



“Self-care in the 21st Century: Personal Wellness or a Capitalist Propaganda?”

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“Beauty work is relabeled “self-care” to make it sound progressive” (Tolentino 80). Writer and editor Jia Tolentino claims in her book “Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion” that in the 21st century “self-care” is only a rebranding of “beauty work.” According to Psychology Today, self-care “is the mindful taking of time to pay attention to you, not in a narcissistic way, but in a way that ensures that you are being cared for by you.” In essence, self-care means taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness. However, Tolentino claims that in the vernacular of the 21st century, self-care is a relabeling of “beauty work” which is basically a cumulation of the activities women do to enhance their physical appearance and look beautiful. These activities include the use of different “self-care” products including makeup and other cosmetics such as creams, moisturizers, hair products etc. The manufacturers of these products are part of a \$10 billion dollar industry today (Conlin). They market and advertise their beauty products as “self-care” products to 21st century women so as to sound up-to-date with modern times. On a fundamental level though, they are actually selling beauty practices. In a way, these corporations are deceiving 21st century women for selling their products and making profits. Anoushka Benbow-Buitenhuis’ research article “A Feminine Double-Bind?” provides concrete instances of the self-care industry’s capitalizing off of duping 21st century women in to practicing beauty work, and in turn promoting beauty standards, all under the label of self-care. The 21st

century women are bamboozled by the imagery of beauty portrayed in the advertisements of these products and thus cannot but consume the so-called self-care products.

Beauty has been a constant factor that has guided women and how they should be through centuries. Naomi Wolf in her book “The Beauty Myth” writes about the conditions that make a woman beautiful: “The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable” (Wolf 13-14). Wolf argues that beauty is the symbol for qualities in women that a certain age finds desirable and appropriate. As social standards change over time, the expected appropriate behavior from women also change. Hence, what makes a woman beautiful in a certain age is subject to change. However, in her article Anoushka Benbow-Buitenhuis cites Nancy Etcoff’s definition of beauty: “[T]he global-social definition of beauty has been reduced via the sieve of culture in the last 30 years to mean ‘ethereal weightlessness and Nordic features’” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 45). The terms of “beautiful” in the 21st century are not about desirable behavior like Wolf had said, rather it has to do with physical appearance. This ideal physical appearance that Buitenhuis mentions has specific features. In the article “Effects of Cosmetics Use on the Physical Attractiveness and Body Image of American College Women,” the Cash et al. claim: “[P]hysical appearance is not simply a fixed, immutable attribute, but rather is altered by individuals to manage and control their self- and social images” (Cash et al. 349). As beauty in the 21st century is all about the fixed set of physical features that Buitenhuis cites, women have the option to alter their physical appearance in order to attain those features as evident from Cash’s argument. So 21st century women use beauty products to manage others’ perception of them by enhancing their physical appearance to make it more like the beauty ideals quoted by Buitenhuis. The individuals that were the subject of Cash et al.’s paper were American college women. Their pictures, both with and without the use of cosmetics, were shown

to their male and female peers. The results of the study showed that “the images of the college women were more favorable with their customary cosmetics than without them” (Cash et al. 354). Even the subjects themselves favored their images with cosmetics than without. These results directly correlate the use of cosmetics to enhance appearance with increased self-image of 21st century women. Women who use beauty products to enhance their appearance are more confident of their self-image. In the article “The Beauty Industry’s Influence on Women in Society,” Ann Marie Britton presents a research on how women use beauty products to create a malleable image of themselves before others. The paper quotes from a study by Nash, Fieldman, Hussey, Leveque, and Pineau:

The study found that “images of women wearing makeup were judged to be healthier and more confident than the images of the same women without makeup. When wearing cosmetics women were also assigned to greater earning potential and considered to have more prestigious jobs than when they were presented without makeup” (Nash et al., 2006, p. 501). Similar to other studies the report also found that wearing cosmetics caused ratings of self-confidence within the females to be higher than ratings of women without makeup. (Britton 7)

