Discipline and Power in Women’s Beauty Practices in Post-Soviet Russia

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the influence of Russia’s transition from communism to capitalism on women’s gender identity and self-perception as expressed in their beautification practices. I examine women’s daily beauty rituals as a form of self-surveillance and the internalisation of social norms, and as practically applied to oneself, in the context of an increasingly consumption-oriented society. For the analysis of these practices in the context of an emergent consumer culture in the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s, I employ Michel Foucault’s notion of surveillance of self and others through the gaze and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and cultural capital in its embodied state. I argue that women as social agents turn a disempowering experience of their bodies as the-body-for-other into a supposedly empowering experience when they reapplied to other women beauty norms that they accept and apply to themselves. An experience of gaining power and control comes from the belief that through beautification they have managed to reshape their bodies to match current ideals of feminine beauty and secured their main cultural capital, beauty. But critical gazes and comments directed to other women are a self-reassurance of fitting in to the normative femininity rather than an imposition of influence over the other. In short, despite cultural representations of female beauty as a high valued quality, beauty-power is illusory in a sense that it has no effect on masculine privilege, characteristic of current gender relations.
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In the post-Soviet era, Russian women have been increasingly encouraged to aspire to a homogeneous beauty ideal. The social pressure on women to pursue this ideal has intensified due to the proliferation of beauty products and services and their marketing campaigns. The emergence of various women’s magazines and talk shows devoted to topics of beauty has also exposed a larger number of Russian women to the new, dominant beauty ideals. This paper considers the influence that Russia’s transition from communism to capitalism has had on female identity and self-perception as expressed in their beautification practices. Daily beauty rituals are conceived as a form of self-surveillance that internalise social norms, through the practical application to oneself, in the context of an increasingly consumption-oriented society.

This study of the operation of power in the beauty practices of women in post-Soviet Russia is part of a larger inquiry into changes and continuities in women’s complex negotiation and adoption of feminine beauty ideals. Historical factors—such as the growth of conspicuous consumption, an increased number of gender-specific publications, and changes in gender roles—form a frame for the analysis of the conceptual relation of power and beauty. The research method employed involves thematic analysis of qualitative interviews. The women’s magazines Cosmopolitan and Elle, issued during the period of 1994-2000, also formed part of this study. The main questions guiding my analysis are: what does power teach us about female beautification? What can we learn about power by studying women’s beauty routines? In answering this twofold question I will employ Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital, and Foucault’s notion of self-surveillance. In this paper, women’s beauty practices will be regarded as a site of the exercise of power.

A normative feminine look, or more simply ‘beauty,’ can be seen as a primary asset for women, one that can be encouraged to be exploited for conversion into social and economic capital. In a culture with a long patriarchal heritage, even those women who actively provide for the family or achieve success in their careers, tend to believe that ‘man should be in control.’ Moreover, women continue to be underrepresented at the decision-making level and face gender discrimination in both business and politics. At the same time, beauty is presented as a ‘natural’ female attribute that, with the contribution of marketers and the media, has gradually been turned into a prerequisite for social and economic success. Naomi Wolf argues that ‘images of female beauty’ are used as ‘a political weapon against women.’ The ‘beauty myth,’ as she termed it, is also a trigger for women’s dissatisfaction with their own bodies and constant attempts to correct them, which, according to Wolf, is ‘poisoning our freedom.’ In a culture that embraces the beauty myth, Russian women obediently and even passionately monitor themselves and other women in the mistaken belief that such surveillance over self and others is not an act of submission but rather a source of empowerment.

Two particular aspects of beauty routines are instructive for exploring the concept of power, as well as its possible contribution to our understanding of female beautification. These are a subject’s consent to complying with norms of beauty (self-surveillance) and their re-application of the same norms to other subjects. However, constant monitoring of the body — that for some women has to be constant and thorough — suggests not strength but insecurity, arising from granting the looking ‘other’ the right to judge one’s self. If the result of scrutinising one’s own body produces nothing but painful feelings of resentment and alienation, then it hardy differs from the objectification of the female body as a result of sexist attitudes. Moreover, an individual who

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1 I would like to acknowledge women who agreed to share their experiences with me as without their contribution my research would not be possible. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose comments helped straighten crucial arguments presented in this paper. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my supervisors Kerreen Reiger and Anastasia Powell from La Trobe University.

