

DISCURSIVE SELF IN CONSUMPTION: BODY, FLUIDITY AND FEMININITY

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Abstract: *The paper has examined the extent to which the body plays a mediator between self-identity & consumption invested by power. The consumer culture provides embodied subjects with many of the cultural, symbolic resources for reflexive self-fashioning that are largely dictated by media. However, there have been disputes between authors with regard to the nature of the links between consumption, identity & the body. Given that access to cultural resources for reflexive self-fashioning is not equally available to men & women, feminists have pointed to the problematic & often contradictory position that women are in. By virtue of women's negotiation of 'appropriate femininity' they have developed a framework for understanding bodily practices as both expression of the objectification of women's bodies & an opportunity for them to become embodied subjects.*

Key Words: *Identity, Reflexivity, Bodily practices, Masquerade, Narcissism, Normative femininity, Consumer Culture, Subjectivity, Male Gaze.*

Introduction

In society today the construction of a personal identity can be seen to be somewhat problematic and difficult. People are surrounded by influential imagery, especially that of popular media. It is no longer possible for an identity to be constructed merely in a small community and only be influenced by family. Nowadays, arguably everything concerning our lives is seen to be 'media-saturated'. Therefore, it is obvious that in constructing an identity people would make use of imagery derived from the popular media. People would also have a way of accessing the iInternet. However, it is fair to say that in some instances the freedom of exploring the web could be limited depending on the choice of the parents or teachers. So, if people have such frequent access and an interest in the media, it is fair to say that their behavior and their sense of 'self' will be influenced to some degree by what they see, read, hear or discover for themselves. Such an influence may include a particular way of behaving or dressing to the kind of music a person chooses to listen to. These are all aspects which go towards constructing a person's own personal identity. The importance of the media influencing the construction of identity is reflected in the following:

...individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. For teens, the mass media are central to this process because they are a convenient source of cultural options. (Brown et al. 1994, 813).

Identities shaping self primarily take a gendered trajectory, the way social world is shaped into masculine & feminine routes. Such curving at the outset is mediated by body surfaces and the power laden discursive practices designing it. Mass media acts as a receiver-donor couplet in constructing such practices. Mass media create images that dictate cultural trends indicative of the time. In the current disruption of gender roles, there

seems to be a cultural uprising against women's increasing power. The dominating image of the painfully thin woman in advertising remains the ideal for American women. The grim truth is that in order for patriarchy to continue to thrive, women's mobility must be limited. Is there a better way to limit a person than to starve them? For centuries, women have shaped their bodies in accordance with men's needs and desires. The mass media provide a wide-ranging source of cultural opinions and standards to people as well as differing examples of identity to be able to look at these and to what they would like to aspire to be. The meanings that are gathered from the media do not have to be final but are open to reshaping and refashioning to suit an individual's personal needs and consequently, identity. These personal needs can be translated social needs & vice-versa also. It is said that young people:

...use media and the cultural insights provided by them to see both who they might be and how others have constructed or reconstructed themselves... individual adolescents...struggle with the dilemma of living out all the "possible selves" they can imagine. (Brown *et al.* 1994, 814).

In the postmodern era the impact media have on our lives is continuously growing. Not only do media reflect reality, but they also shape and reconstruct it according to the public's hopes, fears or fantasies. Reality itself is not the sum of all objective processes and things, but it is socially constructed by the discourses that reflect and produce power. On the other hand, the public does not simply accept or reject the media messages, but interprets them according to its social background (Zoonen, 1994, p. 41)

The "feminine" and the "masculine" are defined using binary oppositions: subject/ object, essence/ appearance, culture/ nature, reason/ passion, active/ passive, spirit/ matter. The second terms of these binary oppositions are attributed to the "feminine". In order to be recognized as "feminine", women must internalize the "feminine" values and to construct their identities accordingly. Since femininity is associated with matter, the symbol of femininity is the female body. The broader framework procuring identities can be traced to the prominence of 'body surfaces' in the backdrop of macro social changes governed by 'consumer culture'.

