Title: The Evolution of Modernity in Beauty Culture: Early 20th Century to Today

Sandra Nicolas

New York City College of Technology

BUF 4700-OL70: Contemporary Issues in Fashion

Denise H. Sutton, PhD

4/1/2024

In the early 20th century, the concept of modernity underwent a profound transformation, influenced by various societal, technological, and cultural shifts. This transformation was not only reflected in the broader socio-political landscape but also found its expression in the beauty industry. Being modern meant embracing change, innovation, and progress in various aspects of life, including fashion and beauty standards. This era saw a shift towards urbanization, industrialization, and globalization, leading to the emergence of new cultural movements and trends. We can later explore what it meant to be modern in the early 1900s and how the concept was utilized by the beauty industry. This will allow the analysis of the contemporary understanding of modernity and how the current beauty culture and industry communicate this concept.

The early 20th century was marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancements. These changes brought about a shift in societal norms and values, leading to a redefinition of what it meant to be modern. Modernity in this era was often associated with progress, efficiency, and a departure from traditional customs. Modernism emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a radical movement aimed at rejuvenating various facets of modern civilization, including life, art, politics, and science. It was characterized by a rebellious attitude that rejected European culture as stagnant, corrupt, and sluggish. Modernists sought alternatives to the established norms, turning to primitive cultures and questioning traditional beliefs and systems. One key characteristic of modernism included nihilism, the rejection of religious and moral principles seen as hindering social progress. This rejection stemmed from the belief that conventional morality imposed arbitrary restrictions on human

expression and stifled creativity. Additionally, modernists repudiated all systems of beliefs, constantly questioning and discarding established ideologies due to the rapid pace of technological and cultural change.

In the arts, modernists embraced freedom and experimentation, breaking away from traditional forms and embracing new artistic languages. They rejected the mimetic tradition of art, which focused on realistic representation, in favor of subjective expressions that reflected the complexities of modern life. Artists drew inspiration from primitive cultures, seeking simplicity and authenticity in form and emotion. The modernist exploration of human nature delved into the subconscious, challenging societal restrictions, and exposing repressed desires and passions. Psychological theories, such as those of Freud and Jung, provided insights into the unconscious mind and the collective human experience. Modernists also critiqued urbanization and industrialization, highlighting the alienation and fragmentation experienced by individuals in modern society. Technological advancements and philosophical shifts further shaped modernist thought, challenging traditional perceptions of reality and identity. The concept of relativity introduced by Einstein and the exploration of time and memory by Bergson contributed to a subjective understanding of existence. Politics and economics played a role as well, with the division of labor leading to feelings of alienation among workers and the rise of political movements challenging established power structures. In essence, modernism represented a radical departure from traditional norms and beliefs, embracing freedom, experimentation, and subjectivity in various aspects of human experience. Despite its short-lived prominence, modernism continues to influence artistic, intellectual, and cultural discourse to this day.

Historically, beauty was seen as a reflection of good and a path to truth and virtue. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle associated beauty with harmony, proportion, and moral goodness. For Saint Thomas Aquinas, beauty was one of the attributes of God and a means of accessing divine truth. However, contemporary culture has detached beauty from its spiritual and moral dimensions, reducing it to a superficial and commercialized concept. Friedrich Nietzsche furthered this separation between beauty and goodness, suggesting that beauty could rebel against established moral norms and have value. This philosophical shift coincided with the rise of avant-garde movements in art, which challenged traditional notions of beauty and embraced ugliness and destruction as aesthetic expressions.

In the twenty-first century, beauty is redefined as an interactive and relational concept, grounded in real-world interactions between models, artists, and audiences. This shift reflects a move away from the formalisms of modernism toward an aesthetic that values mutuality, equality, and empathy. Classical aesthetics, rooted in Greek and Renaissance traditions, perceive beauty as a timeless ideal characterized by harmony, proportion, and idealization. This perspective sees beauty as uplifting and transcendent, connecting viewers with enduring truths and values. Classical beauty is often associated with representational art forms that idealize the human figure and draw inspiration from Greco-Roman mythology and culture. Contrastingly, the avant-garde of modernism rejects traditional notions of beauty, favoring innovation and experimentation over adherence to established forms and conventions. Modernist art seeks to challenge and disrupt conventional modes of representation, exploring new techniques, materials, and ideas. Rather than valuing artworks as masterpieces or monuments, the avant-garde views them as moments in a continuous process of critical inquiry and exploration. This

experimental approach to beauty emphasizes openness, objectivity, and skepticism toward traditional norms and values.