2 For a preliminary study, twelve women have been interviewed. They were born in the 1950-60s in various locations in the Soviet Union and (except for one) currently reside and work in Moscow. All participants have children and are married, divorced or widowed.

3 Although I refer to those publications to support my arguments, they are not a primary focus of this paper.


7 Ibid.
performs routines to meet feminine beauty standards is likely to reinforce their validity through her approving or disapproving attitudes towards the appearance of other women. These expectations are especially common where the practices of beauty care are perceived as intrinsically feminine. A link to gender identity is a particularly strong ‘naturaliser’ of beauty norms (for example, the notion that ‘women naturally strive to be beautiful’). An analysis of female beautification thus maps out power as a mixture of unequal gender relations (domination/subordination) and an individual experience of embodying a symbolic privilege over others.

Bourdieu’s usage of habitus emphasises an individual’s embodiment of a symbolic privilege. One of Bourdieu’s main arguments is that social stratification is reproduced through the bodily practices of individuals that are heavily guided by dominant norms within a certain milieu (or social field). Although Bourdieu mainly explores the distinction of classes, his idea that ‘different conditions of existence produce different habitus’ can also be applied to gender. Consequently, if men and women live in different, unequal conditions, then their habitus differs. One of the definitions of habitus given by Bourdieu in Distinction is ‘a system of practice-generating schemes,’ or a structure that organises practices and the perception of practices. Accordingly, we can hypothesise that practices like beautification, in their gender-specific forms, may reveal the unequal conditions of existence between for men and for women. As Sandra Lee Bartky points out, analysis of the media suggests that much simpler grooming routines are enough for men (soap, water, shaving) but not for women. She goes on to argue that disciplinary practices — such as dieting, exercising and making up — produce the ideal feminine body, one to which ‘an inferior status has been subscribed.’ In addition, the media images suggest to women that they can never measure up to the promoted ‘ideal’ of beauty and femininity.

In his book Masculine Domination, Bourdieu asserts that women’s subordinate position in society is reflected in their habitus. In his opinion, female habitus is an embodiment of ‘the limiting case of the universal experience of the body-for-other’ which is ‘constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and the discourse of others’. In a sense, as women’s lives are restricted by gender inequality, so are their bodies by gender norms (normative femininity). Moreover, gender specific practices reinforce the split into two limiting categories of male or female and sustain imbalanced power relations between them.

Cultural capital is another of Bourdieu’s concepts that is useful in analysing normative feminine beauty and attendant beauty practices. Broadly speaking, cultural capital refers to resources that can assist an individual in achieving their goals, which can be ‘linked to the body, and presupposes embodiment’. In addition, there is an embodied state of cultural capital whose accumulation requires ‘an investment,’ primarily of time. Such cultural assets can be ‘converted’ into other forms of resources, namely social and economic capital. Adopting this language of exchange or barter, we can say that female beauty is cultural capital which requires the investment of time and energy. Besides, in consumer-oriented societies, ‘looks’ considered beautiful can be exploited for significant economic gain.

In a society where the beauty myth flourishes and women in general are subjected to subordination, beauty as cultural capital becomes a principal or, in some cases, the only significant resource available to women to achieve their goals or to negotiate their rights and interests. Accordingly, the homogeneity of beauty standards further limit the lives of ‘women’ as they often struggle to live up to dominant ideals. These norms of feminine beauty impose two main constraints on women. Firstly, an attractive and groomed body becomes one of the most significant resources available to women. Cultural capital based on beauty values, more so than social or economic capital, is supposedly accessible for the majority of women. Secondly, beauty as a narrow standard encourages a kind of reductionism, one whose maintenance requires constant investment of material and emotional resources.

In The Beauty Myth (1991), Naomi Wolf asserts that in patriarchal societies, women are encouraged to expend their energy and time on maintenance of an attractive appearance. Wolf insists that despite the myth that beauty is about the celebration of women as well as intimacy, sex and life, it is rather ‘composed of emotional

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9 Sandra Lee Bartky, Femininity and Domination (New York: Routledge, 1990), 71.
12 Ibid.
distance, politics, finance and sexual repression. Women’s demands for equality pose a threat to the status quo of masculine privilege as more equal gender relations automatically turn women into capable competitors. This is undesirable for men who benefit from what R. W. Connell terms ‘patriarchal dividend’ or an ‘advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order.’ Since women started entering professional fields previously dominated by men, the grip of the beauty myth has become tighter.

