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The Hegemonic Male Gaze in the Media Culture:
Influences of Advertisements on Female Beauty Standards and the Use of Beauty Filters on the Popular Social Media Platform

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ABSTRACT

Giant media corporations are the representation of the ruling class who have the power to control media content published to the public and the right to disseminate their preferred ideologies to society. People outside the In-Group are considered media consumers who are repeatedly exposed to media productions containing hegemonic ideologies. Consequently, due to the daily exposure to hegemonic ideas incorporated in traditional and new media, media consumers began to accept hegemonic ideas as social norms. That is when media hegemony actually happens. The idea of the hegemonic male gaze can usually be found in all kinds of business promotions used in the media industry, principally in advertisements. Since males are not the only groups of people who are eager to see images of hot girls in media productions, the sexualized performance of women in advertisements is also attractive to females. After perceiving a certain beauty standard and aesthetic trend shaped by the hegemonic male gaze in social media, women are more likely to pursue the idealized definition of beauty by altering their physical features. Beauty filters on social media are the most popular tool used by females to change their looks to fit into the current beauty standard. This article uses the use of beauty filters on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) as an example to illustrate the cause-and-effect relationship between the hegemonic male gaze in advertisements and the prevalent aesthetic trends.

Keywords: Media Hegemony, The Male Gaze, Female Beauty Standards, Social Media Beauty Filters.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the theme of "the division of labour" first introduced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 1840s, class differences are shown due to the division of roles in labor, in which "...one part appears as the thinkers of the class, while the others' attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive." [1]. Ideas and illusions are mentally created by the ruling class and then followed by the others. At the same time, people outside the ruling class as active members are too busy dealing with "tasks" given by the ruling class and have less time to think about themselves deeply [1]. People outside the ruling class do not choose to disagree with ideas created by the ruling class and revolt because they do not want to break the balance created within the class and put themselves at risk. In the media industry, those big media companies and governments are the "ruling class" and individuals who treat themselves as media consumers are from the "working class". Since media consumers are active members who are designed to interact with media content that contains hegemonic ideas, people accept those ideas and illusions as social norms due to their repeated exposure to those contents.

Back in 1984, Altheide did a critical analysis of the role of the media in shaping the ideology of society and challenged the ideological effect of the media developed by other cultural theorists. Altheide argued that the way the concept of hegemony is integrated into media is ambiguous, and "the compelling logic of the media hegemony thesis has not been matched by a research program to systematically assess the nature and extent of such domination on either foreign or domestic topics" [2]. The fact is today's media culture is not only relying on traditional media, such as broadcast and television but communicates through diversified approaches that are available to everyone. With the shift from the traditional media to the new media, the development of technologies enabled the portability, accessibility, and dissemination capability of media platforms that everyone can use to get informed on events happening in daily lives and to post personal thoughts. The technological development in the

digital era has contributed to the mediatization of politics, which then lead to the occurrence of media hegemony in the contemporary cultural environment. The contemporary mass media culture has provided people with political power and a hegemonic platform to naturalize those dominant ideologies they want others to receive and accept to strengthen and maintain their powerful control over society [3].

The ruling class in the modern media industry has the power to determine which type of media content should be visible to the public and then make it the widely accepted ideology by incorporating their preferred hegemonic ideologies into media productions. Class with power also has the right to decide which ideology should not be included in the various types of media productions to sustain their political power to keep the society avoid from chaos.

2. MEDIA HEGEMONY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA INDUSTRY

Within the mass culture, media contents and texts that people receive are mainly structured and disseminated by those political and economic organizations, which is the central finding in the study of the political economy of the media. With a further understanding of the political economy of the media, the control that governments and giant media corporations have over media content for both their economic and political interests leads to the phenomenon of media hegemony. The term hegemony represents the power a social group has over the other groups, and other groups in society accept those dominant ideologies formed by social groups with power. When it comes to the idea of media hegemony, media hegemony is often represented through media ownership in media production. Media ownerships are mainly powered by the in-group, which consists of members from the dominant and elite groups. As a result, those media stereotypes used by media content creators presented in media content through stereotypical storytelling are always focused on the out-group or the Other, whose members have hardly any control over those mainstream media images.

