

The Beauty Myth in the Restaurant Industry

Elizabeth Horton

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Dr. Shane Elliott

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restaurant industry twists this idea and subjects women in particular to having to look beautiful and pleasing to be valued and respected. When getting ready for a shift, women manicure and make themselves as pretty as possible. Women in restaurants are jealous and rude to each other, usually over trivial things such as beauty and appearances at work. But why are women conditioned to look more young and beautiful while working at a restaurant than in other places of work, where the standard of beauty isn't as high? Women are subjected to the beauty myth at all times, but especially as a waitress, hostess or food runner in a restaurant. This is because to earn value, respect and money, women must sell their appearance to customers and coworkers alike.

I have worked at a very popular, touristy restaurant as a hostess, food runner, and waitress over the past few years since I was 16. When I started as a hostess, we had a slight dress code, but could wear whatever we wanted as long as we looked 'nice' and we weren't wearing casual clothes or jeans. I would wear dresses, skirts, and of course, makeup. There was never much of a problem with anyone underdressing, but if someone was wearing something scandalous, you could expect one of the older female workers to say something about it. The male managers would never say anything about the hostesses skirts being too short, an inch of their stomach showing, or their tops being low cut, but they would stare. As a food runner and waitress, we had a uniform of khaki shorts and a white button down. There was an expectation that we were to look put together and nice, but it was mainly directed towards women. Other female coworkers, especially the waitresses, really had a hand in how we were supposed to look, and when I got moved up to a waitress, as the youngest one, I followed their lead. Our hair had to be up and look nice and styled, makeup was beautifully done, large showy earrings were put in, perfume sprayed

tied around our waist. That was the customary everyday night shift routine of a waitress. At one point about a year ago, I mainly stopped wearing makeup in my everyday life, but every time I worked, I put makeup on. A few times I worked, I forgot my big hoop earrings, and I would actually make less money at work. I have never worn my glasses to work, as I didn't feel comfortable doing so.

Naomi Wolf, a prestigious American author, journalist and feminist, wrote her first book in 1991 called 'The Beauty Myth.' This book got a lot of attention with the public, and made Wolf a leader in the third wave of feminism that sparked in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Wolf writes that "We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth" (Wolf, 1991, p.10). In second wave feminism, which started after World War II, women fought for equal pay, legal rights, and equal education. In the 1980's feminism started to fragment. Women fought to break the feminine mystique, that they were content and fulfilled being stay at home wives and mothers. Wolf explains that feminist overtook the media and started to advertise dieting and beauty products, and started to depict the ideal woman as a youthful, beautiful model; moreover, this new media took over media depicting the feminine mystique of a stay at home mom and cleaning product advertisements. Wolf says that there has always been a beauty myth, but the "myth flourishes when material constraints on women are dangerously loosened" (Wolf, 1991, p.14). In this feminist movement that claimed liberation, women were just becoming more oppressed with the beauty myth. As media, mainly generated by men, became saturated with young, beautiful women, beauty standards became more specific, and more expected.

Though the beauty myth claims to be women's liberation, it is just sexual oppression and objectification of women. It puts women in constant competition with one another. This competition makes it difficult for women to form community, bonds and friendship with one another, thus allowing men more control. Wolf writes that “[the beauty myth] is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power” (Wolf, 1991, p.13). The beauty myth is a patriarchal oppression that keeps men in control, and women oppressed and in conflict with one another. The beauty myth requires that women look pretty, wear makeup, have neat pretty hair, dress flattering and overall look pleasing to the eye in order to gain respect, recognition, and acceptance from men and women alike.

The beauty myth affected how I and other women dressed at work as a hostess, food runner and server, as well as how I was perceived and treated while there. As a hostess, we were expected to dress to fit the beauty myth of young, sweet girls that welcomed you into the restaurant. We were prone to being more sexualized and hit on as hostesses, the youngest workers in the building, by much older coworkers and bosses, than in any other position. This is because in that position, we best fit the beauty myth and the ideal version of what a woman should look like, especially to men. As a hostess, we could wear almost anything we wanted, wear our hair down, and look beautiful under minimal uniform constraints. Because of this, hostesses were often put in competition with other female coworkers, as the beauty myth describes, when other female coworkers would scrutinize our outfits when we dressed too provocatively. It created a jealousy between women in the workplace because hostesses had no set uniform, but other coworkers had to dress in uniforms that weren't as pretty or pleasing to the

this, being a waitress and a hostess, and putting women down because of the competition of the beauty myth only allowed the men that worked there more control and power over us, and benefited them more. Male employees and managers would look or stare at young girls who fit the beauty myth sexually, objectifying them and enjoying what the beauty myth demands from young women. Waitresses and food runners didn't like how 'masculine' the uniforms were, and worked to make them more feminine and pretty. Doing things to make ourselves look more beautiful, such as caking on makeup, fake tanning, and wearing huge earrings, all played into the beauty myth to keep us in competition with one another and maintain our value and beauty in front of our coworkers while wearing a uniform. In addition to being subjected to the beauty myth in front of our male and female coworkers, we also were subjected to the beauty myth for our customers.

Wolf, in her book, wrote that the beauty myth can be seen as a form of currency. This idea really came to life as a female server. Waiters and waitresses make 99% of their money from tips. We are meant to serve customers and provide a good experience. Being a woman in this industry where we are paid according to how well liked and perceived we are by random people only causes women to play into the beauty myth even more. Customers usually don't get the chance to really know who you are as a person based on limited interaction, so our value as a server is based on our looks. Servers financially depend on how well they are valued and perceived, so as servers, we try to make ourselves as youthful, pretty and as pleasing to the eye as we possibly can. I have forgotten earrings before, made less money, and chastised myself because I didn't fit the beauty myth well enough, so I was less valued and less beautiful. Customers objectify female servers, seeing and treating us as just another pretty face, but being

allowed customers to value us based on our beauty, and allowed customers to feel comfortable sexualizing us because they were paying us in tips.

The beauty myth is a toxic standard for women where value is based upon appearances. In the restaurant industry, women are especially pressured to completely subject themselves to the beauty myth more so than in other jobs. Women are influenced to look their best, accessorize, wear makeup and make whatever they're wearing as feminine and flattering as possible. Being beautiful at work allowed coworkers and customers to value and respect us, while creating competition between women. The beauty myth tears down and objectifies women, while benefiting men who would sexualize and stare at us, enjoying the view of beautiful women. Many girls' first job is at a restaurant, and the majority of women working in restaurants are teenagers or in their 20s. These women already somewhat fit into the beauty myth, being youthful, young women; however, this creates more competition to stand out and be more beautiful than our coworkers. Women feel pressured to fit themselves into the beauty myth while working in restaurants; furthermore, at such an impressionable age, girls are conditioned to succumb to the beauty myth and their objectification earlier in life and to a much worse extent to be successful and accepted.