Is “Beautiful Female Something” Symbolic Capital or Symbolic Violence? That Is a Question

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Abstract
The rationale for this article derives from a personal anecdote embedded within the challenging discourse of endeavoring to identify and attach meaning to the concept of a “beautiful female something.” The focused analysis provided here about this stereotypical label reveals a dimension of patriarchal chauvinism that directs the way in which the interpretation of a “beautiful female something” can become socioculturally and universally entrenched. This article expands this concept by stating that the proliferation of this label can be traced in large part to the power pathology of a burgeoning social media that exploits the concept of beauty to the advantage of global consumerism. Developing the analytic articulation found within Bourdieu’s capitals theory, this study contends that the label of a “beautiful female something” functions as both a modality of symbolic capital and symbolic violence. The article ends with a discussion of this paradox and proposes to analyze the covert social mechanisms and conflicting forces that underpin the exploitation of consumerist approaches to female beauty across the globe.

Keywords
“beautiful female something,” media power, consumerism, symbolic capital, symbolic violence

Introduction: The Anecdote and the Research Question
This article commences with a bizarre situation I recently experienced when I reached out to the social network within my Chinese community in Australia, in the hope of recruiting participants for my PhD project. Although recruitment flyers had been initially disseminated widely, I received significantly fewer replies than I expected. One of my Chinese friends, who is also doing a PhD in Australia, jokingly suggested that the introductory sentence in the recruitment could be rephrased from “A Chinese doctoral candidate is searching for interviewees” to “A beautiful female Chinese doctoral candidate is searching for interviewees.” Although I doubted its efficacy, I decided out of curiosity to pilot this proposal in my friend’s university, circulating the same flyer throughout its PhD Association that incorporated its WeChat community of Chinese students. The recruitment contained the same information in it, with the exception of the words “beautiful female.” The consequence came as a surprise when in the next hour, three initiatives were made by respondents who expressed their willingness to partake in the study. This was an impressive outcome, given that the total number of potential interviewees secured using four to five universities generated no more than eight volunteers, despite the efforts I made over the course of the previous month. Perhaps one could explain the discrepancy as just as hasty; and unconvincing causality between the proposal and the consequence of increasing the number of interviewees can thus be judged as nothing more than a “coincidence.” Yet, the disparity of response between the two situations reminded me of the power of labels alluding to beautiful women. For example, a “beautiful female PhD,” a “beautiful female teacher,” or even a “beautiful female writer” can draw immediate attention across the media of China. Moreover, the contemporary West also witnesses an escalation of the disciplining and aestheticizing of women’s bodies (Gill, 2007). I believe that there is an element in this scenario that could be construed as a social phenomenon. Further reflection kindled my interest that I need to conceive a research question anchoring this study: how should the label of a “beautiful female something” be conceptualized as a socioculturally constructed

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concept? Petty as this research topic may ostensibly appear to be, it is my belief that the social mechanisms and forces behind these covert dispositions are worth noticing and analyzing.

**Research Background: A “Beautiful Female Something” as Capitalized by the Media in the Era of Global Consumerism**

The subsequent elucidation develops around seeking answers to the preceding question. Drawing from Bourdieu’s sociological theory as a theoretical framework, the analysis is embedded in some of his salient ideas such as symbolic capital and symbolic violence. It is my hope that an application of Bourdieuan constructs can shed some light on the notion of a “beautiful female something” from a sociocultural perspective, and offer some thought-provoking ideas for similar variants in other cultural contexts. The article aspires to contribute some insightful scholarship to the underrated discussion of the various roles socially assumed by the female body that currently remains as a site of multiple contestations. What is needed here is a better comprehension of the interplay of discourse on female beauty, the media that describes them, the dimensions of female power, and aspects of global consumerism that can either enhance or diminish their integrity.

Since this piece takes a sociocultural lens, I aver that it should first necessitate a synopsis of the embeddedness of the proliferation of this label within the current milieu. I contend that the penetration of this label is inextricably intertwined with the unbridled commitment of the media and global consumerism, which together breeds the requisite social forces and mechanisms for acceptance and favorable flourishing of this notion.

