Close behind, nail polish and hair colour showed regular use among 70% of the participants.

These ten women spend between five minutes to an hour preparing their appearances before leaving the house for work, and generally longer before a social engagement. The average reported time spent on appearance on a work morning was 30 minutes. Eight of the ten participants described a detailed account of the

“getting ready” process, which included the systemic application of a significant number of products.

Although these participants reported considerable differences in household income, these differences did not accurately predict the amount of money spent on fashion and beauty products. Instead, beauty and fashion consumption was more related to popular media consumption. The two university students in my group, both reporting incomes of less than \$16,000, did show the lowest range of expenditure on beauty products in a three-month period (\$50 to \$80.) However, aside from this clear delineation, the rest of the participant responses did not follow a pattern. The woman who reported the highest income (\$61,000 – \$80,000) spends \$350 quarterly on beauty products while another woman whose income was lower (\$36,000 to \$45,000) estimated a greater quarterly expenditure on beauty products at \$450.00. Generally speaking, though, the highest expenditures on beauty products were reported from women whose annual household earnings were over \$36,000. (See Figure Two, p. 87, for a comparison of age, income, and quarterly expenditure on beauty products.)

**Figure Two – Income, Age and Expenditure on Beauty Products**

<b>Participants<sup>9</sup></b>	<b>Range of Household Income (Thousands of Dollars)</b>	<b>Range of Quarterly Expenditure on Beauty Products</b>	<b>Age</b>
Alison	< \$16	\$50. – \$60	18 – 25
Debbie	< \$16	\$60. – \$80	18 - 25
Susan	Unstated	Unstated	26 - 35
Kelly	\$36 - \$45	\$120	26 - 35
Tanitia	\$25 – \$36	\$100	36 – 46
Collette	\$36 – \$45	\$450	26 – 35
Sarah	\$46 – \$60	\$500	46 – 55
Mary	\$45 – \$60	\$300 +	18 - 25
Leah	\$46 – \$60	\$200	36 - 45
Cynthia	\$61 – \$80	\$350	36 - 45

### **Brand Name Awareness**

This participant group is comprised of sophisticated beauty product consumers. They are quite familiar with the mechanics of buying and using beauty products, know which stores carry particular brands, are cognizant about marketing techniques utilized in store displays and through media, and are very much aware of price and quality differences between products. Each participant identified brands of specific cosmetics, hair products and clothing items preferred, regardless of whether she presented an interpellated position on consumerism and the beauty

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<sup>9</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all the participants.

myth or a position of resistance. For example, “Collette” stated that she uses L’Oreal Voluminous mascara, Estee Lauder blush, Biotherm face cream and Avon make-up remover. She was also able to describe defining features of each product such as price and quality to explain her preferences. “Sarah” uses Shiseido eye-makeup and Body Shop skin products. “Leah” said that Le Chateau tended to have sizing that accorded with “normal woman sizes.” Although she expressed a clear anti-consumerism stance in conscious resistances to advertising messages, Leah acknowledged that when she used more make-up in the past, she used Clinique. Some women said that they bought certain products without brand loyalties, based on price or whim. However, generally speaking, whether citing price, familiarity with the product or compatibility to skin sensitivities, the participants did express highly developed knowledge of brand name products and general tendencies of loyalty to particular brands.

Naomi Klein (2000) considers the brand to be “the core meaning of the modern corporation” and advertisements to be the vehicle of conveyance (p. 5). She explains that “branding” is a response to the age of the machine, through which a “sameness” in products was created so that meaning had to be manufactured along with the product to differentiate it from the same item made by another company (p. 6). Thus, we are sold not just a product, but an idea, value, or social image behind which the product stands. For example, “Coke” is not merely a carbonated sugar beverage, but represents an image, a life-style and an ideology of success.

### **Acceptance of the Beauty Myth Among my Research Participants**

Wolf's (1990) assertion that the beauty myth has supplanted the feminine mystique as a social tool of women's repression is worthy of consideration. Wolf states that the beauty myth is even stronger (than the feminine mystique) in order to meet and assault women's new power. My research supports Wolf's argument that the beauty myth is strong, in the general dissatisfaction with personal appearance among the ten women who participated in my study. All of them revealed a clear awareness of the beauty index's criteria, and equally, of the ways in which they did not meet the standard. While responses varied in terms of what each woman liked or did not like about her body, the composite of each woman's responses totalled generally less-than-affirming attitudes, which I attribute to the beauty myth. During some interviews, some of my questions obviously elicited difficult feelings for both the participant and the researcher. After the interview with Susan, whose spoke of her struggles with anorexia, it was hard for me not to feel saddened at hearing about such suffering. Often, after an interview, I realized I needed to emotionally debrief from listening to women's feelings of shame about the inadequacy of their bodies.

In response to my question, do you consider yourself to be beautiful or attractive, three women answered unequivocally, no. "Kelly," a young, married, para-professional, whom I would describe as pretty and rather plump, did not see anything positive about her appearance:

Kim:	How satisfied are you with your appearance on a scale of 1 to 10 where one is not very satisfied and ten is extremely satisfied?
Kelly:	About five.

- Kim: Could you tell me what you based your answer on?
- Kelly: Hmm. . . .The fact that I have to wear glasses. I wish I didn't have to wear glasses. I've never had perfect skin so I've always felt like I have to wear make-up to cover up the flaws and the blemishes. Uhh. I don't know. I actually don't remember the question.
- Kim: I said, how satisfied with your appearance, and you said around 5. Then I asked, what did you base that answer on; what do you like or not like about your appearance?
- Kelly: Well, I'm over weight. So I don't like that about myself.
- Kim: What do you *like* about your appearance?
- Kelly: That's hard to answer. There's not a lot. So I don't know.

This short piece of conversation shows Kelly as under-confident in her appearance. Yet I would describe her appearance as attractive and professional. Her use of cosmetics, toiletries and clothing all very much conform to a standard feminine appearance. Still, the time and money spent colouring and curling her hair, applying full make-up, having finger nails professionally gelled, and purchasing fine clothing did not serve to bring her confidence level to more than a "five" when it comes to her appearance.

Four women offered somewhat vague responses: Mary's "some days I'm happy with my appearance and some days I'm not. . . it depends on who I'm with"; Sarah's "I'm not unattractive . . . about a five" [out of ten]; and Cynthia's "[I'm]not overly attractive but I don't think of myself as ugly or anything . . . ." Cynthia rated her level of satisfaction with her appearance at six on a scale of one to ten. Only one woman answered that yes, she considered herself to be beautiful.



She rated her level of satisfaction with her appearance at “eight and a half or nine” out of ten. This particular woman is very young, tall, slim and athletic looking; she has clear skin, thick hair and a stereotypically “beautiful” face. Thus, in my research group, women tended to not have unrealistic assessments of their own physical “beauty” according to the Western beauty index. Nine out of ten of them expressed less-than-satisfied feelings about their appearances, all of which fall short on a scale in which beauty is defined according to a very narrow range of unlikely qualities.

In my small group, in keeping with a dominant beauty model of youth and slimness as paramount, self-denigrations related to age and weight were expressed more frequently than about any other traits. Eight of the ten women made at least one unsolicited comment about weight concerns and five of the ten made unsolicited comments about age concerns; three of these came from women who are under 35. In my opinion, the women’s concerns about age and weight did not correspond to their actual state. For example, Susan spoke of herself as “getting older” although she is under 35, and struggles with acceptance of her size although I would guess that at about 5’2” she is not more than 85 pounds. Mary, whose age is in the 18 – 25 range, made three references to herself as an “aging woman” in our conversation.

In connection with the participants’ general malcontentment with their own bodies was a clear recognition of what constitutes female “beauty.” All of the women I interviewed identified beauty in terms of concrete, quantifiable physical traits, even if they were actively trying to resist that ideal. A “beautiful woman,”

according to one participant, is “six feet tall, curvy and proportioned.” Another participant said that a “beautiful woman” is “tall and slender” with “flawless skin.” Yet another said that a beautiful woman has “intense eyes, lush hair, nice teeth, a small nose and [is] well-proportioned.” All of my participants’ responses indicated that regardless of the degree to which they accepted or resisted the dominant beauty ideal, they had all internalized it to varying degrees.

My research also shows that while women generally have low opinions of our appearances, we tend to believe that a link exists between appearance and social/professional success, and therefore self-esteem. When I asked participants if they considered themselves beautiful, responses often included expressions of discomfort. More often than not, I observed participants squirming uncomfortably and struggling with these questions. Along with her age and weight, Susan mourned her “difficult” hair, which I would describe as full, fashionably styled, coloured and accessorized with cosmetic sparkles or hair combs whenever I saw her. Likewise, Cynthia, a successful business owner, spoke of her bad skin and heavy weight – neither of which was apparent to me - while Tanitia, an attractive woman with a successful career and beautiful home, said she had learned to *accept* her appearance rather than feel satisfaction with it. She admitted that she sometimes compared herself to women with “beautiful red hair,” and wondered if she should dye her hair, which I would describe as silvery-taupe, full and attractively cut. Mary, a pretty young woman well-established in a para-medical profession and engaged to be married, told me she needed “a lot” of reassurance about her appearance, and that furthermore, she did not have the “right” kind of

hands. These responses clearly reveal that these women have internalized the beauty myth and therefore unhappily measure their own bodies against its impossible standards. The uniformity of laments about age and weight specifically, as well as Mary's reference to not having the "*right*" kind of hands, are testament to the very limited way that a woman can be seen as "beautiful" in Western consumer culture.

### **Consumption of Media Images and Self Esteem**

A significant finding in my research is that the participants who spent the greatest amount of time and money on beauty products generally held lower opinions of their own beauty compared with those who actively resist the beauty myth's standards. Susan, who used to model professionally, watches approximately 21 hours of television per week and subscribes to three beauty magazines. She expressed the lowest self-rating of her own appearance at only four out of ten. Mary subscribes to two beauty magazines and estimates her television watching at 12-15 hours per week. She rated her level of satisfaction with her appearance at a seven, but described panopticon-style self monitoring practises reminiscent of Foucault's theory of docile bodies:

I like my height. I'm satisfied with my weight. Although at times I'm not. It just depends if I'm "PMS" ing. We talked about this the other day. In different lighting you look different or in different mirrors you look different. I'm constantly turning to the side or looking straight ahead or at different angles and such. . .

Similarly, "Kelly" whose stylish and made-up appearances suggests she spends a fair amount of effort on her physical appearance, rated her satisfaction

with her own appearance quite low at only 5 out of 10. She reads *Chatelaine* magazine and watches about 21 hours of television per week

In contrast, “Leah” and “Debbie,” who are both less “beautiful” by popular standards because their body types are more heavy than light, use very little cosmetics and present themselves physically in a more relaxed style than Susan and Kelly, tended to express greater confidence in their appearances. Debbie persistently resisted my questions about what constituted beauty by answering that beauty was more of an “energy thing” for her while Leah said that she considers herself both beautiful and attractive because “there’s no point in thinking otherwise.” By refusing to succumb to popular media’s ascriptive beauty standards, these women are free to construct their own more empowering notions of beauty.

While it is unlikely that media alone are responsible for forming people’s opinions what constitutes beauty and whether or not their bodies are beautiful, media probably play a large role. Various studies have shown that people’s attitudes are affected by what they read and view in the media. For example, Oliver James (May, 2000) cites the research of Douglas Kendrick (1970) in which, following a viewing of the television show *Charlie’s Angels* which specifically features “beautiful” women, men tended to rate their own wives and girlfriends as less attractive than a control group who did not view the show. Even more disturbing, the *Angels* watching men also expressed a lower level of love for their mates than did the control group. Not surprisingly, women who were shown images of “beautiful” female models responded with a lowered mood. James

concludes explicitly that it is “no wonder female depression and eating disorders have mushroomed, if women are forced dozens of times a day to compare themselves to such ideal models” (p. 139). Although over 30 years old, this data, which shows an explicit negative correlation between self-image and consumption of media images of “beautiful” women, is still relevant today because there is no reason to believe that people’s cognitive and psychological processes in response to consumption of media images have changed. If anything, it is reasonable to suppose that the effects of media consumption may have grown stronger as the media images we are now exposed to have become increasingly pornographic and sophisticated as evidenced in music videos and women’s fashion magazines. As well, the standards of beauty have become harder to reach as many celebrities increasingly succumb to common beauty “treatments” like face-lifts, botox injections and breast implants. For example, although she is more than 50 years old, Goldie Hawn retains a 20 year-old face and blonde hair, and at 40 something, Demi Moore’s large, “perky” breasts, and youthful face are due to the cosmetic surgery she has undergone. It is also common for celebrities to spend hours and dollars fine-tuning their bodies with the help of personal fitness gurus. The images of near perfection they present set a completely unavailable standard for most women.