Consumption Pathway

Although the origins of 'modern consumption' practices have a longer history in different locations (Miller *et al.* 1998), several major social firmly established the foundations of a 'consumer culture' by the postwar period. These include the rise of the media and advertising (Ewen 1976; Ewen and Ewen 1982), the decline of heavy manufacturing industries and the growth in service sector industries. Such changes have been associated with the decline of the traditional worker, together with the growing salience of lifestyles based on leisure and consumption activities (Turner 1991). According to Turner (1991), the shortening of the working week, compulsory retirement and the valorization of sport and recreation have meant that conventional wisdom concerning the virtues of hard work have now been overshadowed by an emphasis on consumption, hedonism and play. According to Tomlinson (1990), sources of identity and a sense of self are derived less from work and production than from consumption and leisure.

'Consumption' refer to the purchase and use of goods, leisure activities and services such as shopping for clothes, dining out and engaging in fitness regimes or other bodily projects. Consumption is motivated by consumerism - the ideology pervading modern capitalism that prioritizes the production, sale and acquisition of consumer goods and services. The term 'consumer culture', however, refers to the norms and values of a consumer society. It draws attention to the symbolic aspect of goods and the way in which they are used as communicators (Featherstone 1991b). 'Identity', according to Woodward (1997), is concerned with the extent to which we are the same as or different from others. Cultural goods are of salience here because they are deployed in strategies of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Although most authors agree that symbolic consumption is central to the constitution of self-identity, there are some theoretical disagreements between writers as to how this link can be explained and understood.

Bourdieu (1984) continue to emphasize rigidly defined class-based identities whereas postmodern writers see identities as being dynamic, plural and derived from a multiplicity of sources. Thus whereas for Bourdieu we consume according to who we are (consumer choices are inscribed on the body establishing social differences), for postmodern theorists we become what we consume (the body is saturated with cultural signs with no fixed referents, producing multiple, shifting identities (Jameson 1985; Baudrillard 1988b).

Most of those theorists mentioned above have frequently paid insufficient attention to gender in their discussions of identity formation and re-formation. Given that access to cultural resources is not equally available to men and women in consumer culture, it has been argued that reflexive self-fashioning (Giddens, 1991) is more problematic for women (Lury, 1996). Women, for instance, experience a relative lack of control in terms of self-definition. Thus the constraints and insecurities women confront in claiming ownership of their feminine subjectivity are explored. We will explore this area in depth after reviewing the salience and philosophy consumption practices.

Influx of Consumer Culture

The salient features and attributes of contemporary consumer culture can be traced back to a range of developments that provided the foundations for its emergence. Different authors however, emphasize that it was not until the years between the First and Second World Wars in the USA and Britain that consumer culture became fully established. Most writers agree, however, that it developed initially in the middle classes and gradually spread to the working classes. Productive capacities had been increased dramatically in the late nineteenth century by the development of scientific management and the introduction of assembly-line production and Fordist techniques of work organization.

Demand was stimulated by improvements in real wages, the introduction of consumer credit and the installment plan. Standardized goods became available to wider markets with the development of fast and efficient railway networks (as well as sea and road transport systems) linking large industrial cities. In particular, the new era of consumer culture was inaugurated by, and institutionalized in, the rise of the department store (Chaney 1983) where the profusion of goods on display offered new freedoms and opportunities for consumer indulgence.

The new industrial situation needed what Ewen (1976: 32) calls 'a continually responsive consumer market'. Previously consumers demanded reliable goods, now manufacturers need reliable consumers (Corrigan, 1996). Hence workers have previously been socialized into the puritan values of thrift, denial, hard work, sobriety and moderation, had to be 'reeducated' to appreciate values that extolled the virtues of unbridled consumption, to espouse a 'new discourse centered around the hedonistic lifestyle entailing new needs and desires (Featherstone 1991: 172). By the 1920s, new ideals and norms of behavior were publicized by the nascent media of motion pictures mass spectator sport, the tabloid press, mass circulation magazines radio, the fashion and cosmetic industries and, above all, through advertising. Therefore mass media with all its tentacles provided the aspiring wings for hedonism to take its flight.