The label of a “beautiful female something” has been construed as a catchy notion promulgated by the media to create a “drip-drip effect” on how the public construct their outlook on the female body. As a principal social agent in many societies (López-Guimerà, Levine, Sánchez-carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010), the media has always occupied a critical role in cultural production and maintenance, the discourse of which becomes increasingly a mainstream or authoritative discourse instituted as a legitimate point of view that members within a definite society recognize as common sense (Bourdieu, 1989). The media aim to achieve a social consensus that elevates the value of the female body by virtue of the commercial process of the aestheticization of its public appearance. The driving force is global consumerism whose epistemological underpinning is entrenched through an inexhaustible implanting of the media forces of power that instill the legitimacy of becoming a beauty, while seeking an understanding that the female body is not a fixed biological essence but a lifestyle choice through ever renewed purchase.

With the connivance of advertising, the major vehicle to publicize the ideology of consumerism, the media has destabilized the mechanism via which to evaluate the usability and significance of products, be they tangible or intangible. By attaching marks and connotations to products advertised, the value of products has been inextricably intertwined with their artificial associations. That being so, our consuming practices mirror a life style which is conjectured and promoted by the media that stimulates our enthusiasm to purchase via the incessant attachment of new meanings to products. The proliferation of a “beautiful female something” exemplifies how the media has created and maneuvered the idealized construction and portrayal of the “shoulds, oughts, and musts” of a woman’s body (Nagar & Virk, 2017) by validating the association between value of the woman and their looks facilitated by the consumption of beauty products and services. Even in China, women are hypnotized by the media to be worshippers and practitioners of standardized female beauty increasingly produced by the cosmetic industry originated from the West, currently spreading widely across the world with the flourish of globalization (Leslie, 1995). The media has homogenized our conceptualization of female beauty and augmented the concept that the notion of idealized body can be realized with ever reviving lustrous goods and services. Since economic interests are to be sustained, the only way to preserve the idealized body proliferated by the media is to rely on renewing oneself through a continuous consumption.

In aggregate, this part has touched on the milieu in which the label of a “beautiful female something” exists. Casting light on some sociocultural contributors to the prevalence of this label, it situates the following elucidation of the ramifications of this label within a macro context that explains its being and becoming. Referring to some of Bourdieu’s pertinent ideas, the next part will delineate how this label can be constructed as symbolic capital and symbolic violence.

**Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence**

Since this piece approaches the research question from a sociocultural lens, Bourdieu’s theoretical underpinnings emphasizing all practice as distinctly social (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008) offers a framework for the following analysis to develop. As proposed by Bourdieu, capital theory is widely acclaimed and applied in the context of sociological scholarship. According to Bourdieu (1986), capital refers to objectified or embodied forms accumulated in social space with the potential to produce profits and to reproduce itself. Challenging the myopia of viewing capital solely as monetary assets, Bourdieu (1986) introduced four forms of capital termed as: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

The total volume and distribution of these factors contribute to the hierarchical position of an individual in social
space (Bourdieu, 1989). While economic capital refers to assets directly and indirectly pertinent to money and may be institutionalized as property rights, cultural capital can take its forms as an embodied state of dispositions of the mind and body. It also includes the objectified state of cultural goods and the institutionalized state of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). For social capital, it is linked with resources that one can mobilize as a member of a group established on the basis of institutionalized acquaintance and recognition. The last form is symbolic capital, referring to various forms of capital when they are perceived as a modality of legitimate recognition and prestige (Bourdieu, 1986). Given that symbolic capital is perceived to be of particular relevance to discussions herewithin, more elaborations deserve to be made concerning this concept.

Symbolic capital is intimately associated with the notion of distinction resulting from the deliberated accumulation of three other types of capital, as well as the exhibition, intentional or not, of it (Ceron-Anaya, 2010). By means of “imposition of the legitimate principle of vision and division” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 20), it can be institutionalized by the normalization, internalization, and legitimization of social customs and rules serving to augment hierarchical status. Bourdieu further elaborates the character of these different facets “as permanent and founded in nature, certain de facto differences, and by establishing mechanisms destined to assure their perpetuation” (p.337). Since individuals are endowed with and capable of producing capital that comes in varying amounts and forms, the embodied symbolic capital of honor and prestige also differs, emanating among individuals and groups discernible cleavages that stratify dominant and subjugated classes. However, while a stratified social structure provides actors with guidelines in terms of ways to perceive and act, the power differentials of it are in everlasting fluidity and transmutation as the dominant class strives to optimize their vested interests, whereas the dominated will endeavor to supplement their meager assets. This process of consolidation of social structure occurs at the interplay of productivity, exchangeability, and convertibility of capital. For example, a trajectory to obtain a doctorate degree can be seen as a means to obtain the institutionalized form of cultural capital that can be converted into economic capital as one uses it to get employed. The economic capital that a tycoon boasts can be possibly translated into symbolic capital as he or she devotes a certain amount of money to humanitarian or charitable activities. In the same vein, the label “beautiful female something” as a symbolic capital of recognition has the potential to be turned into social capital when a woman takes advantage of her female attractiveness to secure more social resources.