I showed all my participants two beauty magazine advertisements featuring “beautiful” women. The first depicts a young, blonde, slim, White woman in a fur coat. She is shot from a low angle looking up so that her height is accentuated. She is wearing a short skirt so that the camera takes in her long, slender legs. Her

blonde hair is blowing in the wind, and the ambiance of the photo, apparently set on a rugged rock, coupled with the ragged “cave-man” look of her skirt and fur suggests wildness. The second image is of a young, slim, White woman wearing a bikini and carrying a small bag. She appears to be running on a beach, directly into the camera. The camera is set at crotch level very close to the woman so that the half of her body we see (from the thighs up) fills the page. She is blonde with apparently wet, slicked back hair and a fully made-up face. (See Appendix B for beauty advertisements.) My data shows a consistently negative response to these advertisements of highly sexualized women. In response to my question about how the ads made them feel the following responses are excerpted from six different participants:

“I wish I could wear that – I wish I was skinny. . .to think about me fitting in to the bathing suit? That’s a yucky feeling.”

“A bit envious - a bit down, a bit harder on myself. It doesn’t feel good.”

“I would just like to be thin like that again. “

“Definitely not something I would be able to wear.”

“I feel like I wish I looked like her.”

“Envious of her hair.”

Clearly, these responses suggest the same lowering of mood that Douglas found in his “babe watching” study. “Yucky,” “doesn’t feel good” and “envious” are not feelings that support self-esteem. These results suggest that beauty advertisers’ goal of lowering self-esteem is successful - the beauty magazine images elicited immediate feelings of inadequacy in the women viewing them.

Furthermore, the act of viewing the beauty advertisements suggests a dehumanizing process in which the viewer is interpellated and her mind colonized by the advertisement's meaning.

While the specific content of participant responses varies, every one of the ten participants expressed some form of negativity about the beauty advertisements I showed them. Five women articulated feelings of envy or inadequacy in response to the images. Three were unable to identify a feeling response, one said the ads made her feel lied to, and one said the images were very artificial. Among the three participants unable to identify a feeling in response to the ads, their cognitive judgements about the ads suggested negative feelings. For example, Tanitia could not identify a feeling response, but said she did not find the second ad particularly nice to look at. When pressed to identify why, she responded, "Well if I were doing the make-up ad I would have people focus on her face rather than the crotch." This statement suggests discomfort about the overt sexualization of the model in a bikini – the ad was actually for Revlon cosmetics. Sarah, who also was unable to identify a feeling in response to the ads made the following judgement: "Well they're both very typical models using sexuality to sell a product. Those kinds of things generally bug me. I don't find it appealing."

Another theme that appeared in response to the advertisements was some form of irritation for the obscurity of the ads' message. Three of the participants expressed irritation because the ads did not "make sense" or did not portray images appropriate for a Saskatoon audience. The following are excerpts from five different respondents' comments about the two advertisements:

“Not appropriate for Saskatoon!”

“Annoyed because people don’t wear this sort of thing.”

“I have negative feelings about it. I don’t know how to describe it though . . . irritating ‘cause it doesn’t fit together.”

“Nothing I would wear so I don’t understand why magazines want to advertise that. She’s not wearing much clothes. Definitely not something I would be able to wear.

“Not angry but annoyed because people don’t wear this sort of thing, and I don’t know what the ad is for.”

Clearly, the participants found the advertisements, which are common among Western beauty advertisements, to be unsuitable and even offensive. I would suggest that their clear discomfort, articulated in a variety of ways, resulted from the dehumanizing presentation of the women in the advertisements.

Aside from media messages, there are constant cultural reminders of what women should look like. People who have consumed popular media messages reaffirm the validity of these messages by attempting to conform to the dehumanizing standards set, thus modeling to each other what is acceptable feminine behaviour. Styles of physical presentation that include coloured hair and cosmetics, and discussions during coffee-breaks at work about dieting, removal of “unwanted” body hair and myriad details that comprise the beauty ideal also play a large role in perpetuating it. Inevitably, though, the role of the media in shaping and reflecting Western culture cannot be understated. Given media technologies’ level of growth and sophistication, omnipresence, and inevitability in Western cultural locations, it is unthinkable that media could not play a significant role of



influence in people's lives. Clearly, advertising works, or corporations would not spend billions of dollars on it annually.

Evidence suggests a generally negative relationship between mental health and exposure to Western consumerism. Oliver James (2000) states unequivocally that there is no correlation between happiness and wealth. In fact, his scholarship, based on a 1995 World Health Organisation study, argues that the greater the approximation to the American model, which includes advanced technologies and consumer capitalism, the greater the likelihood of mental illness among citizens (37). This research, as well as Kendrick's "babe-watching" study provides strong support for the suggestion that the beauty advertising so prevalent in Western societies works against the well being of consumers while corporate profits grow.

### **Profiles of Two Participants**

#### ***"Sarah"***

"Sarah" (not her real name) is a White, middle-class, middle-aged, professional woman living in a "trendy" Saskatoon neighbourhood. I would describe her as a classy and worldly woman. She holds a bachelor's degree and an executive position, which places her in an earning range of \$46,000 - \$60,000 annually. Sarah is both image-conscious and politically conscience. She is very well-dressed and groomed and uses cosmetics daily, but chooses Body Shop skin products for ethical reasons and expresses concern about the use of child-labour in clothing production. Sarah's cosmetic use includes the following products: foundation, cover-up, eye-liner, mascara, eyebrow pencil, eye-shadow, lipstick, hair-styling product, hair-colour, nail polish, and face and body moisturizer. Her

morning beauty ritual, lasting about 45 minutes long, includes blow-drying then straightening her hair with a hot iron. She visits the beauty salon monthly for a cut and colour, spending what she terms a “hugely expensive” \$110 per visit and approximates her expenditure on beauty products and services in a three-month period at about \$500. These estimates indicate that her annual expenditure on beauty products and services is about \$2,000. Sarah identified Shiseido as her make-up brand and the Body Shop for skin products. The Bay is her cosmetic store because she “can get everything” there, and she has established a certain degree of comfortable familiarity with one of the cosmeticians, whom she describes as “older” and “not overly made-up.” She buys her fashionable clothing at Eddie Bauer or at a local exclusive designer store.

Sarah, like 90% of my participants, remembers when she first started using cosmetics as a significant event in her life. Sarah began using cosmetics under her mother’s tutelage. She remarks that most of her friends had to struggle against disapproving mothers in order to use cosmetics, but that her mother encouraged the use of make-up. Sarah recounts that her mother brought home mascara telling her that she had very light eyelashes and that it was time she used “something like this.” In spite of Sarah’s perception that her friends’ use of cosmetics met with maternal resistance, 40% of my participants reported that their mothers played a role in initiating their cosmetic use. In fact, in two cases, the mothers solicited professional make-up advice from a Mary Kay cosmetician for their daughters. There is a significant age range among these four women, from 18 to 55, which infers that mothers of recent years, as well as of 40 years ago have encouraged their

daughters to use make-up. While it is not possible to make generalizations based on a qualitative study of this size, these data do suggest that it is not unusual for mothers to initiate their daughters' use of make-up, as a modern rite of passage mediated by an older woman.

Although she answered that she did not have a preferred brand of clothing, Sarah told me that her favourite place to buy clothing is at a store that I would describe as a small exclusive boutique featuring clothing at higher prices than is usually found at more mainstream department stores such as Sears or the Bay. Although she confessed that her monthly hair styling is "hugely expensive," she said she would find it hard to try a less expensive salon because she has established a comfortable relationship with the stylist, describing it as something like having a "personal psychologist." This comment implies a certain ritualistic aspect to the beautifying process. As in the case of many other rituals such as religious, educational or professional ceremonies, the process involves a person identified by his or her special skills who may become a trusted member of the client's social/professional life.

Sarah's experience of finding comfort, familiarity and pleasure in patronizing a beauty salon mirrors one of the other participants involved in my research. "Colette" said that readying herself for a social evening was a long involved process, usually entailing a glass of wine. She spoke of enjoying the process, considering it part of the whole "going out" experience. She sometimes makes a social event of the beauty salon or spa experience by sharing it with a friend. She described "going for a facial with a girlfriend just for fun," to have a "girls' day

out.” In spite of the whimsical tone expressed in Collette’s narrative, the amount of money spent on a “girl’s day out” renders it a fairly extravagant occasion. In six phone calls made randomly to beauty salons in Saskatoon, I was quoted from \$25 to \$50 for a hair cut (the range was consistently lower for men) and from \$52 to \$90 for a facial.

In both Sarah and Collette’s cases, the beautifying experience is not entirely utilitarian but involves pleasure in the process. The pleasure may derive from the social nature of the experience when shared with a friend, or from the therapeutic nature of the experience which involves being pampered and listened to by someone familiar enough to be comforting but outside of the immediate social network and thus “safe.” Based on my own beauty salon experiences, I expect that the women involved in my study experience beauty salons as places where they are comforted, touched and pampered in a venue that does not demand reciprocal attention. Since women often play the role of care-givers in patriarchal societies, both in their families and places of employment, being the recipients of care giving is likely to be experienced as an uncommon delight.

My participants’ narratives of the beauty salon experience evoke a sense of a nurturing women’s space. Naomi Wolf (1990) speaks of this women’s space existing in popular women’s magazines. She argues that beauty magazines, in spite of the fear-inducing beauty advertisements, often contain articles that speak intelligently about women’s realities. She refers to editorial topics such as managing the balance between parenting and paid employment, coping with sexual harassment, and presenting oneself professionally as a strategy to career

advancement. In an environment characterized by mainstream editorial that is male-dominated, the beauty magazine offers a woman-centred editorial space (Wolf, 1990). Clearly there is a connection between the women's space created in the beauty magazine, and the women's space created in the beauty salon. However, my data reveal that "pampering" is generally not the main goal of the beautifying process for women.

Sarah's narrative reveals other motivations for her use of cosmetics. With obvious embarrassment she admitted to wearing cosmetics even while working in her backyard garden. Sarah's habit of using cosmetics creates a direct clash with her belief system. The following excerpts reveal this clash:

Often I . . . go out to work in the garden and I'll do my usual routine, [make-up and hair] I won't just slap on jeans and a t-shirt and go outside. It's very ingrained in me. I go camping and sometimes I even take along my make-up bag! (laughs) It's sick! It's sick to admit to that! (laughs) . . . It's so superficial! It's not natural to wear make-up. It's very unnatural to get up in the morning and slather goop on your hair and goop on your eyes. You know it's much simpler-much purer to wash your hair and walk out the door. And I could intellectualize till the cows come home. I know it's being tied to something that's very superficial. It doesn't make me feel proud of the fact that's for sure. To be self-satisfied to the extent that you feel that you look fine in your natural state – I wish I could do that.

What is important about the contradiction between Sarah's values and practice is the internal conflict created. In her own words, the result is that she feels "not proud." This admission suggests shame, considered in feminist healing environments to be an unhealthy and silencing emotion. Furthermore, in an idealistic person, the awareness that one's values contradict with one's behaviour is likely to result in a sense of hypocrisy. Clearly self-esteem is not the result of such an experience. Yet, ironically, Sarah, like all of my participants, identifies the

effect of her beautifying rituals as promoting self-esteem, as this excerpt from our interview reveals:

My whole reason for using beauty products revolves around the image I have of myself . . . I think it's just self-image. And as well, when you're feeling good about yourself you project self-confidence.