Philosophy of Consumption

As Featherstone (1991) has pointed out, advertising became the guardian of the new morality, encouraging individuals to take part in the consumption of commodities previously restricted to the upper classes, albeit in modified forms. Advertising celebrated the new consumption ethic, advocating the values of self expression, living for the moment, the exotica of far-away places, freedom from social obligations and the cultivation of style (Featherstone, 1991). It attached images of youth, beauty, luxury and romance to even the most mundane of products, making them desirable to the general population.

For Baudrillard (1975) one of the immanent features of consumer culture is the dominance of the exchange-value of commodities (the price for which goods can be sold in the marketplace), which has erased their original use-value (their purpose or utility) to such an extent that they are now free to take on any meaning depending on their position in a system of signifiers that is self-referential. Signifiers, like television advertisements, 'float'

freely with only the loosest connection to actual objects. Consumer goods became attractive for their symbolism - for the imagery surrounding them and what this might 'say' about the person who buys or uses them.

A focus on the allure of goods, however, was not the only strategy that advertising deployed. It also aimed to produce a specific kind of consumer who would be particularly receptive to its message. According to Ewen (1976), the intention was that the consumer's critical functions should be turned away from the product and towards him or herself. Advertisements were often designed to make people feel ashamed of themselves and inadequate. There was always room for self-improvement through the purchase and use of a vast array of consumer goods (Featherstone 1991a).

Consumer culture was firmly established by the end of the Second World War, since when it has drawn more and more people into a hectic and ever-expanding cycle of consumption. The progressive expansion of the market has brought increasing areas of social life within its trajectory, advocating the need for commodities not only in the domestic sphere but also in leisure activities. Bauman (1998) points out that consumers are now required to be energetic, alert, impetuous, restive, excitable, sensation-seeking and passionate. Although eager to make new choices from the panoply of goods displayed, they must also be equally susceptible to losing interest, for it is the volatility of their engagement that matters

Consumption, then, is far from being simply about the satisfaction of fixed needs; that no desire should be considered ultimate. As Bauman (1998) has pointed out, in shortening the time and space between desire and consummation, consumer culture has taken the waiting out of wanting and the wanting out of waiting. Hence, endless desire and longing as opposed to need and a utilitarian attitude now fuels the consumer game. Importantly for the argument here, it is desire for the sign, not the commodity itself, that links consumption" to the constitution of self-identity.

Identity vs. Identities: The Fixity-Fluidity Debate

For Bourdieu, identities are located in relatively stable and fixed social class positions which determine particular constellations of consumption preferences in any social field such as art, sport, diet, furnishings, music and so forth. Taste in cultural goods operates as a marker of class identity. Because consumption choices involve discriminatory judgements of taste, they render social group's own particular discriminatory capacities. For Bourdieu, taste classifies the classifier. In this context, Bourdieu introduces the notion of 'habitus'. By 'habitus', Bourdieu is referring to a set of unconscious dispositions, that organize an individual's capacity to act, to classify and to make sense of social experience. It is manifest in an individual's taken-for-granted assumptions about the appropriateness' and validity of his or her taste in cultural goods practices. To put it simply, a person or group's 'habitus' is what makes their good taste (or absence of it) to be 'natural'.

The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste.

(Featherstone 1991b: 86)

Thus, according to Bourdieu (1984), symbolic consumption is an ideal weapon in strategies of distinction. Cultural goods are deployed to demarcate boundaries between some individual *or social groups and to establish* communality with others. In the general struggle for dominance, different classes try to impose their own habitus on others, to legitimate their own tastes. Given access to, cultural capital - the sedimented knowledge and competence to make judgements of taste acquired through expenditure of time and money on such unproductive matters (Corrigan 1996) each act of consumption reproduces social differences.

However, postmodern writers have tended to introduce notions of fluidity and plurality into their formulations. From a postmodern perspective, identities are no longer received automatically through the rituals and social practices of the traditional order, but are constituted through individual marketplace decisions.

