

ESZTERHÁZY KÁROLY UNIVERSITY

Doctoral School of History

Thesis of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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**TRENDY WOMAN IN THE SOCIALISM**

**Beauty Ideals and Beauty Habits in the Kádár-era**

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## **The topic of the dissertation**

My dissertation tried to explore the beauty care habits and possibilities of the modern woman of Kádár socialism and to present, in the context of the political, economic, and mental changes that have affected them. In addition, the dissertation dealt in detail with the state socialism characteristics of the Hungarian cosmetics service industry, presenting the different procedures and techniques, their changes as well as their socio-economic background. In parallel, I tried to explore the social, economic and mentality-historical connections between the changes in beauty care, hygiene, the female ideal / beauty ideal as a social construct, and the history of the beauty industry.

## **Objectives**

The main motivation of my dissertation was to introduce new aspects into the history of women and society of the studied period, as well as to break the stereotypes related to the cosmetic beauty industry. Furthermore, my work is to promote the history of beauty care as an integral part of the history of Hungarian society.

## **Research methods, resources**

My dissertation beyond the literature is based on extensive source processing.

In terms of written source material, I processed professional cosmetology textbooks, beauty care books for women, and household counselors published during the researched period. In the field of women's magazines, I processed the Women's Magazine (1956-1989), Women (1960-1972), Girls, Women (1972-1989), Youth Magazine (1965-1989), Ludas Matyi (1956-1989), This Fashion and all issues of Pesti Divat (1956-1989), focusing on columns on beauty advice, cosmetic commercials, and analyzing images of women on the front pages. In addition to women's magazines, I reviewed the wide range of dailies and magazines between 1956 and 1989 in the digital database of Arcanum and Hungaricana, especially those in which news and articles related to the cosmetics industry and beauty care could be found. As archival sources, I reviewed the material of the meetings of the Executive Committee of MSZMP (Hungarian

Socialist Workers' Party) of the Budapest Capital Archives between 1957 and 1989, especially the documents concerning the beauty industry.

I carried out material source exploration and collection work. My collections include cosmetics from the research period (soaps, face cream jars, lipsticks, etc.), beauty equipment (hairspray pump, eyelash brush, curlers, curling iron, etc.), cosmetic machinery, price lists, diaries, as well as privately owned photographs.

In addition to my own collection, I used the Hungarian Museum of Commerce and Tourism's "What does Jucika buy?" - the material of the exhibition entitled, the material and catalog of the exhibition Vienna Museum Mit Haut und Haar Frisieren, Rasieren, Verschönern, the exhibits of the Budapest Hairdressing Museum.

As a narrative source, I conducted interviews with contemporary beauty and fashion professionals, beauticians, well-known models, and contemporary young girls and women. Among the interview techniques, I used the semi-structured qualitative procedure during the focus group and individual in-depth interviews.

### **The structural setup of the dissertation**

My dissertation was divided into three main parts: "Changes in the Image of Women and the Beauty Ideal of Women", "Developments in the Cosmetics Industry and Cosmetic Practice (1956-1989)" and "Beauty and Hygiene", of which the middle block was the central theme of my research. In addition to the contemporary economic history analysis of the Hungarian beauty industry, I was deeply involved in describing / presenting cosmetic machines, tools and procedures, exploring the special opportunities of the shortage economy, presenting the everyday life of beauty industry units / shops and following the economic, social and mental history of the cosmetics profession. I placed special emphasis on the presentation of the paradigm shift that characterized the beauty care mentality of the Kádár era compared to the Rákosi era, which practically meant the "rehabilitation" of beauty and beauty care. With the previous chapter "Changes in Women's Images and Women's Beauty Ideals", I tried to present the kind of role construction model change that is periodically determined by political, economic, or even social changes and thus they can also influence beauty trends. After all,

beauty ideals are not essences that have existed since ancient times, but the same social constructions, such as values, that can vary from historical epoch to cultural as well as from culture to culture.

Finally, the “Beauty and Hygiene” chapter, in addition to ethnographic and hygienic history processing, was made most valuable by its rich collection of objects and colorful oral history, which demonstrated that beauty as a social construct and how it was realized for individuals broken down into the everyday life of the women’s society of the period under study.