Although she spends a significant sum of money on hair, make-up and clothing, Sarah expresses a strong and clear awareness of exploitation issues related to capitalist globalization and capitalist consumption. In the following excerpt she reveals cognisance of the pervasiveness of sweatshop abuses in the production of fashion items used in the Western world:

I know that a lot of clothes manufacturing is done in Third World countries and I know that they're done in sweatshops and sweatshops that also hire children. I know Gap for example has a very nasty history of sweatshops in Third world countries, but Eddie Bauer, I don't know. It may very well be the same.

In response to the question, who makes the clothes you wear, Sarah 's response indicated her awareness of global sweatshop abuses and of her preference to avoid participating in abusive production methods:

I know that in terms of clothing it's often women and children, and they're paid a pittance probably. The whole rationale for using Body Shop products is they, theoretically, don't test on animals. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. 'Cause those kinds of things are important to me.

Along with a general awareness of exploitation issues related to globalization, Sarah exhibits an equally sophisticated awareness of the contradiction between her values and practices. Her explanation for this contradiction implies advertising's power to seep below the level of conscious thought.

I'm recognizing through this process just how much of an impact things like advertising has on one, in terms of your attitude. You know, intellectually I know there are certain things that make me feel uncomfortable, yet I buy into it to a certain extent.

Sarah's awareness that she "buys into" the dominant ideology of feminine beauty and consumerism does not change her beauty consumption habits. She still spends approximately \$2,000 dollars annually on beauty products, shops for clothing in an exclusive high-fashion shop, and wears name brands like Eddie Bauer. As a successful middle-class executive, Sarah has an image to maintain. Although "one of these days" she may let her hair go grey, for now, she maintains a socially acceptable youthful appearance, using hair colour, make-up and a well-tailored wardrobe. She resists the exploitative production/consumption process by consume Body Shop products for skin care because of her understanding that it does not exploit animals in the testing process.

To better understand at what point Sarah would limit her options in the pursuit of beauty, I asked her if she had ever had cosmetic surgery. She had not. When I asked her if she would ever consider it, she also answered no. Both surgery and botox injections, a new popular method of reducing wrinkles, were options Sarah felt were too intrusive to justify.

### ***Sarah's Perspective of Cosmetic Surgery and Botox Injections***

Sarah's unequivocal "no" to the possibility of cosmetic surgery was followed by her pronouncement that such procedures are "too interventive to muck around with." As an interesting aside, she told me that the arts organization that employs her had been offered a \$500 gift certificate for botox injections, for a fund-raising event her organization was holding. Although I did not ask whether or not she had

accepted the gift, her attitude towards it was clearly disapproving as she described the event in disparaging terms and a tone of disbelief.

However, the very fact that this offer was made to a non-profit arts-oriented organization attests to the successful normalization of the cosmetic surgery industry. Given the relative newness and unknown long-term effects of botox injections, such casual “gifting” is cause for serious concern. One wonders if botox injectees may at some future point suffer consequences reminiscent of the supposedly “safe” silicone breast implants which so many women submitted to before serious health implications resulted.

Botox is the common name for Botulinum toxin A, which is a neurotoxin produced by *Clostridium Botulinum*, the bacterium that causes botulism or food poisoning. In such cases of food poisoning, victims may die because the toxin causes temporary paralysis of the muscles. If that paralysis is in the respiratory muscles, then breathing difficulties can be fatal (Neer, 2003). Likewise, injecting Botulinum toxin A into facial muscles temporarily reduces wrinkles by paralyzing these muscles so that the victim cannot move, therefore, wrinkle her face. The fact that people (generally women) submit to having their muscles purposely paralysed by a toxin in order to look younger speaks volumes about the level of fear underlying the practise. Aging has been medicalized and problematised to the extent that women pay money to risk their health in efforts to stave off the inevitable. When we look at the number of television ads that promise youthful complexions with the right skin cream, at the cosmetics that promise to “minimize



fine lines,” or the number of drugstore remedies that claim to have anti-ageing properties, it is no surprise that women have *en masse* learned to fear ageing.

An advertisement on the Internet for botox injections uses authoritative mock scientific language to induce fear about the natural and inevitable process of ageing. The advertisement’s bias is obvious in the imbalance of a much shorter list of common sounding words to describe the possible side effects of toxic botox injections:

BOTOX® Cosmetic is indicated for the temporary improvement in the appearance of moderate to severe *glabellar* (frown) lines associated with *corrugator* and/or *procerus muscle activity* in adult *patients* aged 65 years or less. The most common side effects are headache, respiratory infection, flu syndrome, temporary eyelid droop, and nausea. (Italics mine) (Botox Cosmetic Internet advertisement)

This style of authoritative mock-scientific language is common in the television and magazine cosmetic advertisements that most Western (and increasingly non-Western) women are subjected to on a daily basis. Unless one is completely reclusive, omitting all television and media consumption, which would in effect mean that one would have to refrain from entering grocery stores, drug stores, or any other stores where necessities are bought, as well as city streets where signage and public buses and taxis advertise, then one can not “choose” not to consume beauty advertising.

### ***Sarah’s Media Consumption***

Although a daily make-up user, Sarah does not consider herself to be a heavy media consumer. She does not buy beauty magazines although she did have a subscription to *Seventeen Magazine* when she was young, and I would add, impressionable. She watches a relatively small amount of television per week,

citing about eight hours on average. However, eight hours of television viewing per week would include a significant amount of advertisement time. Furthermore, Sarah acknowledges that she does read beauty magazines while in the beauty salon and other waiting rooms. While standing in grocery or convenience store line-ups, all of us are exposed to beauty magazine covers plied with images of impossibly perfect (air brushed) models and directives to improve our “abs,” “butts” or “boobs.” In spite of her choice not to read beauty magazines, Sarah, like all of us, is subjected to daily barrages of advertising concomitant with Western capitalist consumerism. As discussed earlier in this thesis, advertisements tend to follow the prescriptive formula of first creating insecurities in the consumer by suggesting that she may be suffering from any variety of social ills, then offering to solve the problem with a product. With regard to beauty and fashion advertising, the primary “social ills” are ageing and weight-gain, related and natural processes that confer a rating of inadequate on any woman who besought with them.

In spite of an expressed desire to resist buying into the beauty standards set by advertisements, Sarah defines feminine beauty in terms that very much reflect the hegemonic criteria. When I asked her to describe a beautiful woman, she said she would first consider personality traits. The hypothetical beautiful woman should be “someone who displays a lot of inner beauty. Someone who’s gracious, kind, gentle, and non-judgemental. . .tolerant.” These adjectives fit very well under the trope for Western femininity. Women should be passive and nurturing, or in Sarah’s terms “gracious, kind, gentle and non-judgemental.” When I asked her to speak specifically about the physical aspects of a beautiful woman, Sarah expressed

very definite ideas about what beauty was and was not. She said that a beautiful woman appears natural with hair that does not look processed but is thick and full rather than thin and wispy. I noted here that Sarah's own hair is "processed" with monthly color and a daily regime of washing, blowing and curling in order to achieve the "full and natural" look. The irony of course, is that one must process the hair in order to achieve the "natural, full, unprocessed" look. This begs the question regarding how "natural" is defined. It clearly does not refer to leaving the body in its "natural" state but involves a great deal of intervention. Sarah's description of the beautiful woman also demands that she must not be "extremely overweight," should have high cheekbones rather than a round face, large eyes rather than narrow "slitty" eyes, and full rather than thin lips. This image characterizes a White, young, slim woman - typically "pretty" according to the hegemonic ideal.

Although her own concept of beauty reflects the dominant ideology of beauty, Sarah is aware of her co-opted position. Her narrative reveals the psychological balancing act required to consume popular ideologies in order to achieve social and professional well-being, while simultaneously resisting them. She reveals her own position in this balancing act in the following passage excerpted from our interview:

It's interesting having this conversation because I know that we're so much a product of societal attitudes and we're raised – as women – we're raised from a very early age to fit into society's image of what is beautiful. And that is that we need to be slim, we need to have a certain look, your face has to have certain attributes in order to be attractive. . .

***Sarah: Conclusion***

As a middle-aged middle-class professional woman, Sarah presents herself as attractive in conformity to middle-class standards of femininity. She uses cosmetics, colours her hair, maintains a slim body and is very well dressed. At the same time, she is educated and cares about issues of social justice. The exploitation of people associated with globalized capitalism and the hegemonic standards of feminine beauty expounded by advertisers are injustices of a patriarchal capitalist world system about which she exhibits a sophisticated awareness. Although she expresses a marked distaste for advertising that exploits sexuality, and avoids consuming beauty magazines or large amount of television programming, Sarah is clearly, by her own admission, affected by popular media. The balancing of these incongruent positions creates in Sarah a sense of being “not proud”; she views her daily use of cosmetics as “superficial” and even “sick.” Yet she also asserts that presenting herself according to the dominant beauty ideology provides her with a certain measure of confidence.

I would suggest that Sarah’s articulated experience mirrors the experiences of many Western women who might like to extricate themselves from the beauty-consumer role, but find that it is too much entwined with issues of identity and survival to easily reject. It may be that we learn to fragment our consciousnesses in order to maintain the dissonant roles played between our socially and economically surviving selves and our ethical sensibilities.

There are of course health implications to a fragmented consciousness as psychological discourses show. Jane Wegscheider Hyman (1999) explains that women who have suffered abuse or trauma may dissociate in order to survive.

While it is certainly a stretch to relate psychological theories of dissociation to the experiences of Western women who consume beauty products while simultaneously maintaining a consciousness of the exploitation issues associated with the production and marketing of these products, a similarity of kind does exist between the two. With social status and economic survival at stake, there may be some form of “fracturing” of the consciousness in order to mediate opposing knowledges that occurs for Western women who consume beauty products, and if fracturing occurs, it is likely to take a further toll on women’s self-esteem.

***“Susan”***

I would describe Susan (not her real name) as a White, middle-class young woman in her late 20’s or early thirties. In the demographic questionnaire she checked the 26-35 age range, but declined to answer the question about household income. Therefore, my judgement of her as middle-class is based solely on her outward appearance and her apparently middle-class value system. She works in a secretarial capacity in a professional office, is married and does not have children. By my observations, Susan is very thin, very fashionable and devotes impeccable attention to her face and hair, which were always thoroughly made-up and styled whenever I saw her. Susan is a woman whom I would describe as appearing to have “just stepped out of a fashion magazine.” This observation is not far from the truth, as Susan told me that she worked as a fashion model in the past. Susan has some college education behind her and currently works in a clerical capacity.

Susan is extremely image-conscious and admitted to having an eating disorder, which she told me was under control at the time of our interview. She

spoke of struggling with accepting her present weight, which I would guess at not more than about 85 pounds, and wishing she were still the 70 pounds she was when her anorexia was active. Since she is approximately 5' 2" in height, 70 pounds would be a life-threatening weight.

On the day of our interview, Susan arrived at my door and immediately asked to use the bathroom, apologizing that her hair was "in a state." She did not appear wind-swept to me but looked as she always did when I encountered her in her place of employment, fashionably attired, and carefully coiffed and made-up. Susan told me that she began using cosmetics in grade six when she would have been not more than 12-years old. She remembers her mother applying blush to her face at this time. This anecdote suggests that like Sarah's mother, Susan's mother sanctioned the ritual of using cosmetics as a part of her daughter's passage to adulthood.

Today, Susan's regular cosmetic and toiletry use includes the following: foundation, face powder, cover-up, mascara, eyeliner, eye-shadow, blush, lipstick, hair product, hair-colour, nail polish, fragrance, face moisturizer, skin toner, body moisturizer, exfoliator, cellulite reducer and wrinkle reducer. She told me that her morning beautifying routine lasts about 30 minutes and is twice as long before a social evening.

Once during the interview Susan gave a conflicting answer to my questions. She said she used to have her hair cut and coloured in a salon, but that she now only cuts it at a salon but colours it at home. Yet, when I asked her how much money she spends in a three-month period on beauty products and services, she pondered aloud that a cut and colour is \$150, implying that she continues to spend

that amount at the hairdresser's. Then, after a significant pause replied, "Gosh! . . . I'm not able to answer that one!" Because she also declined from revealing her household income, it may be that Susan is not comfortable exposing financial information.