'The roads, to self-identity, to a place in society, to a life in a form recognizable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place' (Bauman 1998: 26). In effect, it is argued, we become what we consume. As the pace of life has accelerated and as society has become more *open*, so releasing individuals from the constraints of traditional social positions, identities have become more unstable, fragile and subject to change. By providing a series of 'expert knowledges', for instance in relation to lifestyle, health, fashion and beauty, consumer culture is understood from a postmodern perspective to have contributed to an increasingly reflexive understanding of the self, an awareness that identity is chosen and constructed (Giddens, 1991; Kellner, 1995). As Giddens (1991) has pointed out, the self in 'late modernity' has become a reflexive project; it is created (and re-created) through a plurality of consumer choices and life-decisions. In his view, individuals can now draw on a wide repertoire of symbolic goods with which to fashion and display their own identities.

Whereas Giddens tends to see the self as a unitary, self-regulated attainment (Turner 1992), other authors have suggested that the self has a plurality of identities constituted in diverse contexts and often dependent on consumer-defined figurations. Writers such as Jameson (1985) and Baudrillard (1988b), for example, have argued that the self-constituting subject is now fragmentary and inherently unstable. Baudrillard (1988) has even gone so far as to argue that the subject has now disappeared, resulting in a 'decentred self'.

Hence this simulational world is understood to provide few fixed reference points for self-constituting subjects. Instead, they engage in an endless, superficial play with signs and images, producing multiple and shifting identities. In other words, individuals use commodities and their random, open-ended meanings to continually reinvent themselves.

For Jameson and Baudrillard, therefore, although identities are constructed through the consumption of signs, they are not reducible to class in the manner indicated by Bourdieu. Instead anyone can be anyone - as long as they have the means to participate in consumption.

Body Surfaces in Identity Construction

In consumer culture self-identity is inextricably bound up with the body and its surfaces. In contrast to postmodern approaches where the body is in effect dematerialized, for Bourdieu the body is the materialization of class taste. The body bears the imprint of the consumption practices of various social classes.

The habitus does not simply operate at the level of everyday competences, but, according to Bourdieu, is embodied - literally. That is, it is made manifest in body size, shape and weight, posture, demeanour, ways of walking, eating and drinking, and sense of ease with one's body; even in the amount of social space a person feels entitled to occupy. Each class or class fraction, then, has a clearly identifiable relationship with its body, which results in the production of distinct bodily forms. For instance, the working classes have an instrumental relationship with their body whereas the middle class are more concerned with their body's appearance and intrinsic functioning. Hence the former tend to engage in weight lifting, producing bodies that exhibit strength, whereas the latter are -more likely to choose jogging, producing a fit, slim body. The symbolic values attached to particular bodily forms thus have implications for an individual's identity and the way in which the body is a site of struggle in strategies of distinction - a site for the marking of difference.

Gendered Bodylines

Although many of the 'new body theorists' acknowledge the influence of feminism as a political movement on the emergence of the body as a topic, actual feminist scholarship on the body is notably absent from their accounts (Shilling 1993 and 1997 are exceptions). Similarly, writers on consumer culture have assumed that

modern selves in search of their identity projects experience this culture in a homogeneous and universal manner without any consideration being given to gender or other socially constructed differences.

Giddens frequently assume that cultural resources are equally available to men and women when reflexively fashioning their own identities. According to Tyler and Abbott (1998), Giddens' understanding of the body as an integral element of 'the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991: 219) seriously underestimates the extent to which women's bodies as 'projects' continue to be more reflective of patriarchal norms and instrumentality imposed aesthetic codes of 'femininity' than expressions of a self-determined individuality.

In feminist writings on the consumer body, however, two separate, and potentially opposing, strands are identifiable. In the first strand, women are located as the objects of consumption and consumerism; the relationship between femininity, consumption and the body is seen as oppressive to women. In the second strand, by contrast, women are situated as the subjects of consumption and consumerism, with authors suggesting that women are well able to resist, challenge or reappropriate cultural goods and practices in order to fashion their own subjectivity. However, as will be suggested, women's relationship to consumer culture is more complex than either of these perspectives imply, to the extent that women are simultaneously the objects and subjects of consumption. K. Davis (1997) has pointed out that feminists have taken domination, difference and subversion as their starting point for understanding the conditions and experiences of embodiment in consumer culture. From a variety of feminist perspectives, several authors examined how the female body was regulated, normalized, fetishized and commodified in a range of consumerist discourses. Feminist scholars pointed out that in discourses of advertising and fashion, the female body was consistently the reference point for the persuasion to consume (Kilbourne 1995; McRobbie 1996).