Britton’s paper exemplifies how women with the “ideal beauty features” cited by Buitenhuis are perceived more positively by other people, even in the workplace. The New York Times published an article about a study conducted by Professor Nancy Etcoff of Harvard University on 25 females aged 20-50 which also showed that “it [makeup] increases people’s perceptions of a woman’s likability, her competence and her trustworthiness” (Louis E3). The studies by Britton and Etcoff prove that in the 21st century beauty determines the way women are perceived by others, and so 21st century women use cosmetics to enhance their beauty to match with the features quoted by

Buitenhuis. That is, 21st century women use beauty products to enhance their beauty so as to be positively perceived by others.

However, the 21st century has gone through the third wave of feminism (1900s-2010s) that “sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, among other things.” (Brunell, Burkett 2019). So 21st century women are progressive--they advocate for feminism and condemn anything that goes against it. Beauty concepts of the 20th century, that were cited by Buitenhuis, sought to bracket women within fixed physical ideals. This is against the agendas of feminism and so should have been abolished with the third wave. However, as Wolf writes, beauty does and will always exist: “The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it... This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men” (Wolf 12). Wolf claims that beauty is “objective” and “universal”--at any day and age, beauty will exist and beauty standards will be fixed as they are. This holds true even for the 21st century as acknowledged by a real-life 21st century woman in an interview with Stacy Malkan for her book “Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry.” The interviewee, Felicia Eaves, said: “[Y]ou need to look a certain way to be accepted in this society” (Malkan 70). By “certain way” here she meant looking beautiful. So even 21st century progressive women are to “embody” the “objective” beauty ideals that were specified in Buitenhuis’ article. Buitenhuis argues for this as well: “[T]he feminine double-bind remains strong--even women who actively reject the products and the culture cannot completely disregard the socio-cultural importance of beauty culture” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 46). Post-feminism 21st century women, who condemn beauty standards and beauty ideals, cannot escape the socio-cultural importance of it. Hence, they too practice beauty work to enhance their appearance and to embody the specific

features considered beautiful. However, their beauty work is dubbed self-care to sound more progressive.

In the chapter *Always Be Optimizing*, Jia Tolentino writes: “Old requirements, instead of being overthrown, are rebranded. Beauty work is relabeled “self-care” to make it sound progressive” (Tolentino 80). Through this statement Tolentino argues about the repercussion of Wolf’s claim that beauty is objective and universal. Tolentino claims that in the 21st century “beauty work” is relabeled as “self-care” to sound progressive to the women. In a way, the “old requirement” of beauty has been rebranded into something that is in lieu with the status quo of the 21st century. This proves Wolf’s hypothesis on the universality of beauty--it exists even in the post-feminism 21st century under the progressive name of “self-care”. Buitenhuis in her article shows why self-care seems more progressive than beauty work: “Gimlin’s UK and US study (2002) found that beauty and other commercially mandated acts of self-care, could be seen symbolically as female agency” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 44). The manufacturers of cosmetics and beauty products use the veneer of “self-care” to appeal to the independence of progressive 21st century. Buitenhuis substantiates her claim through the example of Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign. Dove is a leading multinational corporation which sells cosmetics, such as moisturizers, face wash and hair products that help enhance women’s physical appearance. Buitenhuis quotes from a 2008 study by Johnston and Taylor: “[M]obilizations against beauty have been appropriated by the Dove brand, which cleverly used ‘feminist consumerism’ and critiques of false beauty imagery to sell their products. Their hugely successful ‘Real Beauty’ campaign saw increased profits and much media attention to their brand” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 48). The author argues through this study how beauty corporations relabel beauty works as something that sounds more progressive to sell their products to modern day progressive women. In the campaign, Dove aimed

to advertise their brand as one that advocates for “real beauty” and “real women.” They aimed to play into the 21st century feminist discourse that condemns aspirations to achieve fixed beauty standards that have been in place for decades as specified by Etkoff. This is an apt case of how beauty corporations sell their products by rebranding. In this case, Dove advertised their beauty product in a way that appealed to the agency of 21st century progressive women and capitalized on that. Tolentino’s claim, substantiated by Buitenhuis’ example, shows that self-care in the 21st century is a clever relabeling of “beauty work” by beauty corporations to rope in 21st century women to buy their products. In other words, the 21st century women are being deceived by the beauty corporations. The fact that self-care is worth billions of dollars today proves the extent to which the beauty corporations are successful in duping 21st century women to practice beauty work.