When I asked Susan about the largest sum of money she had spent on beauty products or services at one time, she was able to answer that she had spent between \$200 and \$250 at the hair salon in one visit. However, she later revealed that she spends considerably more than that on her once or twice per week trips to the mall for clothing, referring to herself as a "shop-a-holic." She mentioned that she had just been shopping the week of the interview and had "spent a fortune." In response to my question, "what's a fortune?" she said she had spent about \$300. When I pressed her with the question, and that this was a "normal" expenditure for her, as the following excerpt from our conversation reveals:

- Kim:            You said you spent a fortune. What's a fortune for you?
- Susan:        At one time?
- Kim:            Yeh.
- Susan:        Three hundred bucks.
- Kim:            Ok. And what would be a 'normal' spending?
- Susan:        I guess that's normal for me.
- Kim:            Is it? Ok.
- Susan:        Well I don't think I *should* be spending that much. I *know* I *shouldn't* be spending that much money on stuff like that. But for me I guess that's normal. I guess usually it's at least a few hundred.

If Susan visits the mall an average of one and one half times per week, the cost of the fashion clothing she wears amounts to \$450 per week, or about \$1,800 per month. That amount would easily comprise the majority of her paycheck as an office administrator for a private firm.

### ***Susan's Media Consumption and Self Image***

Susan is very familiar with the style of merchandise sold in particular stores. She cited Fairweather, Bootlegger, Le Chateau and Ricky's as her clothing stores of choice. Walmart, Superstore and Shopper's Drug Mart are her preferred stores for purchasing cosmetics and toiletries. She makes these choices based on convenience and selection. She is brand conscious, referring to specific brands for specific cosmetic and toiletry items. Susan responds to advertisements, which is revealed by the fact that she purchases all her face care products by mail order, having learned of the brand, YVS, from a flyer. Her sneakers are Reebok and Nike, both highly advertised brands. Clearly, Susan is a very savvy and brand conscious beauty and fashion consumer.

On the subject of cosmetic surgery, Susan told me that she would "definitely" have breast implants and nose surgery if she could afford it. She told me that the four out of ten she would rate her level of satisfaction with her appearance is "better than it has been . . . It used to be a negative number." In apparent confluence with a poor self-image, Susan consumes a significant amount of popular media. She subscribes to *Elle*, *Vogue* and *Shape*, popular women's beauty magazines with an editorial focus on the appearance of women's faces and bodies. The cover of *Shape* for the month of April, 2004 included a photo of a very slim, "pretty"



woman wearing very little clothing, what appears to be either underwear or a bathing suit, and it carried the following titles: “The Best Cardio for Losing Weight,” “Firm Your Thighs in Just Three Moves,” “Cellulite: Four Proven Solutions,” and “Six Triggers that Cause you to Overeat.” In fact, every single title on this particular cover (I have not listed them all here) is related to weight loss and exercise except for the one fearful warning titled “Cancers that Strike Young.” These titles give evidence to the normalization of woman-hating media messages. The messages on this one magazine cover alone are imbued with enough toxicity to contribute to a serious eating disorder and body image problem. Added to her beauty magazine consumption, Susan estimates that she watches about 21 hours of television per week, which is nearly one seventh of a week, a significant amount of her time. Along with television show content, which tends to include stereotypical reinforcements of the beauty myth for women, there would be a significant amount of time spent watching advertisements, some of which are women’s beauty and fashion advertisements. Even advertisements not particularly focused on beauty products tend to reinforce the beauty myth in depictions of happy, successful women in a variety of contexts. Whether they are portrayed driving children to school in expensive cars, cleaning the floor, or overseeing business meeting, women on television advertisements are typically young, slim, White and “beautiful” unless the advertisement is specifically targeting an older audience.

Susan’s conversation with me was peppered with self-admonishments that sounded very much like the advertisements she consumes. When we talked about exfoliating facial masks, she said she used them seldom but that she “need[s] to be

doing this stuff more” now that she’s “getting older.” Although she placed her age in the 26 to 35 range, (I would guess is less than 30 years old) she sees herself as “older.” In response to ageing, Susan uses skin-firming cream on her face although she said it was not effective. Although she told me it “didn’t work” she continues to buy and use these products. She also lamented her curly hair, saying she would “try any brand” to try to get it to “calm down.” In spite of being young, thin, and wearing a thick mane of curly hair, Susan is still very unhappy with her body, so spends a significant amount of time and money adorning it with fashionable clothing, hair products, toiletries and cosmetics.

The obvious problem for Susan is in the intersection of her belief that being “beautiful” is important enough to have both career and social implications, with her belief that she fails to achieve this status. Although she felt unable to answer my question, “what is a beautiful woman?” the effort spent trying to attain that elusive state suggests that she holds a very clear sense of what “beautiful” is not. Susan’s experience confirms Gillespie’s (1989) assertion that the media brainwashes us into thinking that beauty is not about what we are, but about what we are not.

While she struggles with anorexia and spends a large part of her pay-check on beauty and fashion products, Susan has no consciousness of the global context in which the products she buys are made or of the capitalist consumerism driving the advertising she buys into. “Globalization” is a term Susan has heard but does not know its meaning. She does not wonder where the products she buys originate, has never considered that they may come from sweatshops, and is unaware of the

term “consumer culture.” Her focus is instead on struggling to meet the dominant beauty standard by availing herself of the “right” beauty and fashion products, which she associates with the United States. This excerpt from our dialogue reveals Susan as globally unaware while acquiescing to American consumerist ideology.

- Kim: Where do you think the toiletries you buy come from? Perfumes, soaps, bath products- that sort of thing?
- Susan: I’m thinking . . . I don’t know . . .the States?
- Kim: Ok. What about the jeans you wear or any clothes you wear?
- Susan: You mean the clothes I buy here in Saskatoon? Where do I think they come from?
- Kim: Yeh.
- Susan: Umm. I always find Saskatoon shopping really sucks. There’s not as much selection. This is going to sound really bad but I’m going to say Canada because the States would have a lot better stuff (laughs) . . . I used to go the States a lot when I lived in [Canadian city] and the exchange was really good then so I would go shopping to the States and they made all different things.
- Kim: When making a purchase do you ever wonder who makes the items you buy?
- Susan: Honestly? You know what? I really don’t. Actually I don’t.
- Kim: Ok. Do you think they might come from sweatshops?
- Susan: That has never crossed my mind. I used to work for a sewing factory kind of thing. It wasn’t a sweatshop. You know I never even think – the term “sweatshop” is not part of my - you know?

Unlike Sarah, Susan does not suffer from guilt related to her beauty and fashion consumption. Instead, the primary source of Susan's guilt is that in spite of her commitment to consuming beauty and fashion products, she still has not achieved the level of beauty she considers important. She struggles to maintain the present weight of her tiny body, spends "a fortune" on shopping escapades, and by her own admission would "try anything" to make herself more "beautiful" including permanently altering her body through surgery. Susan represents a completely interpellated position on the dominant Western beauty ideology.

### **Comparative Analysis of Sarah and Susan**

There is considerable contrast between Susan and Sarah's awarenesses and beliefs regarding globalization and the beauty myth. Sarah is cognizant of the exploitation of global producers, her complicit role as a consumer, and of the manipulative force of consumer advertising. Sarah seems to have some feminist sensibilities, revealed in her recognition that cosmetics are "artificial," and in her expressed desire to accept her body and face in its natural state. She also expressed awareness that her distaste for fat bodies may be a reflection of social norms. Susan is completely unaware of these facets of the global production/consumption structure and revealed no consciousness about the beauty myth. Yet the ultimate result is the same: Both women spend considerable amounts of time and money consuming beauty and fashion products and services. They take the same amount of time to prepare their appearances for work and spend between \$100 and \$250 per visit at the hair salon. Both have internalised the Western beauty myth. Neither would consider presenting herself at her place of employment with a face

clean but cosmetic free, or hair clean but product free. Although cognizant of the exploitative manipulative aspects of consumerism, Sarah buys and applies cosmetics even before weekend afternoons spent gardening in her backyard and brings a make-up kit with her on camping trips. Susan's anorexia means that she is preoccupied with her appearance and never quite satisfied with how she looks. Both women present outward appearances of complete conformity with White middle-class standards of femininity, and both are meticulous in preparing their faces, hair and clothing to meet the world each day.

What is different about these women is the meaning they attach to the products and behaviours associated with beauty consumption. Sarah recognizes her interpellated position, which creates guilt for her. Susan does not, but feels guilty for not attaining the standard of the dominant ideology. Because of her understanding of exploitative production methods and manipulative consumerist messages, Sarah buys Body Shop products. Her choice not to subscribe to beauty magazines and to watch only eight hours of television per week is congruent with her concern about living in a consumer society that profits from the labour of less privileged people. The fact that she continues to "buy into" the beauty myth causes her guilt:

I don't imagine Eddie Bauer is that much different from Gap. April Cornell now that would be interesting to know because she's an individual designer. Although often the way corporations are able to exist are on the backs of poor people so they only go into a country if they were able to get cheap labour so at the end they're able to mass produce a product and sell it at a rate that . . . God, I'm going to go through a period of real anxt after this! (laughs)

Contrastingly, Susan's guilt is that she "should be doing [her] hair more" and feels like "a slob" because she does not take enough "care" of herself. The following excerpts from our conversation reveal that Susan's guilt is about not trying hard enough to be "beautiful."

- Kim: How often do you use exfoliators?
- Susan: Ok, to be honest I'd have to say very seldom.
- Kim: Seldom, ok.
- Susan: *But now I'm getting older I need to be doing this stuff!*
- Kim: Do you have a favourite or preferred brand of jeans?
- Susan: I'd have to say I don't know. I bought two pairs today but . . . I don't! *That's probably terrible.* I don't look at the brand at all, it just depends how they look on me.
- Kim: So, you don't do waxing and that sort of thing?
- Susan: I used to. *I feel like such a slob* 'cause I used to take care of myself a lot better.
- Kim: How often did you see a hair stylist in the last year?
- Susan: (Pause) Boy, not regularly. Hmm, how often did I go the hairdresser. . .[long pause]
- Kim: Maybe twice?
- Susan: Maybe say three or four times. I'm not really sure.
- Kim: Ok, that gives me a good idea-
- Susan: I know *I should be doing it more* – it just happens.

Susan's guilt represents a position of total submission to the beauty myth. Her previous work as a model, her anorexia, her willingness to surgically alter

herself, and her present behaviours in terms of beauty and fashion expenditures and style of self presentation all speak of a woman who has completely accepted the dominant beauty ideology. Susan appeared to me to be a woman expending enormous amounts of energy into looking “good” with little room left in her emotional or cognitive life for awareness of the larger context in which she pursues the “carrot” of beauty. But like the proverbial “carrot,” the beauty Susan seeks can never be attained. The result is her own sense of failure. Sarah also expressed a certain sense of failure. But for Sarah, the failure is in seeing the global context of production, marketing and consumption, yet failing to resist its corporate agenda. In either case, money and time are spent on beauty and fashion products, and the women as consumers, feel guilty. Whether conscious or not, the women in my study all showed signs of having learned to monitor and judge their own bodies according to the dominant beauty ideal. This self-monitoring is part of what Foucault has referred to as the creation of docile bodies.

### **The Creation of Docile Bodies**

Western patriarchy has a long history of constructing the female body “feminine,” which is equated with a specific kind of beauty equated with passivity. The docile mind and body have been necessary constructions in order for the dominant group - White heterosexual men - to inscribe it feminine. Michele Foucault wrote about power relations in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). Foucauldian theory holds that as the political liberty of the individual increased, it was countered by a force to discipline the body. Based on Bentham’s vision of the panopticon, Foucault describes the perfect and most

efficient structure possible for keeping large numbers of people imprisoned, which has symbolic implications for the beauty industry's hold on women.

Bentham's Panopticon: . . . at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (Foucault, 1977, p. 200)

By making them constant objects of the male heterosexual gaze, women have been made extremely visible, and thus trapped. Learning that we are the recipients of the dominant social group's gaze must surely create a kind of prison of self-consciousness for women. Pornography, beauty shows, beauty magazines, and myriad forms of social and media constructions function to place women under a constant, judging gaze. As Foucault explains, the panopticon's efficiency lies in the way that power over individual behaviour is transferred to each individual. Subjecting the prisoner to consciousness of his constant visibility, results in the prisoner assuming responsibility for constraining himself. Thus, "he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p 202). A body subjected in



this way to constant scrutiny becomes “docile” and pliant to the machinations of the dominant power.