The concept of modernity was reflected in evolving beauty standards, particularly in the beauty industry's response to the popularity of the Afro hairstyle among African American women. The Afro represented a departure from traditional Eurocentric beauty norms, embracing natural hair texture and challenging the dominance of straightened hairstyles. As the Afro gained popularity in the late 1960s, it sparked debates within the beauty culture industry. Hairdressers, who had long promoted straightened hair as the epitome of beauty, viewed the Afro as a threat to their business interests. They expressed concerns about the decline in demand for traditional hair straightening services and the potential loss of revenue. The beauty industry responded to the rise of the Afro by commodifying it. Hairdressers and beauty companies began offering specialized products and services tailored to maintaining and styling Afro-textured hair. Advertisements for Afro products emphasized themes of racial pride and self-expression, capitalizing on the Afro's association with black identity and cultural heritage. The commodification of the Afro reflected the complexities of navigating cultural shifts and economic interests within the beauty culture industry, highlighting the intersection of beauty, identity, and commerce in modern society.

In the contemporary context, modernity has evolved to hold within a broader spectrum of values and ideals. While technological advancements continue to shape our perception of modernity, contemporary society also emphasizes diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability. The beauty industry reflects these shifting ideals of modernity by promoting inclusivity and diversity

in its marketing campaigns and product offerings. Beauty brands are increasingly embracing diversity in their advertisements by featuring models of different ethnicities, body types, and gender identities. This moves towards inclusivity challenges traditional beauty standards and signals a more progressive understanding of modernity that celebrates individuality and authenticity. Beauty has undergone a profound transformation, moving away from its traditional associations with transcendence, goodness, and truth. Instead, it has become universal in our consumerist society, often manipulated, and distorted by cosmetic products and procedures. This shift has led to a trivialization of beauty, divorcing it from its deeper connection to the soul, virtue, and morality.

According to philosopher and theologian Zanchi, beauty has lost its true essence and has become a tool for concealment rather than revelation. It has emerged from its transcendent dimension and has been co-opted by consumerism, becoming a means of masking reality rather than revealing it. This departure from beauty's original significance is lamented as a loss of its purity and connection to goodness. In today's beauty culture, beauty is often constructed and manipulated through cosmetic procedures, algorithms, and AI-generated standards. The emphasis is on external appearance rather than inner virtue or spiritual depth. This commodification of beauty has led to a loss of primal beauty, ethical beauty, and spiritual beauty, as beauty becomes increasingly superficial and disconnected from the totality of the human being. Another perspective is the current beauty culture emphasizes sustainability and eco-consciousness as integral components of modern living. With growing concerns about environmental degradation, consumers are increasingly seeking out beauty products that are ethically sourced, cruelty-free, and environmentally friendly. Beauty brands are responding to

this demand by incorporating sustainable practices into their production processes and offering eco-friendly packaging options. For instance, companies like Lush Cosmetics have gained popularity for their commitment to using natural, ethically sourced ingredients and reducing waste through packaging-free products. By aligning themselves with values such as sustainability and ethical consumption, these brands position themselves as emblematic of modernity in the 21st century.

In conclusion, the concept of modernity has evolved significantly from the early 20th century to the present day, reflecting broader societal changes and shifting cultural values. The beauty industry has played a crucial role in shaping and communicating these evolving notions of modernity, from promoting notions of progress and sophistication in the early 1900s to embracing diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability in contemporary times. By examining the evolution of modernity in beauty culture, we gain insights into the changing dynamics of society and how beauty ideals reflect and respond to these changes.

Reference

Lapham's Quarterly. (n.d.). The beauty of the shoe. Retrieved from
      https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/arts-letters/beauty-shoe

Martinez, E. (2019). What is the beauty in the 21st century? Comunicación y Hombre, 15(1),
      101-112. https://comunicacionyhombre.com/en/article/what-is-the-beauty-in-21st-
      century/

Miami Dade College. (n.d.). History of modernism. Retrieved from
      https://www.mdc.edu/wolfson/academic/artsletters/art_philosophy/humanities/history_of
      _modernism.htm

Lush. (n.d.). Ethical buying. Retrieved from https://weare.lush.com/lush-life/our-values/ethical-
      buying/

WALKER, S. (2000). Black Is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960—1975.
      Enterprise & Society, 1(3), 536–564. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23699596