Some feminists, however, have argued that a narrow focus on the domination and objectification of women in contemporary consumer culture obscures women's active engagement with their bodies. They have suggested that a view of women as the passive accomplices in their own objectification is overly pessimistic. Hence, attempts have been made at a theoretical level to conceptualize agency and the female body. Winship (1983) and McRobbie (1994) have shown that consumption practices have become an increasingly important source for the creation of an individualized feminine self. Women are now exhorted to engage in the 'work of femininity' by purchasing mass-produced commodities and transforming these into expressions of their own unique identity. Based on the idea that beauty is not naturally given but achievable by all through the correct application of diverse products, women are encouraged to work on their bodies, labouring to perfect an ever-increasing number of zones. Mouth, legs, eyes, teeth and other bodily parts must all be subject to scrutiny in order to achieve their ideal feminine self (Winship 1983). According to this view, women become active agents of their own self-fashioning. Similarly, Smith (1990) has introduced the idea of women as 'secret agents' behind gendered discourses of femininity. In her view, when women confront consumer discourses that inform them that their body is inferior, a gap is created between the body as deficient and the body as an object to be remedied. Dissatisfaction becomes an energizing process - the motivation for women to engage with their bodies as an object for work, for 'doing femininity' to which print and non-print media is harbouring on this to make this rationalize.

Rather than simply adopting versions of femininity that they are invited to emulate, women actively seek to redefine and rearticulate the meaning of these femininities (Lury 1996). They may resist or subvert normative discourses of femininity and exploit them in new ways. Cixous (1994) has pointed that the fashion garment is not simply an object that constitutes a woman's aesthetic inclinations. Fashion does not merely reshape the body but becomes continuous with it. It is a new way of speaking with the body, liberating it from silence. Fusing identity with appearance, the inside with the outside, fashion can be a form of self-expression. Cixous suggests that it is not simply oppressive but that it can be empowering as well. Lury (1996), for instance, has suggested that women have subverted the idea that beauty is something that can be achieved and have developed ways of seeing femininity as a masquerade. In her view, this enables women to play with their personal identity and take pleasure in the adoption of diverse roles and masks. With every change of style or appearance 'the body can be

made through dress, to play the part it desires as gender coding is displaced from the body on to dress'. (Evans and Thornton 1989 : 62) The process of masquerade or the 'simulation of femininity' has a liberatory potential in the creation (and subversion) of diverse female subjectivities and enables temporary resistances to impositions of power, including the operation of the male gaze. McRobbie (1996) suggests that, in a range of commercial discourses and cultural forms, women are constituted as 'knowing' consumers, well able to recognize how they are being persuaded to consume. In her view, the mocking humour, irony, parody and refusal of feminine naivety in consumer-led discourses provides a space for a degree of reflexivity and critique by women of the normative practices of femininity. Lipovetsky (1994) have discussed the narcissistic pleasures of transforming oneself, 'feeling like - and becoming — *someone else, by using* cosmetics and changing the way one dresses' (Lipovetsky 1994: 79)