Sandra Bartky (1998) discusses Foucault’s theory of the socially constructed docile body, adding another layer to it in her analysis of how women are doubly affected. She argues that Foucault failed to distinguish between social effects on the female and male body, for femininity itself is a social construction demanding vigilant discipline. Thus, the woman who constantly worries about what she eats, spending hours and dollars on attempting to achieve acceptable feminine beauty has become a self-policing victim of the panopticon of patriarchy. “[A] tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind” (Bartky, 1998, p 42). Bartky’s point is well-taken, because Foucault’s panopticon theory resonates with disturbing familiarity when we consider the reality of so many North American women literally starving themselves into thinness, or paying fortunes to have their bodies mutilated into the “proper” form.

As so-called “willing” beauty consumers, middle-class western women are really panopticon-style prisoners of a beauty ideology. We have learned to self-monitor what we eat and wear, frequently checking our appearances in mirrors because we have learned to expect the male judgmental gaze and even, I would imagine, the judgmental gaze of other women who have been interpellated by the dominant ideology. A plethora of cultural artefacts from television shows, to magazines, to books, to folklore, tell us that men are watching women and that women had better look “good” if they want to be successful. An ancient Western myth tells us that a face launched a thousand ships and a more recent one, that

Cindy Crawford's face made her a millionaire. In a surreal mirror-like effect, the faces and bodies of seemingly perfect women, themselves subjected to the camera's gaze, gaze back at us from magazine covers at every grocer or convenience store check-out counter serving as constant reprimands that we are not measuring up.

The women in my study described behaviours that suggest submission to the gaze, even while their own stated value system resisted. For example, Sarah's sheepish admission that she wears make-up even for back-yard gardening on the weekends produced evidence of an internal conflict in the attendant shame she expressed: She told me she hated to describe her morning beauty ritual because it is so "superficial." Debbie, who asserts she does not "get into all that" still wears foundation to work to cover her "blotchy" skin, while Leah, expressing strong opposition to consumerism and to popular beauty standards, admitted to being concerned about whether or not she made the right decision in wearing foundation to a job interview. Evidence of docility inscribed in women's bodies showed itself in all of my participants' responses to varying degrees. Susan's narrative was dotted with "shoulds" regarding her beauty regime. She made numerous guilty references to a "right" way to present herself, then to her own transgressions which were clearly not intended to be acts of rebellion but represented failures to meet the required standard. Likewise, Kelly said, "I've never had perfect skin so I've always felt that I have to wear make-up to cover up the flaws and the blemishes." Yet she told me that a beautiful woman is someone who takes care of herself and carries herself with confidence. When asked a direct question like what is a beautiful woman, Kelly was able to cognitively analyze the answer she wanted to

give. Yet when I asked her about her own make-up use, her answer, perhaps less considered and more emotional, revealed that beauty is about more than a confident style of carriage for Kelly. The language of docility - the “shoulds” and “musts” and “need to’s” that pepper the language of women describing their relationships to their bodies - is a manifestation of the disciplined bodies produced by their exposure to a plethora of visual and verbal cultural messages demanding they adhere to Western capitalist beauty standards.

Rigid adherence to authoritative dictations is another expression of docility. The following excerpt from Sarah’s interview reveals the formulaic rigidity of her beauty regime:

When I get up I shower every day. That means washing my hair everyday. And I do blow dry my hair. And it’s naturally very curly so to make it straight I have to work on it. And I use an iron to straighten it. It takes me about twenty minutes to do that, and then I do my make-up.

In analyzing Sarah’s narration of her morning beauty routine I noted the mechanistic quality of her discourse, which speaks of activities done in a particular order, every day, taking a particular amount of time. I also noted Sarah’s use of terms of discipline related to her hair care, such as “*I have to* (work on it)” implying a necessity, rather than choice. As well, the term “work on it” suggests a laborious effort rather than a pleasurable task of self-care. The daily washing, blow-drying and ironing into shape is probably not an unusual routine among Western women and is certainly in accordance with prescribed beauty treatments advocated by advertisers. Both her choice of words in describing the beautifying process and the process itself speak of subjection to a prescribed beauty standard.

The beauty myth's message has been so well propagandized that it has been internalized in the minds of women to the extent that they perform according to its standards every morning. When I asked my participants to describe how they got ready for work in the morning, they narrated punctilious processes that suggest the significance of an act so familiar that it has become "natural." Mary specifically used the word "system" to describe her morning beautifying ritual.

I've got it down in a system. . . I usually hop in the shower and take care of my skin care, put on body lotion and then I take care of my hair with spray-in conditioner and blow dry it. Curl it a little bit with a curling iron and then put it up - just put it away from my face and then I put on my make-up. And after my make-up I spray my hair into place and style it a little bit more. And get dressed.

By describing her beauty routine as a "system" Mary implies something mechanistic about the process. The language of docility is expressed in the phrases "take care of" and "spray it into place" which construct the body as unruly, primitive and needing discipline. It is a language that resonates with the tone of colonialism.

A significant amount of women's time and energy is required to maintain the docile bodies demanded by the beauty industry. Cynthia's morning routine describes a complex activity that not unlike driving a car or typing a routine business letter - has become so familiar that it can be carried out with little conscious attention. The following monologue, delivered at a very fast pace, suggested she did not even need to think to describe the process:

I get up. I let the dogs out, make coffee, let the dogs in, go have a shower, and then after I come out of the shower I moisturize, like, put on body lotion. Then I put mousse on my hair, then I plump my hair then I - I wash my face before I get in the shower - then I get out and I put toner on and I moisturize and put on make-up. Then I blow dry my

hair then I put on my powder after my face has had a couple of minutes for the foundation to set; put on the powder and the blush; then I start my curling iron, go put my mascara on while my curling iron is heating, curl my hair and turn the curling iron off, go get dressed while my hair's just setting a bit. And then put my clothes on go back to the bathroom, comb my hair through, spray it and I'm done. (laughs) Every day!

Cynthia's morning process, which takes about an hour, sounds so fixed and methodical that it again calls to mind the assembly line of the industrial revolution – or of the globalized assembly lines of today. The comparison is significant because both the industrial revolution and the era of global capitalism are associated with technological growth and a mechanization of work, which inevitably have served to further alienate the worker from the work and the consumer from the producer. Cynthia's methodical narrative also evokes the methodical and rational discourse of science. That discourse has been co-opted by the authoritative voice of advertisers in convincing women of their inherent inadequacy without the right products.

The language of science and technology, the most powerful discourse since the religious discourse pre-Renaissance, is often utilised as a tool to construct docility and compliance in the beauty consumer. For example, a Clinique in-store ad described by Naomi Wolf (1990) adopts a "scientific" appearance by utilising a table in which is recorded the following informational "data" for facial lines: "very many, several, few, very few" (p 96). Wolf notices that there is no category for "none." Other products include very scientific and unfamiliar words such as "phytolyastil," "SEI complex," and "mucopolysaccharides," clearly designed to

convey scientific authority. Wolf refers to this practice as the use of “mock authoritative language” (p. 108).

The development of a language of authority is an important and commonly utilized tool in achieving political dominance. For example, the colonization of North America involved a discourse of primitivism which named the Indigenous peoples “primitive,” “heathen” and “backward” in order to justify the usurping of their land and lives for the imperial mission. Young, impressionable, aboriginal children coerced from their homes and raised in christian missionary schools were often punished for speaking in their own language, inferring the power of language and the obvious fear the dominant culture held of the aboriginal languages. Aboriginal children were forced to adopt the European lifestyle and values through the adoption of its language and religion. Likewise, advertisers use strong language to “ideologically pacify” the consumer; the language of advertisements names women’s bodies as imperfect and in need of fixing. “Flaws” like fat, wrinkles, grey hair and pimples are named ugly and capable of wreaking misery unless brought under the control of scientifically designed products.

Thus, the scenario in which a woman stands inside a store, more often than not owned by White men, reads the list of ingredients on a bottle of face cream probably invented by White men, is impressed by its authoritative language and so buys it echoes Joyce Carol Oates’ story “The Goddess” (1974) in portraying the trickery of patriarchal authority. In this ironically titled story, a young aspiring actress trusts three authoritative men who claim to be legitimate film producers, but instead they rape her and film the attack for a pornographic video. A similar kind of exploitation is recalled in popular narratives about Marilyn Monroe – also a

goddess of kind – a woman wanting love and success, but instead exploited as a sexual object in the patriarchal Hollywood film industry. In that industry she was actually more of a pawn than a player among powerful White male producers and directors.

Similarly, women buying into the beauty myth can be viewed as pawns in an industry that is inevitably driven by the goal of perpetual economic growth for the corporations rather than by the health and well being of its customers. The mostly male corporate executive officers (CEO's) of cosmetic giants are enormously wealthy from the profits generated by the industry: A few examples include L'Oreal's CEO Mr. Lindsay Owen-Jones, Mary Kay Cosmetics' CEO Richard Rogers, Shiseido's CEO Mr. Morio Igeda and Revlon's CEO Jack Stahl who reportedly receives \$2.4 million as an annual salary.

The same patriarchal authority expressed in the primitivist discourse of colonial missionaries and in patronizing Judaeo-Christian guilt-inducing sermons is also evident in the advertisers' admonishments to perspective consumers. As Naomi Wolf (1990) noticed, beauty advertisers are particularly likely to use the tool of religious guilt to preach their message. The beauty advertiser's message is designed to induce guilt and fear that will motivate the "sinner" into attempting to reform her "evil ways" by submitting to the beauty authorities. Thus, natural bodies are rendered damned by the "evils" of fat, age, or imperfect skin, and can only be saved by using the right product. It is important for the advertisement to succeed in convincing women that they are in desperate need of repair if they ever hope to be loved. As the Christian church has convinced many people that they are sinners who must submit to church authority in order to assure a place in heaven, the

unadorned woman is scared into submitting to popular beauty standards. Wolf (1990) notes that “a woman who does not feel damaged cannot be relied on to spend money for her ‘repair’” (p.74). Like the concept of original sin, advertisements nurture the idea that women are inherently inadequate. Guilt is invoked in the following beauty advertisements as noted by Wolf (1990):

(Revlon ad) Since 1956, there’s been no excuse for dry skin.

(Clarins ad) Even the most innocent expressions - including squinting, blinking and smiling take a toll on a woman’s face . . .

Do you laugh, cry, frown, worry, speak? . . . A better bust is up to you . . . Take control of your contours.

(Terme di Saturnia) Isn’t it obvious what you should do for your skin now?

(Elizabeth Arden) Stop damaging your skin. (p. 75)

The language in these advertisements meant to invoke the female body’s submission to control suggests the tropes of the flawed body vs the perfect spirit that are at the foundation of Judaeo-Christian discourse. As well, the patronizing tone of these ads admonishing women for not maintaining young, perfect bodies speaks of Western paternal colonialism exerted over the environment and over indigenous peoples. The advertisers’ goal is that the consumer will internalise these guilt inducing messages and police herself accordingly. Guilt and an internalised paternalistic attitude toward her own body are most definitely suggested in all of the “shoulds” with which Susan berates herself for “letting herself go.” Ironically, Sarah expresses the same emotion - guilt – but for the opposite reason:



It's not natural to wear make-up. It's very unnatural to get up in the morning and slather on goop on your hair and goop on your eyes. You know it's much simpler, much purer to wash your hair and walk out the door. And I could intellectualize till the cows come home. I know it's being tied to something that's very superficial. It doesn't make me feel proud of the fact that's for sure. To be self-satisfied to the extent that you feel that you look fine in your natural state – I wish I could do that.

Sarah's ability to negotiate between her beauty practices, which make her feel comfortable enough to face the outside world, and her cognitive judgment of these activities as superficial leave her with the experience of feeling "not proud." This lowering of self-esteem is very significant when we consider that it comprises yet another layer of the process of breeding insecurities in consumers. The obvious irony in this situation is that all of my participants argued that their use of beauty products was related to their goal of feeling better about themselves. However, none of them expressed awareness that the sense of inadequacy motivating the desire for beauty products might have been caused by the beauty advertisements themselves.