## **Results**

My first question to be clarified was how did the change in the image of women and the ideal of beauty develop during the researched period, and how did all this affect the changes in social, political and mentality? The discourse on the female ideal of the 1950s featured both a formal image of a woman in line with the Soviet-style system propagated by the state, and an unofficial, nonconformist female model that combined the “bourgeois dwarf” tastes of the previous system with infiltrating Western trends. Following fashion in this era was considered a kind of moderate, private rebellion, and a woman with lipsticks who sought to follow Western trends and wanted to stand out from the gray crowd was a nonconformist and, according to the interpretation of the age, produced anti-systemic behavior. In contrast, after the propagated “tractor daughters” of the Rákosi-era, after 1956, a paradigm shift took place in which the female ideal of the Kádár-era became much closer to the type of woman preferred by the contemporary public and moved further and further away from the former Sovietized pattern. The Soviet-type female ideal ceased to be a mandatory example to be followed, and women who followed the fashion also began to follow trends infiltrating from the West, as far as possible within the framework of state socialism. The tractor girls of the fifties were replaced by the “Pest woman” of the sixties, and the emancipated working woman of the seventies was replaced by the sexualized poster girls of the eighties.

The change and continuous development of the image of women in the Kádár-era also affected the beauty care habits and tendencies of the contemporary women's society. The need for beauty care for women has increased and the use of professional beauty care services has multiplied. Women’s desire for beauty ceased to be a political issue, and they were openly

allowed to visit the hairdressers and cosmetics of contemporary state and cooperative shops. Related to this is the following question raised at the beginning of my dissertation that:

How did a “luxury service” like cosmetics fit / exist and function during the apparent Puritanism of the Kádár-era? My research shows that beauty care has become available to everyone, and it was this mass becoming what made cosmetic services lose their “luxury value”. State Hairdressers and Cooperative Stores provided treatments for the fashionable socialist woman according to Puritan socialist taste and budget. Under these circumstances, therefore, although access to professional beauty services has become commonplace for women, these services have not been considered a luxury, either in price or quality.

What difficulties did professional beauty care face during the shortage economy and how could beauticians remedy these problems? In the early sixties, beauticians still had to make cosmetic creams and wraps from practically “from scratch”. They cooked creams according to the “secret” recipes of their former masters and used vegetables, fruits, eggs as beautifiers. Later, they could buy professional cosmetics in large packaging and low active ingredients from KHV (Cosmetics and Household Chemicals Company), which, as my research revealed, they tried to improve with vitamins and quail eggs in an individual way, based on their own creativity. Beauticians also found an additional “loophole” created by the shortage economy and procured and paid out of their own pockets for cosmetics imported from abroad that were used for treatments.

What beauty practices were advised to contemporary women and how was this put into practice? By processing the beauty sections of contemporary cosmetics and beauty advice books, publications and magazines / magazines / dailies, as well as the genre of oral history, I think I was able to give a rather complex answer to this question in my research. In the Rákosi era, the same Alumol cream was used for both face and foot care, and the beauty advice boxes recommended lard for women’s faces and water compresses. In the Kádár-era, the woman who wanted to be beautiful could already do so by using cosmetics and trying the fruit and vegetable wraps in the beauty boxes. Although she went to the hairdresser regularly, she also learned to do her hairstyle at home and mastered the little beauty tricks.

The “trendy woman” of Kádár-era socialism has come a long way from following the officially propagated image of women to the consciously formed self-realizing female ideal of

the emancipated woman. The question arises as to whether Rákosi's forced emancipation had anything to do with women's subsequent emancipation aspirations. Are the fashionable policewomen of the eighties really the descendants of the propagated tractor daughters of the fifties? But while one is the product of forced emancipation, the other is the conscious choice of women. The “trendy woman” of socialism had to face political propaganda, social conventions, and maneuver in a way that did not become either an enemy of the state or a “bad woman” stigmatized by society. This applies, either to the assumption of your desire for self-realization or even to sexual freedom, and to its external demonstration. In all of this, of course, there were differences between members of each female generation. Finally, in my opinion, at any stage of socialism, regardless of its puritanism or shortage economy characteristics, women's desire for beauty has always been present, and individual life strategies as well as the shortage economy have determined its practical realization. In the Soviet-type system of the Rákosi-era, beauty care was officially associated with exploitative classes, but at least the middle class, with petty bourgeoisie. And the Kádár consolidation, brought about the rehabilitation of professional beauty care, creating a special specific segment, the “affordable luxury” of socialism.