Beauty corporations advertise their products in a way that shows their cosmetics to be able to enhance appearance and make one look more beautiful, but they call the use of these cosmetics “self-care” instead of what it actually is-- beauty work. The example of Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign perfectly captured this agenda of the beauty corporations. They used “flawless” models in their advertisements and called it “real beauty.” Author Stacy Malkan in her book presents an interview with a digital photo retoucher to show that the images of models in beauty commercials are fake and digitally edited:

Digital retoucher Dominic Demasi demonstrated in the film how he reworked a photo of actress Halle Berry to remove pockmarks, change her skin tone to match her makeup and even shave down her knuckles to make them “seem less obtrusive.” Products manufacturers are “not concerned with natural. They’re concerned with selling their product,” Demasi explained. (Malkan 69)

This interview shows that beauty corporations market their products through digitally fabricated images of the models to make them look “perfect” and “flawless.” By doing so these corporations are preaching beauty standards to the 21st century women. Buitenhuis cited Althusser’s interpretation of society in her article saying: “Society is the recipient of instruction and social individuals are primed and expectant, for orders, suggestions and socially recognizable action” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 43). Buitenhuis uses this definition of society to prove her point about why 21st century progressive women practice beauty work and use cosmetics. The subjects of her study--a group of women aged 18 to 60--in spite of condemning its existence, practiced beauty work. Buitenhuis used Althusser’s interpretation of society to decipher the attitude of her subjects. In Buitenhuis’ perception, “flawless beauty” and “beauty work” are the instructions given to society by beauty corporations and, as Wolf mentions that only women are to embody beauty, the “social individuals” in Althusser’s definition who are expected to follow the beauty instructions are women. In the context of this paper, Buitenhuis’ understanding is applicable. The beauty industry preaches the ideals of flawless beauty to 21st century women through digitally photoshopped images of models. In this way the corporations set beauty ideals for real life women. The women, in turn, are bamboozled by the fabricated pictures. They begin to think that they too can attain flawless beauty as the models by using the advertised products. Buitenhuis presents the testimony of one of her subjects, Liz, as a case of how 21st century women are duped by the beauty industry:

Liz (40s)... raves about a Lancôme advertisement: “Well, it’s beautiful. Again, it’s flawless, it’s striking, the model that they have used is gorgeous, she is flawless, again, the skin is perfect, no wrinkles, no freckles, no broken capillaries, no scarring, no nothing. She is absolutely flawless. It is perfect. Looking at it would make you want to go out and buy the

product. I actually have bought Lancôme from advertisements in the past, myself, because I have looked at an image and thought, oh that looks good and read the little blurb and thought oh I will try it, and I have, so yeah ... very powerful ... the glow looks so beautiful and shiny and everything. It's perfect." (Benbow-Buitenhuis 48)

In this case, Liz is deluded because of constantly being exposed to "flawless beauty" through advertisements. Such deception due to constant exposure to beauty imagery was studied by Peter Bloch and Marsha Richins in their article "The Pursuit of Beauty and the Marketing Concept."

The authors inferred in their paper that:

[C]onsumers assume that the model's attractiveness is partially due to his or her use of the product in question (Downs & Harrison, 1985) and thus react to the advertisement through some cognitive process, perhaps believing that product use will move consumer to be more like the model. (Bloch and Richins 12)

Bloch and Richins' inference argues that when women are constantly exposed to images of attractive models as promotion for certain beauty products, they start believing that the use of those products will yield the same results for them. They start using the products in the hope to imbibe the model's beauty as projected in the commercial. They do not account for the fact that the beauty broadcast in the advertisements are digitally tampered with as Malkan proved in her book. Buitenhuis' case Liz is an apt instance of this.