### **Fetishism and the Commodification of Beauty**

Along with mere products, advertisers are selling values and lifestyles. Inherent in a capitalist consumer lifestyle, which characterizes Western and particularly American culture, is a belief in the primacy of the commodity as a means to well being. Stephen Fjellman (1992), writing about the commodification of fantasy in Disneyland theme parks, states that the commodity has become absolute as a purveyor of well-being in American consumer capitalism:

The hegemonic metamessage of our time is that the commodity form is natural and inescapable. Our lives can only be well lived (or lived at all) through the purchase of particular commodities. Thus our major existential interest consists of manoeuvring for eligibility to buy such

commodities in the market. Further, we have been taught that it is right and just – ordained by history, human nature, and God that the means of life in all its forms be available only as commodities . . . Americans live in an overcommodified world, with needs that are generated in the interests of the market and that can be met only through the market. (p.9)

Within this strong foundation of consumerism the product becomes a metonymy of the qualities it represents. Thus, fetishized, Crest toothpaste becomes symbolic of not only clean teeth but of sexiness and romantic success implied or explicitly promised in advertisements. Often the brand name, itself associated with a particular lifestyle, takes the place of the product itself. Hence we speak of “Coke” in reference to any brown, carbonated drink or “Kleenex” for any kind of tissue. “Branding” as Naomi Klein (1990) argues has become an important part of the lifestyle commodity. Association with a particular brand name functions as a social identifier. One is too “cool” to wear this brand of runners, or too “alternative” to associate with that “preppy” brand of jeans. As social identifiers, brand name products have become fetishized in North American culture, empowering them as agents of cultural pacification. As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, the imperial project imbued the Western product with the very values and lifestyle sold to the natives as part of the enculturation process.

### **Resisting the Myth / Resisting Consumerism – Are They Linked?**

As discussed earlier, the beauty myth is propagated in large part by media advertising, the primary tool of capitalist consumerism. People who deconstruct advertising messages as a strategy of rejecting the ideology of capitalist consumerism would also likely reject the hegemonic feminine beauty ideology it conveys. When we looked at the results of Kendrick’s “babe watching” study we

saw that women are negatively impacted by consuming media images of “beautiful” women. Thus, it is logical to assume that women who are able to avoid or deconstruct such media images might not suffer the associated lowered self-image.

My research supports this logic. Two of my participants, Linda and Leah, both spoke assertively against the socially prescribed beauty ideal, and both expressed greater self-confidence in their own appearances. “Leah,” a young university student, described make-up as a luxury “that you don’t really need” and complained that women’s sizing was unrealistic, because she had to wear an extra-large, while she had observed that she was pretty “average” in comparison to women she saw in her daily life. Leah said that she agreed with “some academics” who describe images of women in beauty magazines as unrealistic, but she felt these magazines were “pretty harmless” as long as readers know that “they’re all about advertising, all about selling products.” She offered a feminist point of view when she answered the question, what is a beautiful woman: “What makes them beautiful is the fact that they’re confident and they think they’re beautiful.” This surprising and refreshing attitude represents a complete departure from what the beauty myth would have us believe. Leah’s definition of beauty allows an agency of belief to women. Their power does not lie in the accident of their particular physical attributes, their “choice” to use cosmetics and beautifying products, nor their financial capability and willingness to submit to surgical intervention, but to their absolute choice to reject popular beauty ideology and adopt a positive, self-defined sense of personal esteem.

Not surprisingly, Leah's self-image was higher than the group average. She rated her level of satisfaction with her appearance as 8 out of 10, and when asked if she considered herself beautiful or attractive she responded with the most positive answer of all ten women: "Yep. I consider myself to be both beautiful and attractive!" To correspond with her positive self-image, Leah's definition of "beauty" involves criteria that contradict the static, externally imposed beauty index prescribed by the fashion and beauty industry. For her, being beautiful is about being confident rather than having a particular body size or shape of nose or breast. She clearly has made conscious choices to resist the myth, which shows in the following passage in which she provides an explanation for her confidence:

I guess the reason that I think I'm attractive is that I think it's important to think you're attractive. There's not really much you can do about it anyway so you might as well think you're attractive 'cause I don't think you're really gaining anything by not thinking you're attractive.

Leah's resistance to the dominant beauty ideology is replaced with her own woman-empowering definition. Unlike the dominant standard, Leah's definition of beauty as confidence and assurance in one's own beauty is diametrically opposed to the beauty myth, which involves an externally imposed standard based on absolute physical traits, which, as Leah says, "there's not much you can do about." For Leah, the locus of control is inside rather than outside. I would suggest that it is both plausible and probable that this difference accounts for Leah's own self-confidence in her appearance.

Similarly, Debbie expressed resistance to the beauty myth and to consumerism, and like Leah, her definition of beauty counters the beauty myth. For Debbie, beauty is "more of an energy thing. . . .where you can sense the inside

beauty. So it doesn't matter what their physical appearance is, it's kind of what their light is." Corresponding to this personally defined beauty, Debbie rates her level of satisfaction with her own appearance as ten on a good day and five on a bad day, but this rating is associated with "mood and energy" rather than quantifiable physical traits. She told me that since she became aware of feminism, she spends less time on beautifying herself. "I don't get into all that," she said. She did admit that there was a time when she did though, and when I asked her what caused the change, she replied as follows:

What changed it? A number of things. Feminism, being a mom, working in a hospital. I just started to care less and less about what other people thought. Really kind of resenting wasting my time with eyeliner and you know, the eye shadow. Just got bored with it and irritated.

Aside from a definition of beauty based on their own values and on non-quantifiable, non-physical traits, both Debbie and Leah reported a low rate of attention to popular media. Both women said they watch less than 5 hours per week of television. Debbie does not read beauty magazines, while Leah reads *Jane* and *Marie-Claire*, but with a critical eye. She stated that they were harmless as long as the reader is aware that advertisements are geared to selling products. Later, when I showed her the two beauty advertisements from *Vogue* (appendix B) and asked for her response, she offered a fairly sophisticated deconstruction, noting camera angle and layout of the page.

When asked how she feels when she sees a beauty advertisement, her response showed the effort of conscious resistance:

Sometimes you feel sort of pressured, like this is the standard. It's glaringly obvious that this is the standard. But instead of feeling that

pressure and internalizing that and thinking that that's the appropriate standard, for me, I feel the pressure and then I resist it. It's sort of like, no; *you didn't get me this time*.

Leah's "no you didn't get me this time," suggests a battle in which she must be ever vigilant against the power of the media message. Likewise, Debbie said she does not wear brand names and even removes them if she finds them on clothing bought second-hand, because she does not want to be a "walking billboard" for a corporation. Again, like Leah, Debbie expends a certain amount of conscious effort in resisting popular consumer ideologies. Debbie also reported that she mutes television commercials or leaves the room when they are on. Consistent in both women is an apparent link between conscious resistance of the Western consumerist beauty myth, the ability or choice to redefine beauty according to personal values rather than popular values and a greater confidence than the other eight participants in their own physical appearance.

According to my research and to textual analysis of a variety of sources it appears that some women, either through enormous bravery or maybe a sense of desperation, create the possibility of real choice in spite of the plain/beautiful binary that is culturally available. Some women choose the "plain woman" role and find power in their choice. For example, Debbie said that she knew she did not fit in when she was a teenager, so she began buying second-hand unfashionable clothes based on her outsider identification. "I wasn't cool in high school so I deliberately went out of my way to find stuff that no-one else had." In other words, because she was certain she was not able to succeed in the social hierarchy, Debbie opted out of the competition. Similarly, Laurie Leblanc in *Pretty in Punk*, (1999)

describes her choice to define and reinvent herself as a Punk girl as a solution to failing at prescribed femininity. A social pariah, she went from being one of the “smartest dorkyest, most persecuted girl in school, to one of agency, as a person in control of [her] . . . self-presentation” (p. 3). Clearly, she was a failure as a girl because she wasn’t “pretty” or fashionable, but was instead smart and working class - all the “wrong things” (p 4). Rather than letting these “things” be used as tools against her, she made them her weapons. She became Punk. As a Punk girl, Leblanc continued to experience social persecution, but its effect was lessened due to her newly found confidence as a result of her newly found agency. From this position society was not rejecting her; she was rejecting it. “Yeah,” she retorted, “but at least *I’m* ugly on purpose” (p. 4).

At least one of my participants seemed to both accept the Western beauty myth’s values but simultaneously maintain some sense of physical confidence despite not fitting into the mould. Collette, whose body size necessitates that she shop at Pennington’s, a fat women’s store, was the only participant who expressed a positive self-image, although she also contradicted it when she expressed a longing for thinness. This brief excerpt from our conversation shows the mixed message Collette expresses about how she feels about her appearance. Like Debbie and Leah, she appears to have made a conscious choice to define herself positively.

Collete: I’m pretty comfortable with it [her appearance].  
There are a lot of things I’d change, but yeh, I’m ok  
with it. I’m pretty comfortable with myself and I  
think that . . . yeh, I’m pretty cute! (laughs)

Kim: Good for you!

Collette: I could have never said that ten years ago and if I looked like I did ten years ago, man would I be happy!

Collette does not resist the beauty myth nor does she resist beauty advertising, freely admitting that she reads *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's World*. Yet she manages to maintain a positive self-image as the above conversation attests. However, there are indications in Collette's narrative that suggest she may be less confident than the above short excerpt implies. During the part of the interview when Collette was asked to respond to the two *Vogue* beauty advertisements, she said they made her feel bad about herself and wish that she were "that skinny." She also admitted that if it weren't so painful she'd "definitely have liposuction." She told me she had already "looked into it." Investigating the possibility of surgery to achieve thinness indicates a significant level of dissatisfaction with appearance. Collette defines herself as attractive, but qualifies that by saying "because I love people . . . [I'm not beautiful] in a sexual way, you know?" This pronouncement implies Collette's reticent to claim the adjective "attractive" unless she makes clear that she is referring to her personality rather than her body. Her negation of herself as sexually attractive is quite significant in a culture that glorifies sexualized images of women. Thus, even her personality, which I would describe as warm and energetic, her full, long hair, buxom shape and attractive face are not enough to overcome the sense of inadequacy for not having a magazine-thin body.

### **Participants' Awareness of Globalization**

In order to assess the participants' awareness of how their consumer role fits into the global production/consumption process, they were asked if they had heard



of the term “globalization.” If they answered yes, they were then asked to describe what they thought it meant. Of the ten participants involved in my study, eight had heard the term, but only two of these were able to define it with any degree of accuracy. The following responses from Leah, a young, undergraduate student, and from Cynthia, a middle-aged professional, reveal their understanding of globalization as a fracturing of the production process for profit motives:

I think that globalization is when companies sort of have headquarters in all sorts of different countries. And the first step of production might be in one country and the second step of production might be in another country and mostly they try to do that to cut costs. (Leah)

It means that we interchange with everyone on the planet now. It's not like it used to be when the guy in the next town made things that we use and the guy on the other side eight miles away made everything else that we use. Now everything's brought in and we all interchange via Internet and import and export. (Cynthia)

Two other respondents attempted to define globalization but gave less exact descriptions. Both, however, expressed their sense of globalization as a process involving cultural Westernization or uniformity:

In Canada we have companies coming here from all over the world. We're becoming more the same - we're all kind of - the same fashion interests and countries are becoming more and more connected. (Allison, a young university student)

Similarly, Sarah, an educated professional woman, described globalization as a process of creating Western uniformity:

It's the move to create uniformity across all cultures so that there's very little difference in terms of dress, in terms of image. There's a move to Westernize all cultures so that if you went from Saskatoon to Tokyo, chances are you'd see someone who looked similar to you, wearing similar western dress. And it goes beyond that to general political beliefs as well . . . I'm not sure . . .

These two responses are significant because even though the women could not accurately define globalization, they had gleaned the idea of its connection to a Western cultural take-over. None of the respondents used the rhetoric of neo-liberalism, which has tended to hide the inequities created by globalization with phrases like “global village” or “the world is becoming smaller.” This kind of understanding may reflect the public advocacy of groups such as Global Trade Watch, Third World Network, Friends of the Earth International, The Council of Canadians, and the Anti-Globalism Action Network. Events like ABC’s 1996 news exposure on “Twenty/Twenty” of Kathy Lee Gifford’s Walmart line of clothing produced by Two/Thirds World sweatshop labour reached many viewers who might not otherwise have sought out information about globalization.