Another concept pertinent to the discussion herein is symbolic violence, which according to Bourdieu (2001) refers to “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and recognition (more precisely, misrecognition), cognition, or even feeling” (pp. 1-2). Within this notion, violence denotes the subordination of individuals and groups enacted by differential power hierarchies. However, unlike those violence types resorting to physical force, it being symbolic resides in the sense that it is established via the unnoticed domination without explicit force or coercion during the social habits that are manifest every day. This phenomenon is more of an organic process whereby individuals internalize perceptions and acts through their experience of socialization and come progressively to develop taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving (Connolly & Healy, 2004). This experience also reflects a process of socialization that is “issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21). Put simply, symbolic violence occurs arising from the misrecognized naturalization when the dominated accept and apply the point of view of the dominant (Bourdieu, 2001). As such, the violence is enacted upon a social agent with his or her complicity that inversely reinscribes the domination (Clark, 2004).

As noted previously, it is clear that philosophical rumination concerning beautiful women could serve to provide sociocultural insights that enlighten other contexts where the value of female bodies is constructed and adapted by sociocultural conventions. Philosophical perspectives can reflect the subtleties of the embodiment of female capital by way of consumerism. Such approaches afford instrumentally beneficial interpretations of female beauty and can signal signs of situational contexts of violence against women, which are intrinsically subjugating, denigrating, and potentially life threatening. Bourdieu’s two concepts will serve as an analytic framework within which the elucidation of a “beautiful female something” can be conceptualized dualistically as both symbolic capital and symbolic violence, based on the era of consumerism in which the media plays a key role.

Analysis

A “Beautiful Female Something” as a Modality of Symbolic Capital

I shall now elaborate on how the notion of a “beautiful female something” could be understood as a modality of symbolic capital. My basic investigation starts with consolidating the notion of beauty as a form of well-acclaimed distinction regarding which women can more readily access the opportunities afforded to them by way of their own beauty. The media plays out a twofold role in this process. On one hand, it spares no efforts in circulating ads related to aesthetic values in idealized images of female beauty, thus revering it as a standardized perfect goal for women to pursue and possess. On the other hand and by the same token of countless ads, it champions the magic of cosmetics, high fashion bags, elite apparel, accessories, and so on in transforming the beauty of an ordinary woman into an
extraordinary one. It is the media that conspires to fantasize that this distinction is attainable in order that female consumers are well positioned to follow its lead. Consequently, the comprehensive template of a beauty is constructed and promoted by the media imagery, and the beauty of femininity is increasingly exposed and professionally displayed as artifice and performance in various types (Grogan, 1999).

In Bourdieu’s conceptual world, all cultural symbols and practices “embody interests and function to enhance social distinctions” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). The label “beautiful female something” as a cultural symbol reveals how women have been disciplined by the media to pursue levels of social distinction in terms of inscribed properties such as beautiful skin tones, body shapes, elegant clothing, and temperament. When beautiful women are recognized and accepted as legitimate, they function as a form of symbolic capital providing prestige and sociocultural distinction.

Furthermore, with the “accumulation and distribution of attention” (van Krieken, 2012, p. 55), beautiful women have been created and exploited by the media as a symbolic capital with a potential convertibility into other forms of capital. The label is to a great extent an oxymoronically abstract idea in which social connotations are embedded within ever changing value frameworks. The concept of beauty is physically and socially delimited and envisaged, not only manifesting looks, postures, temperament, and other overt favorable features but also registering covert messages of the financial status, lifestyle, upbringing, educational experience, and so on that shape and inform the communicative pathways of various forms of capital that an individual ultimately expresses and possesses. The investment into becoming and being a beautiful female by means of clothes, cosmetics, accessories, books, travels, body management, and so on incorporates the investment into a diversity of capital as materialized by any attempt to favor them. Moreover, the entitlement to a beauty delineates more than an innate physiological description but also the social construction of an honorable life. The value system to obtain it seems to be “the product of a more or less conscious pursuit of the accumulation of symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 16).