But despite these, women are still not in a position to refuse the male gaze. As Lury (1996) has pointed out, although women may now adopt a playful, imitative attitude to self-presentation, this cannot be construed as a strategy of resistance in situations where women do not have the power directly to avoid the male gaze. They may simply sidestep its force by using it for their own ends. In her view, it is a compensatory practice, a relation of displacement in which the subjects and objects of consumer culture are confused. Advertisements and popular media portray women in different looks that engages their partner in discovering them freshly. This haunting for 'new discovery' to capture male gaze is encouraged by media in shape of cosmetic propagation, 'make-over' public shows by inviting renowned beauticians, shows regarding exhibition of dresses that would enable to 'reform' the corporeal space and so on & so forth. Partington (1991), for example, has argued that, historically, for women to invite the male gaze they have had to become skilled in discriminating between objects and using them to adorn themselves and their environment. In her view 'Female subjectivity is acquired through learning-to-look as well as learning-to-be-looked-at' (Partington 1991: 54). Hence, to exercise such skills in judgements or expressions of taste, women have become subjects of a (female) voyeuristic gaze while at the same time identifying narcissistically with commodities because they themselves are constituted as *objects* of the male gaze. Winship (1983) and Mc Robbie (1994) have also suggested that despite language of 'choice', 'the work of femininity' can be seen as the imposition and enactment of a cultural ideal of feminine beauty, perfect body shape and hence seeking approval of male gaze. Although media images do make promise for emancipatory potential for women, they are actually 'doing femininity' in different forms and magnitude. Rabine (1994) argues that fashion-conscious women are encouraged to become self-producing subject. By clothing & using cosmetics she is enacting fantasies of fashion-magazines on her body. Therefore women are both subject and object of consumption, the consumer as well as the consumed. (Myers, 1986).

The Panopticon Gawk

In contemporary culture, the body, especially the female one, is regarded as an object that can be shaped and modeled to match the promoted beauty standards. The media are an efficient instrument that both reflect and shape social realities. The ideal of femininity media promote also reflects women's position in a certain society. Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon' as a metaphor can be used to illustrate how the control and surveillance performed over the female body from outside tend to act automatically, from inside, once a certain ideal of femininity has been internalized. Michel Foucault defines the panopticon as a highly efficient instrument of surveillance and control that is present in all modern institutions (Foucault, 1997, pp. 279-315). Inside the panopticon the observer can see without being seen, while the observed are permanently exposed. The object of control is aware of its permanent visibility, therefore obeys all rules. Since the individuals can never see their observer, they can never know if they are actually watched, but only that they could be watched. This mechanism grants the automatic effects of power, causing the observed to become their own principle of subjection. The external surveillance becomes self-surveillance, so that any other external constraint is no longer needed. As for the female body, it is enough for the woman to internalize that she is being an object of the masculine gaze so as to obsessively control and survey her gestures, postures and looks. The practices women use in order to subscribe to the contemporary ideal of beauty (excessive diets or plastic surgeries, for instance) affect their physical health and, since the femininity standards are difficult to reach, women are compelled to

live most of their lives with a feeling of deficiency, of not being good enough, which means that a severe control over the body can also affect the mind.

As it appears, the key-concepts the media discourse operates with are "surveillance" and "control" over the female body, both external and internal. Media use this strategy so as to shape women's bodies as well as to fashion their social roles. Self-surveillance and self-examination techniques operate for the case of women's bodies. An increased visibility of women's bodies is created for the panoptic observers, hence for "invisible" agents. Media sets standards for the shape and the dimensions of the "beautiful" body, according to a series of binary oppositions regarding, for instance, the normal/ abnormal size of the body. The women whose bodies do not match the ideal standards need to be "normalized" through a series of practices of self-surveillance and self-control. Such discourses regarding the aspect of the body suggest that there's always a need for improvement. Control is granted by producing norms, by associating women to certain identity types and by offering certain solutions to the artificially created needs. Normative femininity is made of a series of disciplinary practices regarding the body, its gestures, its appetite, its shape and its aspect. The great advantage of the disciplinary model of power is that it replaces violence with normalization (Price, 1999, p. 195). Women's image in the media reflects social prejudices regarding women's most appropriate roles in a given society. Media are efficient means of dissemination and control. They play the observer's role in a virtual panopticon, exposing women's bodies in detail, setting norms for their shape and dimensions, providing the methods to model one's body according to standards and sanctioning every exception to the rule. Women are kindly invited to control their bodies. A woman who constantly controls the way she looks, dresses, what she eats, is a subject of self-surveillance. This is the reflection in her conscience that she is a subject of surveillance in ways a man is not and no matter what she does, she is, first of all, a body, and her role is to arouse and to decorate. This state of permanent visibility has been induced to women to grant the automatic effects of power. Women are prisoners in this virtual panopticon as, once aware they are being objects of the gaze; they apply to themselves the normalizing politics of control and self-surveillance. In the contemporary patriarchal culture women act as if a masculine observer were permanently watching them.