Of the remaining six women in the study, four stated that they “had no idea” to what the term “globalization” referred. These four women range in age and socio-economic status: Two are semi-professional, educated women over 40 years old, and two are young women working in the service industry. The remaining two women guessed at what the term might mean, but were far from accurate: One spoke of global warming and the other of social change such as children becoming more outspoken in public venues. These responses revealed a lack of understanding about globalization. However, when I asked participants if they thought their clothing might have been made in sweatshops, two of the four who could not define globalization were aware of sweatshop abuses, indicating some awareness of the global production system even if the word “globalization” was not familiar to them. Both referred to the news show *Twenty/Twenty* that exposed

Kathy Lee Gifford's use of sweatshop labour.

“Figure Four –Awareness of Globalization and Demographic Factors” (page 147 of this thesis) shows respondents’ awareness of globalization juxtaposed with demographic information including, age, education and professional status. As Figure Four indicates, the women who had attained university education were more aware of globalization issues than the two women who had no university education or the two who had received some college training. Although only two of the six were able to define globalization with any degree of accuracy, five were aware of the global production process as a fractured one including sweatshop abuses often occurring in the Two Thirds World, and showed some understanding of the term “consumer culture.” These five women’s responses indicate a certain cognizance of the global economic process and of their role in it as Western consumers. Sarah and Allison, who were only able to define globalization partially, both spoke of making informed consumer choices based on ethical considerations of the production process. Likewise, Debbie, who was completely unable to give a definition of globalization, spoke of her choice to support local small businesses and to refuse to wear brand name clothing. Her awareness of the production process even included wondering about the life of the specific factory worker who made a specific garment that she wears. Clearly, these women showed a fairly sophisticated understanding of their consumer roles in the global economic process.

## CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY

### **How Privileged Women Construct Meaning about Beauty and Beauty Product Consumption in a Globalized Economy**

One of my primary research motives has been to investigate relatively privileged Western women's awareness of their consumer role in the exploitative relationships between corporations and consumers and between consumers and producers. To answer the first part of this question, I asked questions to learn how women construct meaning from beauty advertisements and to what degree they internalize the beauty ideology promoted within the context of Western consumerism. To this end I asked participants to tell me what the term "consumer culture" means to them and to respond to two beauty advertisements I extracted from *Vogue* magazine (Appendix B). Participants were asked what beauty products they use, what financial and time expenditures are related to the "beautifying" process and what motivates them to purchase and use beauty products. They were asked to describe their concept of a "beautiful" woman, whether or not they see themselves as beautiful or attractive, and how satisfied they are with their appearances. As discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis, the responses indicate that eight of the ten women have internalized popular beauty standards.

The two who resist the myth tend to use very little make-up and spend relatively little time and money on beauty products. Each of them is aware of the dominant beauty ideology, but each exercises conscious strategies of resistance involving processes of cognition and praxis. Part of resisting for these women, involves rejecting or deconstructing beauty advertisements. Debbie is aware of the

popular beauty standard, but rejects it. Instead, she defines beauty as “an energy thing.” As evidence of this rejection, she recounted a memory of seeing two old women in a public shower, and filled with emotion, described them as “absolutely gorgeous.” In conjunction with the signifier “gorgeous” came descriptions of “saggy, scarred” bodies. I found her anecdote to be unique and moving as the Western eye rarely if ever looks at old women’s bodies, and if it does, never with such unveiled candour matched with equally unveiled celebration. Debbie’s story indicates that she has not only consciously reconstructed the ideology of beauty but has allowed it to become part of her emotional knowledge. At this level, knowledge becomes deeper.

Leah also consciously resists popular beauty ideology by choosing to conceptualize herself as beautiful regardless of how she does or does not fit the popular beauty ideal. In her words, there is nothing we can do to change our bodies so we may as well just love them. Like Debbie, Leah’s rejection of the dominant beauty ideology is matched with an assertion of a positive, self-defined concept of beauty. Leah also demonstrates a fairly sophisticated ability to deconstruct beauty advertisements. In a candid tone, she spoke about how magazine images of beautiful women may not even be “real” because they may be constructed from different models’ body parts and then airbrushed. These two women have made a concerted effort to resist the ideology conveyed by beauty advertisements, indicating their awareness of the inherent exploitative nature of these images and texts.

The other eight women in my participant group engage with the dominant beauty ideology with more complacency. Most of their responses suggest docility to beauty advertisers' messages. Among these eight women, regardless of income and socio-economic status, significant amounts of time and money are spent attempting to achieve the beauty ideal. As described in Chapter Five, the majority of women in my study revealed acceptance of popular beauty standards, and unless they met the standard – primarily White, young and thin - expressed a corresponding low self-esteem. The two women who did meet this standard (Alison and Mary) were happier with their bodies, rating their satisfaction at “eight and a half or nine” and seven respectively. Collette, who feels she is beautiful because of her warmth to other people, rated her satisfaction at a seven. Leah was the only other woman who rated her self-satisfaction fairly high, at eight in keeping with her philosophy of perceiving beauty. Also in keeping with her philosophy of beauty – that it is an “energy thing” – Linda said her level of satisfaction ranged between a five and a ten depending on how she feels on a given day. Tanitia rated her satisfaction level high at eight, but qualified it with “it’s no so much satisfaction as just accepting how I look.” The others, Kelly, Susan, Sarah, and Cynthia ranged between four and six with an average of five. Without qualifiers or a redefining of beauty, the women in my study did not rate their satisfaction with their appearances high. These data suggest that for women, satisfaction with one’s appearance is related to a self-defined ideology about beauty.

All ten women showed evidence of having internalized the dominant beauty ideology. Nine of the ten participants spoke of a slender body type as a necessary

quality of beautiful woman (see Figure Three). Collette did not use the word “slim,” but identified Cindy Crawford, a popular model who is very tall and slim, as her ideal of feminine beauty. Neither did Mary specifically use the word “slim,” but spoke of a beautiful woman as needing to be “well-proportioned.” When asked to comment on her level of satisfaction with her own appearance, she offered that she was “satisfied with [her] weight” indicating that correct weight is an important trait for a beautiful woman. Since Mary is very slim, her comment implies that she values slimness. Even Debbie and Leah, the women most resistant to the dominant beauty ideology indicated their awareness that slimness is a desired trait in a beautiful woman (see Figure Three).

**Figure Three – Participants’ Beauty Ideology**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Describe a Beautiful Woman</b>
1	Collette	26-35	Tall & curvy; Cindy Crawford.
2	Mary	18-25	Lush hair, blonde, tall, well proportioned.
3	Susan	26-35	“Can’t answer that.”
4	Kelly	18-25	Flawless skin, tall, slender.
5	Sarah	46-55	High cheekbones, large eyes, full hair, not fat.
6	Cynthia	36-45	Not too thin or too fat, nice skin.
7	Allison	18-25	Natural beauty, tall and fit, nice skin.
8	Leah	18-25	Confident, not overweight; big bust & hips, small waist.
9	Debbie	36-45	An energy thing; “the norm is slim to thin, busty and curvy, good teeth.”
10	Tanita	46-55	Well-proportioned, slim, clear skin.

## **Links Between Awareness of Production Issues in the Globalized Economy and Local Beauty Product Consumption**

Whether or not they were able to define globalization did not seem to be a primary factor in determining how these women make consumer choices. However, a combination of awarenesses about sweatshop abuses, the fractured production process inherent under globalization, and themselves as Western consumers does influence consumption decisions. Five women, (numbers 5 –9 in the table on Figure Four, p. 137) reveal evidence of ethically motivated consumption choices including the following: wonders about the origins of a product at the point of purchase, prefer to shop Canadian (“Cynthia” and “Leah”); purchase Body Shop toiletries for ethical reasons (Sarah and Leah); or shop in small, locally owned businesses (Sarah and Allison). Participants who were cognizant about sweatshop abuses but were not aware of the term “consumer culture” or of the fractured production process inherent in a globalized economy did not reveal shopping choices motivated by concerns regarding ethics. For example, both “Colette” and “Mary” knew something about Two/ Thirds World sweatshop abuses based on television coverage of the Kathy Lee Gifford case, but this awareness had not lead them to question their own consumption patterns. Neither had heard the term “consumer culture” and neither questioned the origin of a product at the point of purchase (Figure Four). Likewise, Susan and Kelly, who were uninformed about the reality of Third World sweatshop abuses or the terms “globalization” and “consumer culture,” did not make shopping choices based on ethical considerations. These data suggest that among my group of participants a



combination of awareness of sweatshop abuses in the context of a globalized economy's fractured production process with some consciousness about Western consumerism was associated with ethically based consumption choices.

**Figure Four – Awareness of Globalization**

#	Pseud.	Age	Post Sec. Edu.	Profes- sion	Could Define Global- ization	Aware Sweat- shop Abuse	Aware Consu- mer Cul- ture	Questions Origins of Products	Makes Ethically Motivated Consumer Choices
1	Collette	26- 35	None	Service	No	Yes	No	No	No
2	Mary	18- 25	Coll.	Clerical	No	Yes	No	No	No
3	Susan	26- 35	Coll.	Clerical	No	No	No	No	No
4	Kelly	18- 25	None	Clerical	No	No	No	No	No
5	Sarah	46- 55	Univ.	Profess. / (Director)	Some- what	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Cynthia	36- 45	Univ.	Profess. / (Med.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7	Alison	18- 25	Univ.	Service/ Student	Some- what	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Leah	18- 25	Univ.	Service/ Student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Some- times	Yes
9	Debbie	36- 45	Univ.	Semi- Profess.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Tanitia	46- 55	Univ.	Semi- Profess.	No	No	No	No	No

Differing levels of awareness about the globalized economy in which much of the production is carried out by members of the Two Thirds World, many of whom cannot afford to buy the products they make, does appear to exert a certain

impact on how the relatively privileged Saskatoon women who participated in my study construct meaning about product consumption. Both Debbie and Leah, who showed the strongest resistance to consumerism, are cognizant of exploitative production and marketing methods. Debbie spoke of wondering about the lives of the individuals who made the products she bought. Her choice to not wear brand names is associated with her choice not to support corporate profit seeking. Leah, too, spoke of resisting consumerism by setting up informal systems of clothing exchange between co-workers. Leah was able to clearly define globalization as a fractured production process in which workers are often exploited. Two other women, Alison and Sarah, revealed a lesser degree of resistance to consumerism. Alison tries to shop in small locally owned stores and Sarah chooses Body Shop products for ethical reasons. They both had attained a certain measure of awareness of global production processes and dominant marketing strategies. Thus, there appears to be a relationship between awareness of globalization and consumerism, and resistance to consumerism. Some form of alternative product consumption in the form of buying used clothing, refusing to wear brand names, or shopping at local and /or ethically motivated stores is part of these women's resistance.

### **Conclusion**

My research involving text analysis and interviews with ten Saskatoon women indicates that the dominant beauty ideology has firmly taken root in their lives. Even participants who expressed active resistance to globalization,

consumerism and the beauty myth engage in consumption behaviours that infer conformity to the status quo.

The participants varied a great deal, however, in terms of their awareness of globalized capitalism. Some women were quite unfamiliar with the machinations of the globalized economy while others expressed some awareness of global economic but did not synchronize this information to an understanding of their role as privileged consumers within the system. Others revealed awareness of globalization and consumerism and practised resistant consumption by refusing brand products or supporting businesses claiming ethical production methods. All ten women showed evidence of having internalized the beauty myth regardless of their awareness of global exploitation and the dominant beauty ideology, and regardless of their consumption practises.