The political economy of the media is a study that mainly focuses on the relationship between the meanings of media texts and the political and economic organizations within the mass media industry. According to Hardy, "Critical political economy of communications is a critical realist approach that investigates problems connected with the political and economic organization of communication resources" [4]. In other words, the media texts and contents that media consumers engage in their everyday lives are mainly produced and distributed by media ownerships, for example, the giant media corporations and governments. Governments' policies and actions are making a considerable contribution to structuring and controlling the overall media context.

With the power of the political economy of the media, people's understanding and thoughts toward an event or a culture are being shaped. The whole process of media production, distribution, and consumption happen with the contents created by those influential media institutions are depends on a large part of finance, for instance, advertising finance [4]. Ultimately, revenues obtained by advertisers will go into financing media companies.

Another way that mainstream media images are being influenced is through the idea of hegemony. Hegemony represents those dominant ideologies formed by dominant groups in the society, primarily by the elite social groups. As Sensoy and DiAngelo illustrate in their works, "Hegemony refers to the control of the ideology of a society" [5]. These ideologies reinforce the power of dominant social groups since people outside the dominant groups are more likely to accept rather than to stand against these dominant ideologies. The meaning of hegemony is further explained in Lull's book " [hegemony] is a method for gaining and maintaining power" [6]. Hegemony is not only about the class differences, such as the differences in social powers that mental labor and material labor has, but the term also symbolizes the ability of the ruling class to reinforce people with high social status's control over those hegemonic ideologies developed based on their preferences. Based on this situation, with the wide acceptance of dominant ideologies within hegemony, the power that elite social groups have is being considered legalized, and the dominant ideologies are being received as "social norms". As a result, people's beliefs and understandings toward society as well as the world are shaped and directed by hegemonies since they are continuously and repetitively engaging with those dominant ideologies produced by mass media.

One of the most useful tools that elite social groups use to disseminate and make others start believing in their preferred ideologies is through mass media, which leads to the concept of media hegemony. Only a small group of people have control over media content, nor does everyone has the accessibility to create media content. In the media industry, advertisers and brands are important sectors of media owners who can control media content and shape media ideologies. With the fact of media ownership merely financing content that best fits their personal interests, there are always hegemonic messages and dominant ideologies included in those media contents consumed by other groups from the society. The media production process made by media ownership, such as governments and capitalists, is understood as the "manufacturing of consent". Within this process, media texts and contents selected and produced were highly biased ideologies of media creators with power. For instance, news that people see on television and other forms of media are selected by media hegemonic groups, and events that contradict the dominant ideology of

media owners will not be shown to audiences. Therefore, the existence of biased ideology in media contents formed in media production is a representation of media hegemony. With the power that media owners have in media production, media hegemony is being reinforced to a large extent.

3. MEDIA HEGEMONY CAUSED STEREOTYPICAL STORYTELLING

Media images and symbols created and disseminated by media owners are all considered signs where meanings are waiting to be decoded by media consumers. Those media images and narratives received by media consumers are often encoded with stereotypes and biased ideologies. As a result, media signs are being decoded by audiences in a stereotyped way as well. Media owners or creatives are using and conveying stereotypes in media production mainly through stereotypical storytelling. When using stereotypes in media production, media owners are creating media content based on the shared mediated stereotypes of the Other and then embed those stereotyped ideas into characters in stories that they are narrating.

Routines and stereotypes used in media productions within the mass culture mainly aim to establish and reinforce the dominant ideologies and shape the common understandings that the public had toward minoritized and marginalized groups. The concept of media routines creates a pattern that media content creators can follow to produce media texts and content based on the established power structures within the society. Since those social hierarchies and power structures are developed and formed under hegemonic ideologies, it provides an understanding that media routines are dominated by hegemony. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo, "Hegemony, then, includes the ability to define and impose self-discipline on others in ways that serve dominant group interests" [5]. The wide acceptance of media content that represents the reality of dominant group interests among the public is then considered media routines that creators can use to prevent problems in "either institutional acceptability or organizational profits" [7]. In other words, by using media routines to show content that follows the current social structures, media producers will avoid facing any risks or failure in their media productions and then successfully obtain the number of profits they expected.