Gender Roles: Dominant vs. the 'Other'

In what concerns women's social roles, mass culture provides the public with a variety of models that reflect, however, cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes. Each model stresses certain qualities, yet some models prevail. We may say that some models seem dominant while the "alternative" ones are quite few and are often considered to be rather "unfeminine". The public is taught that some attitudes and activities are more suited to women than others. Media offer us traditional representations of women as well as different, "emancipated" ones. Women can choose from a wide range of social roles that can be performed both in the private and in the public space. Once again, femininity is defined according to the binary oppositions mentioned above. The second term, associated to the feminine, appears as inferior, even opposed to the first term. The man appears as rational, active, independent, while the woman appears as passive, dependent, subject to passions. Therefore, the tasks that require responsibility, competitiveness, ambition, initiative, intelligence, strength (such as earning an income, taking political decisions, leading an institution) are traditionally attributed to men, while those requiring care, empathy, nurturing, obedience, submission, are attributed to women. Based on this separation between masculine and feminine, the roles women and men perform in the private and in the public space are divided as well: men are the central authority of the family, the bread-winners, producers of material goods and representatives of their family in the public space, while women are unpaid domestic workers, nurturers, reproducers and subordinates. This separation prevails in the public space as the top position within a hierarchy (be it a political, organizational or institutional one) is usually held by men, while women are usually subordinates and mediators, working in the low-paid sectors of the labor market, performing similar activities to those at home. Family is a central value in traditional, patriarchal societies, therefore mass culture products celebrate the values of the traditional family. The traditional family appears as a hierarchy having the man at the top and the wife and children - as subordinates. Opposite to this traditional model is the egalitarian family. The two partners share private and public responsibilities so that neither one of them is subordinate to the other. The traditional roles for women are those of wives and mothers, of beautiful objects and reproducers. Traditional

women find their fulfillment in the private sphere, in nurturing the other members of their family. On the contrary, the emancipated women invest their time and efforts in their personal development, in building a career. For them marriage and motherhood are an option they might decide not to choose. In the public space, these women appear as professionally successful, rational, ambitious, talented and hardworking.

They are endowed with the so called "masculine" features. Anyhow, the "alternative" role models media promote are not radically different from the traditional ones. Moreover, the alternative media offer us a traditional model of femininity that has been added some liberal elements. To put it differently, besides beauties and mothers, feminine women also appear as professionals, successful in the public space. The growing importance of the image undermines women's social position. Besides their duties of mothers, wives, workers, women also have the duty to look good. They have to obey men's desires and beauty standards, being valued mainly as beautiful objects. The new ideal of femininity strengthens the male domination, since women must look good with the only purpose of attracting and keeping a man. These new standards require that women should be young and slim, domestic workers, reproducers, loving wives and mothers, intelligent, ambitious career women altogether. Media suggests women should be able to do it all. Women's failure to identify themselves with this model is seen as a personal failure due to personal flaws, while the model itself is not being contested. Media presents a distorted model of the emancipated femininity: instead of liberating women from their status of objects and instead of placing them on an equal position with men both at work and at home, media creates "the perfect woman", setting standards very difficult to reach (and even more difficult to preserve) and promoting women who seem to match this ideal.