In Russia, as the country was undergoing transition from communism to capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet state, most of the state’s assets were privatised and men in privileged positions in business were able to exploit their status and personal relationships for financial and social gain. At the same time, women’s access to business and politics was obstructed, mainly by gender bias. Gender analysis of labour markets and living standards in the 1990s shows a massive ‘feminisation’ of poverty and unemployment around the country. In the first post-Soviet decade, when the unemployment rate sky-rocketed due to the privatisation or liquidation of formerly state-run organisations, women constituted 70-80% of all unemployed. As unwanted rivals for men in the labour market, women were denied employment on the basis of their gender. In 1991, the first English-speaking Russian newspaper, The Moscow Times wrote: ‘Russia’s labour minister turned back the clock ... with a startling official message for working women: Stay at home, raise children, keep house - and leave the other jobs to men.’

The call for women to return to their traditional responsibilities as mothers and housekeepers coincided with the emergence of new representations of femininity. A renewed cultural representation of femininity was linked to a free expression of sexuality. Femininity was to be concentrated in and shown through the body—slim, groomed and sexy. More than in past decades, a feminine look with a hint of (supposed) sexual liberation was highlighted as a must to achieve and maintain. In Russia in the 1990s, as in western countries, the discourse of women’s sexual liberation was taken to an extreme that hardly benefited women. It was initially claimed by feminist activists in the 1960s and 70s — primarily in the UK, America and Australia — that sexual liberation was about women’s rights, claiming that sexual pleasure was not an exclusively male domain, and something that women should also experience. It also fore-grounded women’s right to deny unwanted sex and claim back her body from the social institutions that had power to generate knowledge about the female corporeality, including medicine, marriage, legal constraints (including those to do with reproduction), and religious practices.

In the 1990s, however, women’s sexuality was framed in a way that, rather than proving to be empowering, revealed the strongly misogynistic values entrenched in Russian culture. Studies of film and literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s reveal an idealisation of prostitution. A common trope in films, such as Intergirl (1989) and Brother (1997), depicted the Russian prostitute providing services for foreigners. In fact, while women’s trade of their bodies was valorised by authors and directors, many young Russian women fled overseas in search of a better life, only to become entrapped in the web of international sex trafficking. Moreover, women facing unemployment were encouraged to sell their beauty by participating in competitions like ‘The Miss Bust,’ pornographic modelling or ‘hostessing’ at night clubs. Another industry that took advantage of the political and economic crisis in the country was fashion and modelling. One of the first women’s glossy magazines, Russian Cosmopolitan, invited young girls (14-21) from around the country to try their luck in becoming a star of the podium. Promotion of modelling among young women in the media coincided with regular usage of images of naked female bodies in advertisements for a diverse range of goods and services.

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14 Ibid., 12.
16 Anastasia Posadskaya and others at the Moscow Gender Centre (Eds.), Women in Russia: A New Era in Russian Feminism (London; New York: Verso, 1994).
22 Azhgikhina and Goscilo, 116-117.
Feminists have argued that an employment of overtly sexualised female bodies in advertising has led to the commodification of the female body. In Russia, this argument includes more than simply visual images of women in certain poses and dress (or without it). While images themselves undoubtedly promote particular notions about what ‘a woman’ is and looks like, these notions are complicated by gender power relations in society. As materialist feminists have argued, in order to understand ‘what it is to be a man or a woman is to grasp the social relations involved.’ As will be discussed further below, comments of women interviewed for this study illustrate this line of argument. While discussing their beauty practices and evaluating the grooming work of others, they inevitably touch upon gender disparity in expectations towards appearance and social roles played by men and women. For instance, one respondent recalled that the director of the kindergarten she used to work at prohibited female teachers to wear pants as ‘there is an image of a teacher as a person in a skirt.’

On the other hand, new representations of femininity were linked to the upward social mobility that became a goal for many Russians, especially among the younger segments of the population. Hence their special concern with appearance which, according to Bourdieu, is characteristic of the middle classes who are ‘especially anxious’ about their ‘body-for-others.’ The two main possibilities for women to achieve financial security and to afford care for the body were to become a business woman and to marry a successful entrepreneur. Images in magazines depicted women who could afford care for the self. An increased availability of cosmetics and other means of grooming were combined with the mediatised promotion of a homogeneous ideal of feminine attractiveness. Models in advertisements for make-up and attire demonstrated a body supposedly brought to its perfection with help of all these goods.