Overall, the media internalizes the beauty ideal by setting the current standards of beauty as real and normative (López-Guimerà et al., 2010) under the all-inclusive label of a “beautiful something.” As evinced by previous studies, the entitlement to a female beauty may equate to a shortcut to benefits in diverse social arenas, such as the attainment of more economic income (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003) and more favorable social reviews (Langlois et al., 2000). When a society is molded by the media to be a fervent supporter of a “beautiful female something” and subsequently gives the green light to its bearers in the job market, business transactions, social interactions, and so on the mania turns out not to be incomprehensible. In addition, it is by this notion that the world of beauty becomes analogous to a quarry with sizable symbolic capital to be capitalized, which is too tempting to be refused for many.

A “Beautiful Female Something” as a Modality of Symbolic Violence

The etiology of a “beautiful female something” as a modality of symbolic violence starts with its epistemological underpinning of subordinating the female body as an object whose value is subject to aesthetic benchmarks stipulated by the media. We are living in an age when the media rarely, if ever, shows any inclination of decline in crafting topics relevant to body consumption, normalizing, or even venerating the pursuit of “visual effects” and “ornamental values” of the female body. Via the circulation and promotion of the media, consumerism stipulates and sells, in an inconspicuous manner, cultural norms that have never before emphasized and focused more determinately on aesthetic values of the female body that has become the main carrier of the insatiable desire for consumption. This is emphasized even more so with the advent of the electronic media, via which animated images have transformed the once abstract symbols in print media into visible stimuli which are so sensorily appealing, emanating consumers’ obsession with enchanting images. The logic behind this approach is profit-seeking, exploiting women as resources with potential economic benefits. During the process whereby women are objectified, they are rendered inferior, as their identity of a human must be represented by resorting to objects. When the purpose of manufacturing is not to meet our need for the value of products per se but to pursue the symbolic values attached to them as imposed by the media, the relationships between objects and humans is unavoidably and distastefully distorted.

The outcome diffuses consumerist trends whose socially legitimated forms of prestidigitation attach privilege to symbolic systems that maneuver customers into consumption activities which objectify women by commodifying them and the labels they embrace. In this regard, the perspective of assessing the value of the female body against meeting aesthetic expectations via consumption can equate to abhorrent symbolic violence in that the objectification is tantamount to subordination enacted through everyday consumption, in which no explicit force other than addictive gratification is entailed. This kind of voluntary objectification embodies what Bourdieu claimed that the dominated accept their condition of domination as legitimate and that they even themselves exercise it (Bourdieu, 1991). With the tacit consent of the dominant and the dominated, these taken-for-granted thoughts and practices of pursing aesthetic value of female body via consumption penetrate the fabric of society and assist in reinforcing the maintenance of power inequalities that subordinate women to objects.

Another dimension of this notion being symbolic violence is pertinent to the entrenched patriarchal ideology. The
media as a symbolic system that establishes itself as an “instrument of knowledge which exerts a structuring power” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79) has become an instrument of domination when the male-dominant ideology serving the particular interests of the male has been legitimized and institutionalized in such a way that it intimates that its rationale is to serve the universal interests, both of men and women. Albeit ostensibly not embodying the notion of subordinating women to men, it is from the angle of gaze that betrays its patriarchal kernel of sexualizing female bodies for visual appreciation, not least that of men’s. Resorting to the media, a “beautiful female something” label has been amplified and materialized, reinforcing the significance of women’s self-image management that manifests discipline and scrutiny embedded in a patriarchal ideology in which female bodies are to be expected and even formulated to be something worth appreciating. This process witnesses the idealized female image being shaped by a form of patriarchal domination that renders the benchmarks of beauty as being ontologically entangled.

By means of TVs, the Internet, magazines, films, and other forms of public discourse mechanisms, consumerist programs betray the patriarchal domination of objectifying the female body as a commodity with consumption values and saturate the society with this concept in an almost imperceptible transition without it being aware of it. The taken-for-granted aspirations for being a beauty, the constituents of which are dictated by the male-dominant ideology, also represent a process whereby females are being “othered.” When their behavioral and cognitive habits represent patriarchal ideals that dictate our society, it often does so in a furtively non-coercive and covert way. This being so, women are deprived of their right to an autonomous choice of whether or not and how their beauty should be used without being exploited. In essence, this misrecognition is naturalized arising from the dominance of patriarchy being implicitly accepted and internalized. As such, the “beautiful female something” label and its ramifications herein present themselves as a modality of symbolic violence enacted upon women with their subliminal complicity.