In any future research of this nature I would consider asking questions about the participants' sexuality, political leanings, and relationship to feminism. I am lead to this idea based on the answers I received from Linda, Leah and Sarah, whose responses are distinguished from the other seven participants. All three expressed some awareness of and resistance to globalization and capitalist consumerism, and described behaviours or attitudes of resistance to the beauty myth. Sarah's behaviour accords to the beauty myth, although she expresses guilt about her compliance to popular beauty standards and does make ethically motivated shopping choices. In her conversation with me, she made reference to her politically leftist leanings. Her sexuality is unknown to me. I infer a certain feminist orientation from Sarah because she described a distaste for the

sexualization of people in advertisements, and described a period in her life when she stopped using cosmetics and beauty products as part of a “seventies consciousness raising” project. Linda is someone I have seen at local queer social functions in Saskatoon, so I know that she identifies as a lesbian. Although she did not indicate her political leanings, her strong anti-consumerism sensibilities suggest a left-wing sensibility. She explicitly named herself a feminist and spoke of how feminism had changed her. I have no information about Leah’s sexuality or political leanings. However, she too, expresses strong anti-consumerists feelings, exhibited the ability to deconstruct beauty advertisements, and made reference to having taken a Women’s and Gender Studies course as part of her undergraduate degree. From this, I infer that she has at least been exposed to feminist ideologies.

As I analyze the data collected from this study, I wonder if lesbians might be more inclined to resistance of popular beauty standards, which are based on a patriarchal, heterosexual male orientation. It may be that women who identify as lesbian are freer to reject popular standards of attractiveness based on their outsider position regarding social constructions of femininity. Also, because their sexual partners are women rather than men, they may be more likely to have constructed women-identified standards of attractiveness. Likewise, women who identify as feminists may be more likely to have challenged the patriarchally determined gender structures. Women who claim leftist political leanings, which emphasise social and economic equality among communities, might be provided with greater impetus and opportunity to reject the dominant capitalist consumer ideology, and

the consumerist beauty ideology. However, I am basing these ideas on conjecture. These hypotheses would need to be tested in order to determine their validity.

Another area of inquiry that further research into the area of globalization and the beauty myth might involve would include the specific nature of the television material viewed by beauty consumers. My research showed some connections between buying beauty magazines and “buying into” the beauty myth. As well, women who tended to watch more hours of television per week tended to reveal a more interpellated position of subjectivity with regard to the hegemonic standard of appearance for women. However, I did not ask questions about the specific content of their television viewing which may, in retrospect, have yielded fruitful data for analysis.

In terms of contextualizing the behaviours and beliefs of my participants, ten Saskatoon women who use beauty products, within a larger globalized world economy, I find that their roles as pawns and agents are complex and overlapping. The data I collected suggest that these women have been influenced by media images, advertising and the social mores dictating the hegemonic beauty ideal. To varying degrees they believe that their appearances impact on their social and economic survival. Half of them did not reveal an awareness of how their beauty consumption feeds into a larger global situation in which many of the producers are exploited workers living in Third and Fourth World conditions. However, to varying degrees, half of them did. Seven women appeared not to question exploitative production methods or their role as consumers and three showed conflict in their abilities to deconstruct the capitalist tools of beauty advertising

while simultaneously behaving according to an internalization of hegemonic beauty ideals. Sarah's expression of guilt for her preference of Eddie Bauer clothing, daily make-up use and processed hair while exploited women and children work in production factories in Thailand or Mexico resonates with the two-sidedness of her conflicting pawn/agent role. She is both colonizer and colonized; her sophisticated awareness of these conflicting roles, though, has a limited effect on her consumption choices, impacting more on her troubled consciousness. I suspect that Sarah's liminal position represents a common location for many educated and socially conscious White Western women.

In summary, my evaluation of the data I collected represents a postmodernist view which inevitably rejects the modernist ideology. My analysis disrupts commonly held "truths," about feminine beauty and about the consumption of products marketed in a capitalist culture. It specifically exposes assumptions of naturalized beauty and the naturalization of women's participation in consumption related beauty practices. As a materialist feminist, I also consider the material realities of the women, who like me, use beauty products and present themselves according to a hegemonic standard for women as part of a strategy of social and economic survival in a relatively hostile patriarchal climate.

As a colonized gender we have been interpellated to varying extents by advertising and by the cultural codes reinforcing the dominant message that women must conform to a certain standard of beauty in order to be considered valuable. As women, some of us without the status and economic security offered by partnership to a man, we need to survive in a political context in which women still dominate

the numbers of those living below the poverty level. This reality must inform any discussions about the role of the female beauty consumer in a global context. While within the broader global context her role may be characterized as one of privilege that inevitably plays a part of the colonizing force, the immediate local context in which the Western beauty consumer lives defines her role as pawn more than player in a gendered capitalist/consumer culture.

It is my hope that as women and other marginalized peoples all over the globe work in grassroots and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to counteract the negative effects of globalization, capitalist consumption and social ideologies that serve to further marginalize, we will continue to connect with each other on a global level. Global activist networking may be the only effective way to begin defending against the human suffering and ecological disasters resulting from global corporatization. As women, freeing our energies from the ideology of fear created by a profit-driven beauty and fashion industry might be a positive step toward creating more momentum in emancipation movements.

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## VITA

Kim Kuzak achieved a Bachelor of Education with a Gold Medal in English from the University of Winnipeg in 1992. While completing her pre-masters studies at the University of Saskatchewan, she won the Avie-Bennet Prize in Canadian Literature. Kim also received a full Graduate Studies scholarship to do her MA at the University of Saskatchewan.

Kim has been teaching English and Communications in high-school and college since 1992. She has also taught for the department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. Presently, Kim teaches English at SIAST.

Kim has traveled and lived in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the Canadian North but presently resides in the prairies, where she feels most at home. She lives with her partner, daughter, and a few four-legged creatures. Kim is also a singer/songwriter who performs locally, a social justice activist and a lover and protector of the Earth and all her creatures.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Categories of Interview Questions

A - Experience/Behaviours

B - Sensory

C - Opinion/Values/Cognitive Processes/Reasoning

D - Feelings

E – Knowledge

- 1 Do you use cosmetics and toiletries? (A)
- 2 I am going to list some toiletries and beauty products. After each one would you please give me an indication of whether or not you use this type of product: (A)  
foundation, cover-up, face powder, eye-liner, mascara, eye-brow pencil, eye-shadow, blush, lipstick, hair styling product, hair colour, hair-perming, nail-polish, fragrance, face moisturizer, skin toner for face, body cream, talcum powder, exfoliator, special products to reduce wrinkles or cellulite.
- 3 Do you have a preferred brand of make-up? Face cream? Hair product? (C)
- 4 What brand name clothing do you prefer to wear? (C)
- 5 What kind of runners do you wear? (A)
- 6 What is your favorite store to buy cosmetics at and why? (C)
- 7 What is your favorite store to buy clothing at and why? (C)
- 8 What is your preferred brand of jeans? Dresses, or other clothing? (C)
- 9 Could you describe for me what a typical morning of getting ready to go to work is like for you in terms of your appearance.(A)
- 10 How about before a social night out? (A)
- 11 What beauty treatment services do you use in a year? (Prompts if necessary: hair stylist, spa, tanning, gym, etc) (A)
- 12 Approximately how often do you use these services? (A)
- 13 Approximately how much money would you say you spend on cosmetics, hair care, and toiletries every 3 months? (A)
- 14 What would you say is the most money you ever spent on cosmetics and/or toiletries at one time? (A)
- 15 Have you ever had cosmetic surgery? (A)
- 16 (If no) Would you have cosmetic surgery at some point in your life if you thought it would improve your appearance? (If yes ) Would you again?(C)
- 17 What fashion/beauty magazines do you read? (B/A)
- 18 How much television do you watch per week? (B/A)
- 19 Would you please describe for me a beautiful woman.(C)
- 20 Do you consider yourself to be beautiful or attractive? (C)
- 21 How satisfied are you with your appearance? (1-10). (D)
- b) Could you tell me what you based your answer on? (What do you like or not like about your appearance?)
- 22 How important is your appearance to you? (C/D)
- 23 In what way does using or not using beauty products affect your social or personal life? (D)
- b) Your professional life? (D)

## **APPENDIX B – BEAUTY ADVERTISEMENTS**

## **APPENDIX C: TEMPLATES OF CONSENT FORMS**

### **1) Participant Consent Form**

#### **“The Colliding of Worlds - Local Beauty and Fashion Consumption in a Global Context”**

##### **About this research**

My name is Kim Kuzak. I am a researcher on a project entitled: *The Colliding of Worlds - Local Beauty/Fashion Consumption in a Global Context*. This project is part of my Master's program in the Department of Women's and Gender studies at the University of Saskatchewan. I will use the information I collect to write my thesis.

The purpose of this study is to find out what kind of beauty and fashion products a group of Saskatoon women use and why they use them. I am also interested in finding out what these women think about consumerism and globalization.

Your help as a participant would involve meeting with me for about an hour. In that time I would ask you questions about what beauty and fashion products you purchase and also about what you might know about globalization. If you agree, we will tape the interview.

You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to and you can stop the interview at any time. If you agree, I would like to tape record the interviews and then make a transcript (word for word) of what we said. You will receive a copy of the interview to review and be sure that it is accurate. At that time you are free to take out any statement in the interview that you don't want included or to make any corrections to the transcript. Once you have approved the transcript then I will use it in my research.

### **Possible benefits and risks**

There are no guaranteed benefits to this research. However, my hope is that this study will contribute to information about how the beauty industry works in the larger context of globalization and how women as consumers fit in to the picture. I am also interested in what women think about their own bodies and about the beauty and fashion industry. To my knowledge there has not been a study done exactly like this one, so any information you share with me will be of great value to this study. Hopefully you will enjoy talking about your experiences with beauty products.

There are no known risks associated with this research. Anything you say to me will be confidential and anonymous. I will not share any information that could identify you or anyone you mention during the interview. When I record the information for my thesis I will not identify individuals. Instead, I might say something such as, “twenty-five percent of the participants said they wear lipstick,” or “forty percent of the participants said they didn’t know anything about globalization.”

You are absolutely free to not answer any questions you don’t feel comfortable answering, and you can stop the interview at any time. You can withdraw your participation from this study at any time and I will destroy the tape and any notes I have unless you tell me otherwise. All of the tapes and notes from the interviews will be carefully locked away in my home. The University requires that I keep them for five years then destroy them, which I will do. I will not make copies of the tapes or written notes.

I will tell you immediately if any new information about this research comes up that is not included in this form.

## **Results of this study**

When I have completed the research, which I expect to be in the summer of 2003, I will contact you and let you know. You will have the opportunity to read a copy of my thesis.

## **Participant rights**

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your participation is very much appreciated. As a participant in this project you have several rights:

- Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time.
- You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and if you do your data will be deleted from the study and destroyed.
- This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will available only to my supervisor and me.
- You have a right to review the transcript of your interview and alter or delete any statement therein.
- You will be asked to sign a Transcript Release Form once you are satisfied with the accuracy of the transcript from the taped interview.
- The tapes and transcripts of all interviews conducted for this research will be securely stored for the requisite period of 5 years. After this period has elapsed, the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

- Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will you name or overt identifying characteristics be included in this report.

### **Contact**

I am the principal investigator of this project and I may be contacted at 343-6452 should you have any questions. If you have concerns that I have not dealt with, you may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Downe at 966-1974 or 966-4327 or the Office of Research Services at 966 8576.

### **Consent**

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behaviour Research Ethics Board on January 15, 2003.

Please sign this form to show that you have read its contents and that you have received a copy of the consent form for your own records.

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Participant signature

Date

---

Signature of Kim Kuzak, Researcher

Date

Do you agree to have our interview taped?

YES

NO (circle one)

If yes, please sign here: \_\_\_\_\_

## **2) Demographic Information**

**You have been very helpful. Thank you for your time and for your answers!**

The following demographic information may be useful when I am analyzing the data.

**Your answers will be kept completely confidential.**

Please feel free to omit any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

- 1 What age range describes you? (18-25) (26-35) (36-45) (46-55)  
(56-65) (66 – 75) (75+)
- 2 What is your occupation?
- 3 What is the highest level of education you've completed?
- 4 Would you mind answering what income bracket your household falls into?  
(Less than \$16,000) (\$16,000-\$25,000) (\$26,000-\$35,000)  
(\$36,000-\$45,000) (\$46,000-\$60,000) (\$61-\$80,000)  
(\$81,000 –\$100,000) (\$100,000 – \$150,000) (\$150,000 +)
- 5 How would you identify yourself ethnically?

Our interview is over now.