In post-Soviet Russia, a sudden growth of conspicuous consumption and the increasing valorization of individuality promoted the idea of individual responsibility and reward for the investment in one’s appearance, or their ‘body project.’ This trend of body consciousness—picked up by Russia’s nouveau riche—is described by Bourdieu in his reflection upon the French bourgeoisie. He writes, ‘everything seems to indicate that the concern to cultivate the body appears, in its elementary form – that is, as the cult of health – often associated with aesthetic exaltation of sobriety and controlled diet, in the middle classes.’ Indeed, embodied symbolic supremacy that shows in one’s habitus can be used to describe a belief that a groomed appearance emulating current beauty ideals privileges an individual over others who cannot afford to equally invest in their looks. A groomed appearance and access to professional beauty services became signs of wealth and self-mastery in post-Soviet Russia. Russian men were also encouraged to attend to their bodies with the help of beauty products and regimens. Although care of the body for men was seen as an essential part of business etiquette, before the nuances of the art of grooming were learnt, the new Russian rich (who were predominantly male) used the body to display one’s wealth.

For women, however, social re-evaluation of ‘good looks’ was formulated in terms of empowerment. Women’s magazines promoted an idea that a woman who cares for her body loves herself and is loved by others. The more effort and patience required by certain regimes, the more praised the individuals who performed them. The message sent to the readership of women’s press can be cruelly summarised as one in which mental and physical strength was measured by lost kilograms and spent calories; and one’s personality or authenticity was expressed in cosmetics and the clothes one wore. A definition of self-improvement was formulated in terms of appearance that showed signs of the application of certain beauty products and performance of certain regimens.

In the interviews I undertook with Russian women, most interviewees suggested that beautification is a means to replicate and present to society an idealized image of the self. The body subjected to a careful grooming becomes a medium of communicating this self-image in social interactions and earning respect from others. One respondent, a 43 year old dance teacher, explained that, as her work involved physical activity, she had to be particularly careful about the body scent: ‘Gosh, never must there be any smell [coming from my body]!’ In her view, a slim, odour-free body and groomed appearance were an essential part of her professionalism. In her account, the media ideal of a somewhat sterilised female body—hairless, scentless and fatless—appears transferred into her success as a teacher and a mentor for the students.

It becomes clear that the discourse of women’s empowerment, firstly through political activism and the right to participate in decision-making along with men (as a general group), has been replaced by the narrow notion of what can be termed grooming-power. In the introduction to New Femininities, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff direct our attention to the recent trend in academic writing where women are increasingly depicted as

23 Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, Theorizing Gender (Cambridge: Polity, c2002), 68.
24 Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction, 211.
25 Ibid.

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autonomous, agentic and empowered subjects.' However, in the context of a consumption-centred culture, the agency of women is formulated exclusively in terms of an ability to choose one beauty product from a range of similar others.

Advertisements promoting the value of a neo-liberal economy and heightened individuality tell potential consumers a story of self-perfection and, not less importantly, of pleasure derived from the perfected self and positive evaluations of it by others. Gill and Scharff note that individualism is at the heart of neo-liberalism as well as of post-feminism, having ‘almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves.’ In other words, if women are seen as agents who make free choices to subject themselves to dieting, excessive exercising or plastic surgeries, then it is solely their responsibility if they cannot match current ideals of beauty and suffer from hate towards their bodies.

The women interviewed expressed attitudes towards their ‘looks’ where self-admiration is interchangeable with admiration by the ‘other.’ One respondent commented: ‘A woman wants ... what was that saying? A woman is lit by the reflecting flame. If a woman sees that a man likes her chubby, then she won’t torture herself. If he doesn’t like her chubby she attempts to ... take some measures.’ Perception of the self through the eyes of others is also echoed in advertisements where positive evaluation of appearance as part of social interaction is mediated by promoted beauty products. A poster for a hair dye, depicting a man hugging and looking at a woman whose eyes are directed at the viewer, concurrently states: ‘We are both in love with this colour.’ In other instances, there is a direct link between the three parties—a woman, a beauty product she wears and an imaginary other who is delighted by her beauty. Commercial jingles of mascara by Maybelline New York in Russian, for instance, sing: ‘Everyone is delighted by you and you are delighted by Maybelline.’ These and other promotional materials promote a circumscribed vision of the self and engagement with others that are reduced to fixation on the façade of the body.

