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Critical Argument Paper #2

For years, beauty, fashion, and consumer culture have served as channels for expressing the ideas of modernity. According to *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, the definition of modernity is “the quality or state of being or appearing to be modern” (n.d.). Modernity in fashion and beauty culture revolves around contemporary ideas. Beauty and fashion go hand in hand because fashion can be defined as a way for individuals to express themselves, and the same can be said for beauty. With that being said, the beauty culture practices the concept of modernity taking contemporary ideas and applying them to create new beauty standards.

One can say beauty culture began expressing or displaying ideas of modernity during the early 20th century due to the Modernist movement. According to Tate Britain, Modernism was a worldwide cultural and societal movement that arose in the early 20th century, which aimed to realign society with the experiences and values of modern industrial life (n.d.). According to the Victoria & Albert Museum, Modernism did not create a specific style but rather a broad set of concepts and ideas in art, architecture, design, and literature that disregarded past styles (n.d.). Cultural icons of the twentieth century in theater, film, and music significantly contributed to making visible and colorful cosmetics more widely accepted in beauty cultures worldwide (Karchin & Horvath, 2023, pg. 10). Karchin and Horvath (2023, pg. 10) also go on to mention how between the years 1909 and 1929, The Ballets Russes, led by Diaghilev, notably introduced vibrant eye makeup at a time when media like film, magazines, and ads were predominantly black and white. This was considered a step into modernism as it changed or influenced the

standards of beauty culture at the time. In the following years, beauty culture saw a growth in cosmetic use and eventually normalizing the use of cosmetic products that led to certain looks or styles, such as the vamp and flapper, becoming popular with the public (Karchin & Horvath, 2023, pg. 10). As a result, “Endorsement deals between cosmetics companies and prominent actresses such as Lillie Langtry for Pears’ Soap further contributed to the normalization of cosmetics usage for the masses” (Karchin & Horvath, 2023, pg. 10). Furthermore, by the 1920s, "makeup" had become a common term, especially in the film and theater industry, reflecting a shift towards personal expression and replacing earlier terms like "paint," which were associated with unnatural (Karchin & Horvath, 2023, pg. 10). The beauty culture and industry practiced modernity in the early 20th century by normalizing the use of cosmetic beauty as self-expression.

At present, the concepts of modernity within the beauty culture and industry have shifted from promoting self-expression to meeting certain beauty standards and looks. The idea people believe in achieving certain beauty standards and looks is they will get treated differently than people who don't meet said beauty standards and are deemed unattractive. Geoffrey Jones mentions that the beauty industry has a strong influence on the beauty culture because many believe that “their use offers real opportunities for people to access the "beauty premium," and real penalties if they are not deemed attractive” (2010, pg. 8). A practice that has grown in popularity amongst the beauty culture in recent years is skin whitening. Nikki Khanna (2020) defines skin whitening as the following:

Skin whitening (also called skin lightening or skin bleaching) is a multi-billion-dollar global industry that promises consumers "translucent," "bright," "fair," and "white" skin through moisturizers, foundations, night creams, anti-aging serums, sunscreens, lip

balms, face washes, soap bars, facials, foot creams, deodorants, and even feminine washes, pills, laser treatments, and whitening injections. (p. 2)

This practice has grown in popularity because companies in the beauty industry are pushing the idea to their customers that having light and clear skin will make individuals more attractive, guaranteeing the individual more success. Such practices have influenced the beauty standards held by men of women. Nancy Etcoff states the following:

In 1939 men and women were asked how important good looks are in a marriage partner. On a 0-3 scale, men ranked looks at 1.5, and women ranked them at .94. In 1989, when men and women were asked the same question... Men rated the importance of looks as 2.1, and women ranked them at 1.67. (1999, pg. 61)

The way beauty companies can sell such practices and products is through ads telling their customers why they need to buy their products. The message companies create through their ads goes something like this, "*Light skin is superior to dark.* For women, the message is even more sobering: *Those with light skin are beautiful and will marry and be successful; if you have dark skin, too bad for you.*" (Khanna, 2020, pg. 3). One may say that beauty culture and the beauty industry are moving backward today because it's promoting socially constructed beauty (Fleming, 2021) rather than beauty within.

In conclusion, the growth of beauty culture reflects the ever-changing view of modernity. From the beginning, beauty and fashion have served as platforms for personal expression by adapting to contemporary ideas and societal shifts. The early 20th century was a significant turning point in beauty as the Modernist movement challenged traditional norms and influenced beauty standards through innovations in cosmetics and self-expression. However, as time went on, the focus shifted from self-expression to conforming to fixed beauty standards sustained by

the beauty industry and societal pressures. Despite the growth in beauty culture, the industry's propaganda of socially established beauty standards creates concern about the impact on self-image and societal norms. Continuing ahead, it's important to promote a culture of inclusivity and accept diverse expressions of beauty, acknowledging that true beauty comes from individuality.

## Bibliography

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