3.1. Normalization of beauty standards presented in ads and social media

With the fact that the application of popular culture in mass media is aimed at marketing, media productions are required to present images or content based on audiences' preferences and interests to achieve a sizable audience that is willing to purchase their products. Lull defined popular culture in his book as "...popular culture means

that artifacts and styles of human expression develop from the creativity of ordinary people, and circulate among people according to their interests, preferences, and tastes" [6]. As a result, popular culture communicated through mass media created by those content creators is designed to be attractive to audiences and satisfy their audiences' desires [8]. Advertisers are selling their products mainly through images and values believed by ordinary people to create a sense of normalcy in their products. Most importantly, advertisements often include concepts of sexuality and love in order to make the products they are selling look more desirable. After repeated exposure to those attractive and aesthetic images shown in advertising, people might start questioning themselves because they think they are not meeting the "beauty standard" or "normalcy" presented in the ads. This self-doubt process is highly related to Džanić's discussion on advertising power, "In the psychological sense, advertising power relies on people's weaknesses" [8]. Within this situation, by engaging with advertising images containing standards of beauty, girls' and women's insecurities about their appearance and bodies will be targeted by advertisers. Although this targeting of insecurities in advertisements is beneficial for advertisers since they are able to make more profits by selling more products, it is incredibly hurtful to females' self-esteem. For instance, the physical perfection of women presented in advertisements has contributed to women's mental health problems since women are unintentionally accepting those advertising images as the beauty standard. Their obsession with thinness makes them start to pursue their personal attractiveness based on the ideal female beauty presented in those images. When failing to meet the ideal female beauty standard, women might feel ashamed, and this phenomenon causes a lot of happenings of eating disorders, depression, etc., among women. The flawlessness of females represented in advertising images lowers the amount of confidence and self-esteem that each woman feels about herself to a large extent.

The representation of body image on social media has been vital in defining femininity recently. The way of physical appearance and the body image of females being depicted in media productions within the mass culture is considered a form of gender stereotypes usually represented through sexist formulas, such as through a form of a sexualized version of femininity. In advertisements, hegemonic ideas had influenced the definition of female beauty and then led to the use of beauty filters on social media among women to make themselves look like the idealized body image shown in advertisements to fit into a narrowed beauty standard defined by media owners to prove self-value.

3.2. The role of advertisements in shaping the current feminine beauty ideal

Most of the time, people are subconsciously influenced by those advertisements communicated through mass media and unintentionally accept dominant or prevalent ideologies presented in those media productions as social norms. The popular culture represented in advertisements constructs what Jean Kilbourne called a "toxic cultural environment" [9]. Almost all the images shown in ads are spreading the idea to young girls and women about physical perfection, which then leads to the obsession with thinness. Within the general representation of females in advertisements, women of color are only being considered beautiful when they have similar features to the white ideal in advertising images [9]. Based on this situation, popular culture represented in advertising is not only related to genders but also races. Advertisements communicated through mass media are dehumanizing women's bodies as well as violence against women. Making young girls and women start living in an unhealthy cultural environment by altering their originally healthy eating habits into unhealthy ones to be thin and attractive. The application of sexuality in advertising not only aimed to sell more products but also to pleasure people [9].

Meanwhile, advertising images are also shaping males' perceptions and feelings toward female beauty standards. Then the judgment of women made by men appears when males think the real women they are with are not considered as ideal female beauty shown in advertisements [9]. Under this situation, women's bodies in advertising are turned into "objects" and "things" waiting to be evaluated by others, especially by males. This evaluation process happening within mass media is disseminating the idea of gender violence since women are being violence against due to their body images. Women who fail to meet the conventional beauty standard will be considered "ugly" and then depicted as an object that is criticized and ridiculed by the mass culture. The fact that merely one part of a woman's body is focused in advertising images, for example, the camera focuses on legs or breasts, is related to the concept of the male gaze. The application of sexuality in advertisement productions is likely to attract more audiences and then sell more products. However, the way that sex is represented in advertising conveys the idea that only people who are young and physically perfect can have sexuality. Girls and women are starting to see themselves as sexual objects within the mass culture by repeatedly and subconsciously exposing themselves to the most dominant and popular way of sexy being depicted in those advertising images. Correspondingly, the concept of the male gaze is being further represented under gender stereotypes as one of the hegemonic ideologies.

4. EFFECTS OF THE HEGEMONIC MALE GAZE IN MEDIA PRODUCTIONS

In the concept of the male gaze, males are defined as active subjects and lookers, and females are defined as passive objects to be looked at within media narratives and productions. Ott and Mack state that "The fact that the gaze of the camera in contemporary society is inherently male (and heterosexual, for that matter) does not preclude other social groups from gaining scopophilic pleasure from gazing" [10]. Males are not the only group who are gaining pleasure from watching photos that contain the sexualized performance of women on social media platforms. Instead, the male gaze in social media brings a sense of unconscious visual pleasure to all spectators and makes them engage with those media texts and content from a masculine perspective. The fact adheres is that audiences will likely be attracted by images that contain a sexualized performance of women on social media since those media content can best satisfy their desires.