The social categorisation of gender, and the norms that undergird gender divisions, are not foreordained characteristics of human culture. The question of one’s compliance with norms that may be disadvantageous involves an investigation of the legitimisation of those norms. As Bourdieu insists, symbolic power cannot exist without it being legitimised by the dominated. In other words, the dominated have to accept as legitimate their own subordinate condition. One’s acceptance of gender regulations, perhaps apart from the fear of being socially ill-defined as either a man or a woman, is conditioned by a cultural mechanism that incorporates norms into one’s body and identity through various disciplinary practices. Gradually, the conscious and repetitious performance of bodily movements, in accordance with gender norms, shifts to the realm of subconscious and a practice becomes a bodily habit, a part of one’s habitus.

Adopting a perception of the individual’s interaction with gender norms as travelling back and forth between awareness and unawareness may help us understand a tension that seems to occur when women are conscious of their subordination and yet respond by justifying it. In the interviews, for instance, despite sharing their experiences of gender discrimination, like the gender pay gap or sexual harassment, women try hard to find justifications for such unfair treatment. One respondent recalled being hailed by a stranger in a car while waiting for a friend on the side of the road, or being ‘scanned’ by a man who entered the elevator. Admitting that, in general, women in Russian society are perceived as ‘an object,’ she believed that men needed to be taught that a woman is ‘also a human and not simply some toy.’ However, objectification of the female body was immediately romanticised, possibly to sweeten a bitter reality: ‘Like a flower in nature ... a woman is a decoration of human society.’

Moreover, it seems that objectification of the female body has become so deeply rooted in the gender identity of Russian women that the lack of an approving gaze and/or commentary upon one’s appearance generates self-doubt concerning one’s femininity. Consequently, women’s self-esteem seems to become mainly based upon their ability to attract as much positive attention as possible. To be a body-for-other seems like a skill to be mastered, not a form of domination to resist. But their preoccupation with providing a pleasing appearance, for the gaze of others, seems to outweigh the enjoyment of possible privileges derived from their beauty.

27 Ibid, 7.
While it is important to acknowledge an involvement of the unconscious in the process of one’s acceptance of dominant gender ideals, for my analysis here I have drawn also on theories that examine the conscious adaptation to and reproduction of social norms. Foucault’s idea of one’s internalisation of ‘inspecting’ gazes, to the extent of becoming ‘one’s own overseer,’ seems highly relevant to the analysis of female practices of self-monitoring and the reproduction of normative femininity through critical viewing of other women. However, as Bartky argues, along with other authors, although Foucault’s historical research concerning the operation of power provides feminists with an instrument of critical description of patriarchal exploitation of the female body, it reproduces ‘that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory’ as gender is totally dismissed. Bringing gender discourse into Foucault’s conceptualization of surveillance, Bartky opposes post-feminist arguments of free choice and defines as ‘disciplinary’ those bodily practices that are ‘imposed’ on women by the media and sellers of cosmetics.

In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault describes the process of internalisation or inhabitation of the gaze into one’s body. He argues that the gaze is so powerful an instrument of control that no physical or material means are necessary: ‘there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze.’ A culmination of incorporation or internalisation of the gaze is reached when an individual starts a voluntary exercise of surveillance ‘over and against’ the self. For Foucault, power over the body exercised through the gaze is a generative force: ‘subjects become formed out of the discourses in terms of which they come to understand themselves.’ This echoes Butler’s view that, once the social law is incorporated into a body, it is born as a cultural fantasy with the law inscribed ‘on’ and ‘through’ it. As a result, the law becomes an individual’s ‘essence’ of the self. Thus, if the law or the norm is the very ‘essence’ of self, a rejection of the law may be perceived by the subject as cultural suicide. Should this allegory be realistic, the subject’s submission to and legitimisation of gender norms among others can be seen as a strategy of cultural and social survival.

