

A CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY APPROACH TO ANALYZING BEAUTY CULTURE IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Consumption is a historically shaped mode of socio-cultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic market place. Consumer culture theory (CCT; Arnould and Thompson 2005) is fundamentally concerned with the cultural meanings, socio-historic influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the context of everyday life. In CCT's research program, consumers are conceived of as interpretive agents whose meaning-created activities range from those that tacitly embrace the dominant representations of consumer identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media to those that consciously deviate from these ideological instructions. CCT focuses on how marketing communication and fashion industry systematically predispose consumers toward certain kinds of identity projects (e.g., Zhao and Belk 2008a, b).

The present research is an attempt to provide a socio-cultural and socio-historic overview of the beauty culture in Iran from a CCT perspective. The focus on cosmetics market and beauty culture in Iran is viable since Iran has emerged as the world's seventh and the Middle East's second (after Saudi Arabia) largest consumer of cosmetics, spending \$ 2.1 billion annually on various beauty products accounting for 29 % of the \$7.2 billion cosmetics market in the Middle East (Media-Line 2010). More importantly, Iran as the only country to have witnessed an 'Islamic' revolution is the most fascinating case to study the link between religion, culture, and media. During the past three decades, Iran has changed from a more liberal country to a conservative Islamic society as a result of the Islamic revolution in 1979. It has been argued that what gave Iran's revolutionary narrative its force was its religious passion (Adib-Moghaddam 2005) which significantly impacted the status of women and their roles in the society. To better capture the nuances of this shift, following an interpretive approach, this research investigates the cultural dualism demonstrated in the content of Iranian ads and examines how advertisements and their key symbolisms have changed due to the socio-political and ideological conflicts during the pre- and post-revolution.

The Pahlavi (pre-revolution) regime promoted a pseudo-modernist orientation that equated Westernization with modernization creating cultural dependence upon the West (Mohammadi 1990). The mass media were central institutions in the modernization process. In advertising, the images of beauty were foreign, mainly western blonds (Mohmmadi 1990) and their message promoted applying makeup and dressing up for public life, which were considered inappropriate and shameful behaviors based on the Iranian cultural values at that time. In fact, the media failed to mediate between old and new values and to interpret the process of change for traditional populations. The result was a cultural dualism (Tehrani 1980) between the competing religious and secular ideologies. A lack of cultural and ideological cohesion undermined Iranian identity and paved the way for the reconstruction and adoption of a traditional religious identity which created a wave of anti-Western sentiment leading to the fall of the Pahlavi regime with the Islamic revolution (Amin 2004). Following the Revolution, the status of women changed. The main social group to inherit political power valued the traditional role of women in a segregated society. Women were required to have hijab (i.e., to cover their hair and skin, except for the face and hands) whenever they appeared in public. Makeup was forbidden in Iranian government offices as the Islamic Republic's religious establishment considered the public wearing of makeup to be contrary to hijab. Media better reflects these restrictions as the content of the advertisements and the delivered messages are required to be consistent with Islamic values. For instance, print ads and posters illustrating unveiled women wearing make-up are not allowed to be shown in public. The enforcement of Islamic values is not embraced by all Iranians as witnessed in the contemporary Iranian society. The number of women adhering to the austere uniform of the early days of the Islamic revolution is decreasing. Young girls wear scarves that showcase rather than cover their hair and opt for jeans, sandaled feet and painted nails (Adib-Moghaddam 2005).

Overall, the analysis of the case of beauty culture in Iran indicates that tradition was politicized in response to state repression and cultural invasion in Pahlavi's regime. After revolution, though, the politicized religion has tried to enforce religious traditionalism by opposing modernization which has also been opposed by the mainstream society. In other words, neither the Western imitated imposed culture of the pre-revolution, nor the religiously enforced politicized culture of the post-revolution era has been successful, as tradition has been continually modernized and modernity has been continually traditionalized (Mohammadi 1990) indicating that members of the society are not passive receivers of mass media messages; rather, interpretive agents whose meaning-creating activities may lead to conscious deviations from ideological instructions promoted by advertising and mass media fueled by political and ideological forces.

References available upon request.