The existence of the male gaze in social media is not only about gender performances in media productions but also frames and affects the current female beauty standard. When the female body displayed on social media under the male gaze is accepted as the feminine beauty ideal, or people are able to directly see the popularity of a certain type of female body image on social media, they will start imitating that specific body image, and therefore make a shift toward a beauty standard that is defined by the male gaze. For instance, Kim Kardashian's poutier lips, defined jawline, and contoured nose shown in photos she posted on her social media have led to an increasing number of plastic surgeries, especially among young adults [11]. In some correlational research, concerns about body dissatisfaction and body surveillance often occur when users use Instagram [12].

The truth is that photos that people see in advertisements and social media platforms are mostly being retouched over and over again to make the females in those pictures look perfect, attractive, and considered a form of "natural beauty." People are less likely to be able to distinguish between the genuine reality and the "reality" shown in advertising created by technology, such as advertising images produced by computer retouching and Photoshop. A famous media example that illustrates the idea of computer retouching used in advertisements is the Dove Evolution Commercial. This video begins with a girl sitting down in a studio, and the makeup and hair artists start putting makeup on her face. Once the makeup is finished, photographers start to take photoshoots of this girl. After the shooting process is done, one picture is selected and Photoshopped. During the "Photoshopping" process, this girl's appearance is being altered more aesthetically by changing her skin and hair, enlarging her eyes and mouth, etc. From this media

example, the "Photoshopping" process had somewhat hidden the authenticity of the original appearance of the girl shown in the image and turned it into a highly edited advertising image that represents the ideal female beauty. For women who live in real life, not in the advertising world, in order to meet the ideal female beauty standard spread by the mass media, there is an increasing number of them who choose to do cosmetic procedures and to be physically perfect and attractive to men. The majority of the time, the use of beauty filters will be an efficient and time-saving way to use in meeting a certain aesthetic trend defined by the current dominant ideologies. People view beauty filters as alternative options for plastic surgery that can help them receive recognition from others at minimum cost.

5. THE USE OF BEAUTY FILTERS ON DOUYIN

Technological advancement has contributed to the development of modification apps and beauty filters, and "these applications and beauty filters have created a huge difference among people regarding the idea of beauty" [11]. The design of those beauty filters varies from country to country, and they are mainly designed based on the prevalent beauty standard of a nation. For instance, the beauty filters on Douyin will make people look "white, young, and thin," which gives people a lighter skin tone, a girlish appearance, and a thinner body shape. In this case, beauty filters on Douyin are providing individuals an opportunity to modify their appearance that is complying with the prevalent aesthetic trend without any time consumption or money costs. Beauty filters help individuals portray a more favorable version of themselves on social media by presenting an idealized looking. Therefore, beauty filters on social media platforms play a vital role in affecting the decisions of beauty choices.

Aesthetic standards and beauty standards are not set in stone. Instead, the standard of beauty is likely to be determined by the contemporary hegemonic social ideology. With the increasing engagement on social media platforms, "social media can be seen playing an important role in framing a certain body type to qualify for being beautiful" [11]. George Gerbner's cultivation theory states that "long-term exposure to media shapes how the consumers of media perceive the world and conduct themselves" [13]. Based on this situation, after the long-term repeated exposure to this aesthetic trend on Douyin, people's perception of beauty standards is changed into a "filtered" version. Young local Chinese women are informed by the social ideology that they will only be considered beautiful and popular when they meet the aesthetic standards of "white, young, and thin". "If the visibility of the body shapes its public significance, then the performance of the body, in that sense, can be ultimately seen as a presentation of a body image" [14]. Most of the time, social media platforms disseminate the importance and value of the term "beauty", which creates a perceived notion of beauty in body image to the public.