Foucault’s interiorising gaze has fairly clear common ground with Bourdieu’s analysis of the embodiment of gazes and discourses of others in female *habitus*. The gaze admittedly has power to objectify what it rests upon, the human body being no exception. In a patriarchal hierarchy of power, where men are superordinate to women, the gaze is merely assisting the exercise of an already existing domination, hence the concept of the ‘male gaze.’ The power over the body validated by the gaze, however, is not a privilege reserved for ‘the other.’ An individual who self-surveillances her body may feel that she has gained power over it. But in this case, the body is experienced as an object alienated from the self (the conscious ‘I’). Such a body is looked at from a distance and not felt or lived through. A disconnection from her body increases the subject’s sensitivity to discourses on what ‘the body’ in general is to be. The former is then given up for the latter, an idea or norm. In performing beauty practices, women anticipate being looked at by other individuals. They perceive their reflections in the mirror, imagining the reaction their bodies may produce in others’ gazes. For women, it is very common to believe that being looked at is essential to her sense of a feminine self. A 50 year old woman recalled with obvious pleasure how once, about two years prior to the interview, wearing a skirt revealing her legs, she was hailed by ‘a young boy’: ‘What legs!’ Such a comment, perceived in a positive light, seemed to compensate the respondent’s dissatisfaction with her body repeatedly expressed throughout the interview.

In their narratives, respondents, using different words, expressed the feeling of insecurity or anxiety about being seen by others if they were not satisfied with their reflections in the mirror. For these women, grooming seems to have a capacity to bring a comforting feeling of protection from disapproving gazes. The women interviewed spoke of comparing their reflections in the mirror with images they see on television, in magazines and in advertisement posters on public transport and billboards. Another 50 year old respondent described how, when scrutinising her face in the mirror, she unconsciously compares her reflection with glossy images in magazines: ‘For me this cult of youth is extremely hard. … It’s become not that easy to look at my face in the mirror. … I know that now I need to wear make-up to be at least a bit on the level of the gloss.’ The work of visual images on one’s imagining of self happens without being fully aware of it. A woman may know that she evaluates

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30 Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 65.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, 84.

herself against pictures of models, but the process of evaluation may go unnoticed. What is disturbing is that such comparisons often end with feelings of dissatisfaction with and hatred towards one’s own appearance and body. This ‘other,’ of pictures and texts, is desired. Women are perceived to strive to embody such ideals. The industry of plastic surgery, or ‘aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture,’ promotes a desire ‘of a fantasised image of oneself as free from the visible signs of temporality, discontinuity, and variance.’ But a belief in a possibility of embodying an image or a verbal description is a step towards alienation and denial of one’s body and self.

A mismatch with new standards of female beauty causes women a feeling of unease with their own bodies. They perform beauty practices to eliminate or disguise what are sometimes referred to as ‘defects’ in their bodies or appearance. If beauty promises a form of empowerment, it is obviously not a stable one. Like any other source of power, it has its limitations. But what is specific about the limitations of female power from beauty is that it becomes particularly unstable in the context of visual culture, in which the presence of ‘perfected’ visual images of other women is intensified. The fact that a certain look is a cultural norm becomes obvious to an individual becomes particularly unstable in the context of visual culture, in which the presence of ‘perfected’ visual images of other women is intensified. The fact that a certain look is a cultural norm becomes obvious to others – indicates the seriousness with which women take norms of the ageing dress-code, and there are often presented in the media (especially women’s press) as the two greatest enemies that women are treated it like that.

Images and characters are thrown around like toys in a play room and every time her attention wanders, one of those images is likely to catch her eye. It is supposedly left up to oneself to decide what to do with it, but images are constructed more and more frequently in consultation with the latest findings in neuroscience. Apart from images, there are words in the media that constantly remind the reader of bodily abnormalities that require correction in order to get closer to the ideal. There are also words and gazes of people around her. These images, words and gazes have their own power to convey to a woman what she has to do with her body to be ‘ideal,’ to have a right to claim her membership in the club of ‘women.’ But only ‘beautiful’ women are highly valued and praised. Women, whose appearance is far from the normative prescriptions of the beauty ideal, are ostracised as not being feminine enough. If it is correct that, as Bourdieu believes, a woman is likely to perceive her body exactly the way that she thinks others perceive it, then she is also likely to see her body as an object should others treat it like that.

Most significantly, the gaze is disseminated; one’s own beauty practices correlate with one’s assessment of other women’s looks. What a woman does to her body, face and hair is expected to be seen on the bodies of other women. Those who fail to demonstrate signs of the performance of the same routines are subjected to a negative evaluation. What seems interesting is that one’s experience of insecurity caused by, for instance, lack of make-up or too tight a skirt does not encourage more understanding towards other women. Rather, this anxiety or grip of the ‘beauty myth’ pushes women to be harsher on themselves and, as if by chain reaction, on others who happen to be of the same gender as themselves. The more controversial cultural messages about what it is to be feminine and beautiful, the sharper one’s gaze is directed to oneself and other women.