The beauty industry through the use of "attractive" models in their campaigns uphold the fixed beauty standards Etcoff defined to the consumers and show them a way of attaining said beauty--through the use of their products. The 21st century women like Liz, who are the target demographic of the corporations, spiral into "a dual attitude of aspiration and loathing towards the beautiful face-object in the advertising, simultaneously wishing for physical traits of the model

whilst actively hating that the model resembles the beauty ideal more so than they do” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 47). So they buy the beauty products solely based on the broadcasted imagery. They do not account for the digital retouching or tampering of images of the models that Malkan demonstrates. They do not even consider the real time effects of the beauty products. Buitenhuis writes about such irrationality of 21st century women: “The irrationality of beauty culture suggests that one can transform her appearance through the application of an anti-ageing cream, even though tenuous evidence exists that these creams are as effective as they claim to be” (Benbow-Buitenhuis 49).

Author Stacy Malkan writes about the real life effects that beauty products have on women. Her research work shows that these beauty products consist of many toxic and even carcinogenic chemicals. One such example are the SK-II cosmetics owned by US consumer giant Procter and Gamble: “More recently Chinese authorities made a discovery of their own about SK-II products: the high-end skin whitening cream and powders contained the toxic heavy metals chromium and neodymium” (Malkan 65). Malkan’s research also shows that many of these skin creams contain hydroquinone that works by decreasing the production of melanin pigments in the skin. This chemical is also “a confirmed animal carcinogen that is toxic to the skin, brain, immune system and reproductive system” (Malkan 66). There are some cosmetics that contain chemicals which possess “the potential to increase skin cancer risk by intensifying UV exposures in deep skin layers” (Malkan 67). Malkan also reported in her book: “After the SK-II incident in China, media organizations in Hong Kong tested a range of skin whitening creams and reportedly found chromium in products made by Clinique, Estée Lauder, Christian Dior, Max Factor, Lancôme and Shiseido” (Malkan 67). The reports presented by Malkan raise formidable concerns about the health repercussions of these so-called self-care products. The products that are seemingly

marketed to be for personal wellness, pose serious health hazards for the consumers i.e. 21st century women.

In the end, all the skepticism surrounding the multibillion dollar self-care industry come down to one question--how much of “self” and “care” are actually present in 21st century “self-care”? Stacy Malkan’s research shows that the self-care products up for sale in the 21st century pose formidable health hazards for the consumers. So 21st century self-care products do not serve the purpose of personal wellness, rather do the opposite of that. Despite such effects, 21st century women still purchase and use these products. The studies of Anoushka Benbow-Buitenhuis, Cash et. al., Bloch and Richins show that 21st century women consume these products because manufacturers market them as capable of enhancing physical appearance of the consumer; i.e. the 21st century self-care products promise to make the consumer beautiful. This relates to Naomi Wolf’s claim about beauty being ubiquitous in every age for women to embody. The manufacturers of these so-called self-care products actually advertise beauty products under the guise of self-care so as to sound progressive, and hence in lieu, with the 21st century. But their actual aim is to capitalize off of Wolf’s hypothesis about the universality and objectivity of beauty in every age. In a way, the beauty corporations are duping 21st century women to practice beauty work by rebranding it as self-care to sound progressive but is actually preaching regressive beauty standards to them. Given all this, the question remains--what can women do now to break out of the fixed beauty ideals and establish a society where women do not use hazardous products to alter their physical appearance and where others’ perception of women is not guided by specific physical features that are considered beautiful? The scope of this question is very broad and deserves a separate paper. To remain within the claim and arguments of this paper, what can be concluded is that the current backlash surrounding beauty standards and beauty ideals seems to be very

prospective to prevent post-feminism 21st century women from consuming hazardous self-care products to alter their physical appearance. Continuation of studies and dissertations on this topic may result in a time when Wolf and Etcoff's hypotheses about beauty will no longer hold true and capitalist corporations will be unable to exploit women through their physical appearance.

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