Using beauty filters on social media is not only about fitting into a certain idea of beauty to receive popularity but also treating those filters as a helpful tool to gain more financial profits. In other words, individuals who participate in those social media platforms will choose to use beauty filters to help them be in line with the current aesthetic trend to sell products more effectively and maximize profit. As discussed by Marwick, "Microcelebrity is linked to the increasingly pervasive notion of 'self-branding,' a self-presentation strategy that requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others" [15]. In this case, the attractive facial appearance and body image of those micro-celebrities are the things sold to viewers since audiences are intended to pay more attention to things that fit into the current beauty standards. Some influencers insert beauty products, such as cosmetic and skincare products, as advertisements in their selfies and short videos, posted or during the live stream on Douyin. "The purchasing decisions of millennials are influenced majorly by social media. 72% of millennials procure beauty products based on Instagram posts and other social networks" [16]. From this purchasing behavior, beauty standards that are in line with the public's idea of beauty have been modified into a commercialized aesthetic, which will potentially impact young women's perceptions of the definition of beauty due to the influence of the attention economy. Audiences are more willing to purchase those beauty products sold by micro-celebrities who fit into the beauty standard through social media because they believe that by using those products, their body image will be able to look similar to those influencers and with more possibility to succeed.

The current beauty standard will be more negatively influenced due to the significant role of social media in shaping privileged ideas on the definition of beauty. When people are able to directly see the popularity of a certain type of aesthetic trend on social media platforms, they will start imitating those styles by using beauty filters or doing plastic surgeries to meet the current beauty standard framed by dominant social ideology. The diversification of beauty is being erased during the imitation process. Individuals who do not meet this specific beauty trend will not be considered "beautiful" or "popular" by the public. Women with a slim or fit body shape will be portrayed as more beautiful and successful than women with overweight bodies on social media [16]. According to Eshiet, "With beauty filters becoming more popular among young women, these filters can potentially affect their self-esteem and body image and what they consider beauty standards" [17]. To be more specific, with the long-term daily exposure to those media content that contains a particular popular aesthetic trend, women with high levels of body concern will be negatively influenced by the idealized beauty shown on

social media caused by body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem.

Hegemonic ideologies on gender performances identified cultural norms of femininity and determined several specific ways that females need to follow to be in line with the "norms of beauty", which led to the acceptance and compromise of the objectification of women in media productions. This existence of the objectification of females in media representations is directed by one of the hegemonic ideologies on gender performances in popular media, in which females are supposed to fit into a specific beauty standard to perform femininity, to get approval. As a consequence of that, women's bodies and physical appearances are disciplined by the hegemonic male gaze. The idea of the hegemonic male gaze is applied in numerous media productions, especially in advertisements and images published on social media. Objectification of women in the hegemonic male gaze has influenced the definition of female beauty tremendously. Beauty filters on social media platforms and Beauty camera apps have provided women who are affected by the aesthetic trend, which was framed by the hegemonic male gaze, an opportunity to change their facial features and body shapes with no money and time consumption.

6. CONCLUSION

Women are portrayed in stereotypical ways in media productions in the mass culture, which is usually aligned with hegemonic ideas in relation to gender roles and gender representation. It is an indisputable fact that advertisements are perfectly captured sexism and gender stereotyping in aiding advertisers to maximize their profits. What is shown in most of the commercials conveys the importance of the dominant ideology of body perfection to women. Spectators get informed from those advertisements that the only way for females to get recognition from others and the public is to make themselves look physically perfect to obey the current beauty standard framed by groups of people who have control over media content. After viewing those advertisements, there will be a high chance for females to doubt their looks once they do not see themselves fit into the contemporary aesthetic trend determined by the hegemonic male gaze. Women who are disciplined by the hegemonic male gaze in the mass media will then choose to alter their bodies and their facial features surgically. On close inspection, with the technological advancement, the emergence of beauty filters on social media platforms has become a most-welcomed approach used by females to alter their physical appearance to be able to in line with the prevalent aesthetic trend in a time-saving way without doing an actual cosmetic surgery. Aside from the influence of media hegemony alongside the concept of the male gaze on contemporary female beauty standards, beauty filters on social media are functioning as a way to essentialize the representation of gender identity on

social media in the mass culture. The use of beauty filters can be understood as a way of promoting the gendered social process and businesses. Visual images of young women used in business promotion, such as the sexualized performance of females in advertisements, promote the gendered social processes and desires among both males and females. Throughout the "naturalization" process of the representation of female bodies and facial features determined by the hegemonic male gaze in the media industry, especially in social media, a type of commercial building aesthetics emerged and that specific female beauty ideal was accepted by the public.

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