Social Tripartite

When portraying a woman, media follow three coordinates: the image (if she subscribes to the ideal of beauty), the private life (if she has a partner, if she has children), the career (how talented she is in her work). This scheme is useful for manipulating women's attitudes towards the alternative models of femininity as our culture is centered on image and leisure time, therefore personal image and private life appear to be more important than any relevant activities in the public space. So, if a successful career woman is not young and slim, is not married, divorced or has no children, the readers will not look up to her for their system of values is different. Each time a woman appears as independent, rational, successful, the stress is moved on her personal life (she has no partner, no children or is not attractive) so as to undermine her professional achievements. The cost for being "different" is too high and women are not willing to give up their femininity (beauty and motherhood) in exchange for liberation. The alternative models are present, though. Different models are accepted and integrated in the "official" culture only if they submit to some traditional aspects. In other words, a career woman is a fine model for women as long as she preserves her femininity, as long as she is attractive and appears as a wife and a mother. Media manipulates women into rejecting the "emancipated" model by portraying intelligent or successful women as deprived of family or personal life. In our culture family is still seen as a source of fulfillment for women. Most women are not prepared to postpone the chance of getting married and having children in order to be successful at work. The image is also very important since it is the very symbol of femininity, so if the career women do not look feminine, the public will reject them and women will refuse to identify themselves with such models. In these conditions, media representations of femininity have a strong impact on women and on the shaping of their identities. Women are supposed to have a variety of models to choose from when constructing their image and assuming their roles, but the truth is that their options are quite limited and induced by the media discourse. After they have internalized the standards of femininity, their choices regarding image and role models are quite predictable.

Anxieties about female strength have provoked controversies in the body building industry. In discussing the diverse ways in which the industry has responded to this perceived threat, Mansfield and McGinn (1993), adopting a Foucauldian framework, have examined a number of interlocking discourses and discursive practices that together provide the conditions under which women body builders attempt to negotiate their self-identities. Body building for women is an explicit and conscious process of self-transformation involving extreme self-control and mastery over the body. (Johnston, 1996) But when they enter the arena of body building and sculpt

their bodies purposively, not only notions of naturalness of the body but also binary notions of body as masculine and feminine—bodily centered meanings also get disrupted. Hence female body builder provides a dual threat to femininity as well as masculinity. Use of steroids in body building is also sexist in the sense that overuse for males is connected with the threat of loss of health while for females, loss of femininity. Mansfield and McGinn (1993) cited instance of Reebok where in 1990 the company refused to sponsor women's body building contest as it was unhappy with the appearance of several competitors. According to Mansfield and McGinn, the only responses to such strong reactions for women exist in walking the line between muscularity and acceptable femininity. They make-up, use lip-stick, nail polish and adopt a posing style that emphasizes grace and creativity particular or close to femininity. From this it may be apprehended that body building is not empowering for women, but it creates a symbolic space that offers new possibilities for experimenting with alternative identities.

Last few lines: Posing a Challenge

Media is dominated by a small number of corporations who have an interest in promoting insecurity, weakness, vulnerability and subjugation. The truth is that secure, strong, confident women do not need to invest billions of dollars annually in make-up, in clothing, in surgeries. As long as the productive context remains unchanged, there cannot be any meaningful change in the messages produced within that context. Barthes (1988) offered at least one key step in challenging representations. The unity of a text, he argued, is not the origin but the destination. "Since texts exist within an endlessly expanding matrix of inter-textual production, readers continually bring new texts to bear upon their readings" (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 431). The question is not how to eliminate particular texts but rather what new texts can be introduced which provide adolescent girls with the interpretive lens necessary to exercise power over the images rather than be the victims of them.

In conclusion it can be seen that the popular media permeates everything that we do. Consequently, the imagery in the media is bound to infiltrate into people's lives. This is especially the case when people are in the process of constructing their identities. Through television, magazines, advertising, music and the Internet adolescents have a great deal of resources available to them in order for them to choose how they would like to present their 'selves'. However, just as web pages are constantly seen to be 'under construction', so can the identities of people. These will change as their tastes in media change and develop. There is no such thing as one fixed identity; it is negotiable and is sometimes possible to have multiple identities. By using certain imagery portrayed in the media, be it slim fashion models, a character in a television drama or a lyric from a popular song, people and even adults are able to construct an identity for themselves. This identity will allow them to fit in with the pressures placed on us by society, yet allow them to still be fundamentally different from the next person. Nevertheless, to the extent that men still have the power to judge how women look, women's claims to self- definition, to be self-producing, are frequently on shaky grounds. Hence, until women themselves can be socially recognized as "cultural intermediaries" and thereby the instigators of cultural change, the possibility of an alternative body politics is limited.

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