In the interviews, for instance, participants express critical views of women who fail to care for their appearance in an age-appropriate manner and, as a result, the appearance itself. They seem to be extremely cautious in following what I term the ageing dress-code. The same ‘code’ is at work when one woman observes another. Particularly harsh criticism is directed towards women who attempt to preserve a youngish look through wearing clothes that are designed for younger women and, thus, expose the ‘defects’ of ageing bodies. A 50 year old respondent commented in a rather irreconcilable manner on the attire of two other women she observed on a trip on public transport: ‘[there were] two “aunties” over 35 wearing tight pants. Oh, my gosh, it’s so ugly! They’re clothes for young women, tight pants! You can wear them up till 18 ... but not at 35!’ Ageing and fat are often presented in the media (especially women’s press) as the two greatest enemies that women are encouraged to fight. Intolerance of other women’s ‘blissness towards “ugliness” – that which is perceived to be obvious to others – indicates the seriousness with which women take norms of the ageing dress-code, and there is no space for questioning the norm.

Women who present no signs of typical female grooming are, furthermore, denied their very femininity, but this denial comes from one’s own fear that her femininity might potentially be cast into doubt. Another 50 year old

37 Bourdieu, Masculine Domination, 63-64.
38 The retirement age of 55 years old can be said to largely determine a cultural definition of an ‘old’ age for women.
The interviewee strongly believes that, for women, a loss of femininity is 'a fiasco.' This woman felt that femininity is exhibited in the way a woman walks, dresses, holds her body, interacts and even looks at others, or in Bourdieu’s term, in her female **habitus**. She critically calls one of her colleagues ‘a semi-butch’ as she demonstrates no visible results of typical female grooming: '[she] never wears make-up ... I never saw her wearing a skirt.' These criticisms reflect what seems central to this woman’s own gender identity: ‘I can’t step outside of the house without applying make-up.’ The critique of other women’s attire or make-up is thus an attempt to impose an homogeneous vision of feminine beauty. These respondents want to reassure themselves and others that their interpretation of the notion of femininity is correct and the one who presents a different interpretation has got it wrong. In a sense, it is a comparative claim to power. But that power is needed mainly to avoid an impression of oddness in their personal interpretation of gender norms. Since the desire to be beautiful is instilled in women from their childhood as an essential part of their gender identity, they thus see beautification as the main resource to use to achieve their goals and lobby their interests.

**CONCLUSION**

The post-Soviet period has seen the introduction of a new beauty ideal, promoted in the media by numerous shows, publications and advertisements, electrical and print, that show Russian women how they could and should appear. This paper has engaged with issues of power as they relate to changing gender norms in a context marked by the transition to a market economy. Yet this has tended to exacerbate the inter-gender power disparities, since women were encouraged to pursue a beauty ideal— that is, to become beautiful objects, and exacerbate intra-gender competition between women who constantly compare and contrast themselves against others and an often unattainable ideal.

Analysis of the interview data and theoretical material has shaped my perspective, bringing it very close to Bartky’s position. That is, without careful examination, it is easy to overlook the difference in degree and intensity with which idealised images are forced on minds and bodies of men and women. The latter receive much more attention from marketers. Moreover, in line with Gill and Scharff’s warning, I believe that an overt emphasis on the rhetoric of ‘choice,’ and the celebration of freedom of choice, is likely to lead to a total dismissal of the operation of gender power politics that largely contribute to the disproportional pressure on women to discipline their bodies and minds for the sake of the normative feminine ‘beauty.’

Synthesis of Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and **habitus**, with that of self-surveillance from Foucault, helped tease out one of the important arguments manifested in the interview data. That is, in a patriarchal society with domination of neo-liberalism, normative feminine beauty operates in a similar manner to the controlling and normalising gaze, but its operation is even more subtle. Women, who embody unequal gender dispositions engendered in cultural ideals of femininity, see their groomed appearance as an element (embodied cultural capital) that either fully substitutes or increases the value of other types of capital available to them. The pressure of normalising beauty forces women to constant self-surveillance over the body in search of ‘defects.’ In a sense, women resist such pressure partly by pushing it off onto other women.