Age and the Feminine Ideal: Beauty and Age in 1930s Fashion Magazines

Melissa Lynne Jakubauskas
Iowa State University

Sara B. Marcketti
Iowa State University, sbb@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm_conf
Part of the Fashion Business Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Citation
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm_conf/21

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Apparel, Events and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Apparel, Events and Hospitality Management Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Age and the Feminine Ideal: Beauty and Age in 1930s Fashion Magazines

Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to examine the feminine ideal of the 1930s and explain how age was an important factor in determining beauty and femininity.

Keywords
age, femininity, cosmetics, history

Disciplines
Fashion Business | Sociology of Culture

Comments
Age and the Feminine Ideal: Beauty and Age in 1930s Fashion Magazines

Melissa L. Jakubauskas and Sara B. Marcketti, Iowa State University, Ames, IA

Keywords: Age, femininity, cosmetics, history

From advertisements for age-erasing makeup to botox to collagen injections, contemporary society seems obsessed with discovering the latest, greatest anti-aging treatment (Stukin, 2009). Attaining physical attractiveness and remaining attractive was, and is, a deep-rooted cultural expectation within U.S. society (Banner, 1992). The purpose of this paper was to examine the feminine ideal of the 1930s and explain how age was an important factor in determining beauty and femininity. In addition, the importance of women countering the aging process with fashion and cosmetics was examined. The decade presented a unique opportunity to study the ways in which societal and political events of the time influenced popular culture and transformed standards of beauty and femininity (Haber, 1982; Peiss, 1998).

The cosmetic and beauty industry became an important and lucrative industry during the early 20th century and continues to be one of the most profitable industries in the United States today (Peiss, 1998). Cosmetics, and specifically, anti-aging products and campaigns were, and are an integral part of women’s lives, influencing the manipulation of “natural-ness” for the achievement of a societal standard of beauty and attractiveness (Peiss, 1998).

The 1930s in the United States was a decade of tremendous economic, political and social upheaval (Farrell-Beck & Parsons, 2007; Haber, 1992). Popular culture such as fashion and fashion magazines, celebrities and Hollywood offered an escape from the difficult economic realities of the Great Depression (Berry, 2000; Haber, 1982). Cosmetics, makeup, and beauty treatments provided a relatively inexpensive way for women to update their fashions while maintaining the frugality required during the Depression era (Farrell-Beck & Parsons, 2007; Vogue’s Book of Beauty, 1933). Hollywood stars even lent their faces and names in the promotion of “hope in a jar,” promising miraculous age-reversal results with the use of cold creams and tonics (Peiss, 1998).

The researchers utilized the primary sources of Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar from 1930-1939 to identify and understand the feminine ideal in the 1930s. Grounded, thematic analysis was performed to categorize common themes related to femininity, beauty standards and age. The publications were chosen because of their wide circulation and popularity among women of the 20th century, and because they represented prevailing cultural values and norms (Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978; Zuckerman, 1998).

During the 1930s, the desire to return to better economic times led to a feminine ideal of a curvaceous figure with an ageless quality (Thesander, 1997). The ideal, i.e., a youthful, slender appearance, was achieved through face and skin care routines, care for the figure and physique and age-appropriate, figure-flattering fashions. Advertisements, columns and articles bombarded women with the idea that beauty and youthful skin could be achieved through the use of products that promised to even out skin tone, diminish wrinkles and keep the skin “...saying ‘young’”
instead of ‘old’” by combating “flabbiness, sagging and ‘bracelet’ lines” (Vogue, Oct. 5, 1936, p. 119). Advertisements stressed the correlation between food management, dieting and beauty; emphasizing body parts such as the jaw line that heralded “the banner of youth” (Vogue, Feb. 15, 1930, p. 111). Articles described appropriate clothing for older women as non-revealing and conservative placing emphasis on hiding the aging physique. The actual appearance of older women, meaning those over 40, was extremely limited, and these women were frequently relegated to before and after pictures that highlighted the shame associated with the aging process and the benefits of cosmetic products. The prevailing cultural attitude as reflected in the magazines instructed women that just as in today’s culture, through hard work and the right products, their bodies could defy aging and achieve society’s standard for feminine perfection.

The study of the feminine ideal of the 1930s revealed a direct correlation with beauty standards in today’s society. Although there has been some evolution of body type standards, much of what constitute femininity and beauty standards today was evident during the 1930s. Limitations of this study include its restriction to only two fashion publications rather than including other magazines and periodicals of the decade. Future research opportunities lie in the comparison of today’s economic climate and its impact on the beauty culture and social attitudes with that of the 1930s to reveal similarities, or differences, in the way America thinks about the body and age as compared to the Depression era. An evolutionary look at beauty and body attitudes could provide a deeper understanding of mass media’s obsession with the body and beauty, and its effect on society. An examination of ethnicity and femininity would also be worth researching because of the limited inclusion of racially and ethnically diverse women in fashion publications during the 1930s.

References