**Conclusion**

In many guises, the media has manifested itself as an ideal vehicle for the self-definition and dissemination of consumerism (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). The media power has elusively imposed its ideology on its audience by mainstreaming unformed values and concepts. Casting light on the notion of a “beautiful female something,” this article has illuminated how the media manipulates this label by means of recurrent circulation to legitimize its wide applicability within a number of diverse discourses.

This article has first endeavored to examine the milieu that defines the proliferation of a “beautiful female something.” It contends that this is attributed to the covert and overt power enterprises that exhort consumerism. Women are manipulated into acquiring a consumption propensity based on the notional interpretations of symbolic values attached to products per se, rather than the utility of these products. The media naturalizes and legitimizes the privilege of beauty and inculcates the patriarchal ideology that the female body is a lifestyle choice that can be bettered through incessant consumption of goods and services as recommended. That being so, in the symbolic world created by consumerism, women are deconstructed to be consumers indulging themselves in satiating their inexhaustible desire by following beauty practices as promoted by the media. In the midst of this process, there exists a gradual decline of autonomy of judgment that is ultimately tantamount to a risk of their personal and female value identification.

The rules for female beauty are culturally transmitted with the promulgation of standardized visual images in the form of social media icons (Bordo, 1989). A “beautiful female something” is a catchy phrase promulgated by the media, and it has a drip-drip effect on how the public constructs their outlook on the female body. Conceptualizing within Bourdieu’s framework, this article then analyses its ramifications from the perspectives of symbolic capital and symbolic violence.

Initially, the notion of a “beautiful female something” residing in a visualized combination of glamorous apparel purchased, slim body figure natured by fitness products, and impeccable face improved in beauty by cosmetics, and so on are solidified by the media as a form of a universally acclaimed distinction that women can reasonably obtain. The associative connotations of this label as related to an honorable life operate as symbolic capital that demonstrates the bearer as being in possession of various forms of capital. In addition, the fact that bearers of this label are being favored consciously or unconsciously in the job market, business transactions, or social interactions, as demonstrated by entitlement to more favorable opportunities indicates its convertibility into various forms of capital. It can be anything such as economic rewards, honorary recognition, or as illuminated in my case, returning more interview participants that on this point are social resources that could be mobilized.

Concurrently, this label also presents itself as a modality of symbolic violence, rendered by media forces that not only legitimize the objectification of women but also internalize and reinforce the patriarchal social structures that define the dominant ideology. Having been exposed to the scrutiny and discipline of the media that exact and normalize the aesthetic ideal for women, female bodies have been habituated to external regulation and subjection that transforms them into docile bodies (Foucault, 1979). Rather than being repressive, the power mechanisms that are driving the concept of beauty behind are constitutive (Bordo, 1989), with women willingly
accepting their being judged and defined referring to benchmarks set up mostly by the media and their male counterparts. When women are proactively and happily engaging themselves through everyday consumption in substantiating this male-dominant ideology, symbolic violence comes into existence. As Bordo (1989) has poignantly stated, “our contemporary aesthetic ideal for women . . . has become the central torment of many women’s lives . . . at the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death.” (p.14)

Having said all that, I believe the significance that the article aims to communicate transcends its elaboration on the minute personal anecdote and the “beautiful female something” notion. Manifesting the aestheticization of female bodies, the article also points to variants sharing the same philosophical underpinnings that are conspicuous in other cultures and societies in the global context. For example, the aspiration to pursue beauty ideals necessitates successes for women in Bulgaria (Ghodsee, 2007). In Japan, women engage themselves passionately in matching Westernized representations of beauty predominant in the Japanese media (Darling-Wolf, 2004). The quest for physical perfection of women as promoted by the media, however voluntary it might seem to be, manifests surveillance and scrutiny of the human body, in which is entrenched discipline and control. Women’s engagement in beauty practices is thus socially induced. In addition, as claimed by Stuart and Donaghe (2011), the engagement is socially consequential, deserving more scholarly attention to be paid to its wide ramifications. It is my belief that to reflect on the absurdity behind those taken-for-granted cognitions and give more voices to the discomfort, skepticism and unease behind this social phenomenon in various disguises across cultures and societies is the first step toward challenging the status quo of the power hierarchies entrenched within masculinized epistemology. Referring to personal experience and discussions, this article has never intended to offer hastily a right answer, if there is any, to the question proposed in the title. Is “beautiful female something” a symbolic capital or symbolic violence? That is still a question deserving more scholarship and rumination.

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