

# When Ideal Beauty Turns Into a Nightmare in Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty* (2023)

A Research paper submitted by

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## Abstract

To embrace the natural beauty within you is often a rare goal people seek to achieve. A large number of people fail to appreciate the natural beauty of their self, appearance, and quality. It is better to let your fabulous natural beauty shine instead of pursuing fake claims that lead to endless destructive outcomes. This paper examines the theory of consumerism through the lenses of Herbert Marcuse's concept of false needs and Thorstein Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption using Ling Ling Huang's novel *Natural Beauty* as an example of the dark reality and exploitative policy hiding behind beauty culture. The study provides a rich examination of the consumerism ideology and its role in shaping human behavior and societal norms. Huang uses this literary piece of writing as an awakening call for those obsessed with ideal natural beauty appearance to consider the decisive reality of the beauty industry and realize the fact of selling this lie of a healthy natural look concealing its consuming objective of fulfilling an outstanding economic profit. *Natural Beauty* serves as a mirror of modern contemporary society which reveals the ghost of our consumer-driven world. The study underscores the importance of one's realization that reaching perfection is unattainable and the ideal natural beauty is that of authenticity.

**Keywords:** Ling Ling Huang, *Natural Beauty*, consumerism, false needs, conspicuous consumption.

## Introduction:

We are at an age in which the alluring mask of consumerism dominates almost the whole society. Blind and faithful following of beauty trends and self-care industries is escalating without the least caution. Aspiring to achieve an ideal version of beauty may forever be out of reach. At the time you think that beauty empowers you, it can also chains you to its ideals. Out of Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty*, the novel delves into portraying the complexities of modern consumerism and its impact on human life. *Natural Beauty* reflects the exploitative societal pressures and spotlights the hollow promises and human costs inherited in our modern culture's concentration on physical appearance. By tackling the theory of consumerism in the light of Herbert Marcuse's and Thorstein Veblen's critical perspectives on the nature of modern society consumerism and the influence of economic systems on human behavior and culture, this paper examines Ling Ling Huang's *Natural Beauty* and explores its role in awakening the absent consciousness towards policies of exploitation and lies of modern trends.

Consumerism is an economic and social ideology that has created dire impacts on society's modern life. Consumerism as an economic theory refers to the fact that the excessive consumption of goods and services is a desirable goal and has a positive effect on the targets of economy as a whole. At a sociological level, consumerism may be seen as a negative weapon that deceives individuals to determine their worth and social behavior depending on what they consume. Nowadays, consumerism is a major concern of contemporary social life as it dominates everyday life in a way that even consumers take it for granted. Therefore, according to Steven Miles (1998) in his book *Consumerism as a Way of Life*:

Consumerism is quite possibly the key concern of contemporary social science inasmuch as it transcends everyday life and does so in such a way that consumers take it for granted. Indeed, consumerism is arguably the realm within which the tensions of late twentieth-century social life in the developed world are most graphically played out" (pp. 5-6).

The origins of consumerism can be traced to several historical developments and socio-economic changes. Before the industrial revolution that emerged in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the role of consumerism was limited. People were producing most of their needed goods and services. Mass consumption was not a prevailing or common concept. Trade, on the other hand, was limited to the production of luxurious goods needed by the elites. With the emergence of the

18<sup>th</sup>-century Industrial Revolution, the role of consumerism became more apparent. Due to the great development and various technological inventions, there was a mass production of goods and availability of services. Factories could produce enough amount of items at a double speed rate than the previous ways of handcrafting industries. People were forced to move from the countryside to industrial cities searching for better job opportunities. With the availability of various goods and their cheap price, most of the people's income became better. They could spend money for buying their main needs and they could also save money for other purposes or spend it on non-essential items. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution paved the way for the emergence of a strong middle class of people who could afford better houses, education, job opportunities, and various goods. Many historians consider the emergence of the middle class as a key contribution to the domination of consumerism. Consequently, the consumerism ideology had a vital role in penetrating society.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, department stores and proliferating shops appeared and provided a variety of goods for people. Moreover, the development of newspapers and magazines helped the owners of factories to advertise their products creating a kind of awareness and a desire among people to buy different items. As a result of the automobile industry and the system of Fordism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of consumerism became of great importance. The American industrialist Henry Ford, who was the founder of the Ford Motor Company, created a system that made automobiles affordable for middle-class people. Therefore, a wide variety of large-scale industrial goods could be easily transformed and more luxurious products could be effortlessly available. "The Fordism economy was dependent upon the fact that workers had a surplus of disposable income which they could invest in the increasing diversity of goods that were being made available to them" (Miles, 1998, p. 7). Through this system of Fordism that led to mass production and consumption, the foundation of a modern industrialized and consuming society was built.

Furthermore, the American economic boom in 1920 that achieved unprecedented economic growth and technological progress led to the electrification of America, new marketing and advertising techniques, better incomes, availability of cheap credit, a variety of new goods, and a high level of employment which in turn created a huge amount of consumers. In addition, the invention of Television in this century helped to make the process of advertising and marketing of new items easy to be performed. It also contributed to creating a culture of desire and aspiration among consumers. This is because " Television

viewing results in an upscaling of desire, and that in turn leads people to buy—quite a bit more than they would if they didn't watch” (Schor, 1998, p. 82). Even the companies, through television marketing, could provide different and varied products, and build a brand loyalty as well. On the other hand, the middle-class suburban lifestyle was also one of the components of proliferating consuming goods. The growth of suburbs encouraged people to furnish their homes and buy cars to move from one place to another. The American dream of establishing a successful life in an upward changeable society became one of the people's major concerns. To fulfill this dream, they endeavored to achieve material success and home ownership.

From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century until now, the concept of consumerism has exceeded its previous stages to overwhelm the lives of people. Globalization, international and multi-international corporations together with the domination of digital technology succeed in transforming many types of shopping habits with e-commerce becoming a fundamental driver of consumerism. Besides these contemporary elements of supporting consumerism, online marketing and social media succeed in creating an atmosphere of desire and competition among consumers. Nowadays, there is a growing awareness of the economic, social, and environmental effects of consumerism. It becomes a way of life resulting from a wide range of historical, economic, and technological changes. Although it becomes an ideology taken for granted by people in their daily lives, consumerism reflects a complex coaction between the level of production, marketing, societal and cultural developments, and consumer motives.

### Review of literature:

Consumerism as an economic theory identifies that “Consumer spending, or spending by individuals on consumer goods and services, is the principal driver of economic growth and a central measure of the productive success of a capitalist economy” (Duignan, n.d., para. 1). Consumerism is closely related to the policy of a capitalistic society. Capitalism, as an economic system, calls for the private ownership of means of production, encourages profit maximization, and creates a severe competition between businesses and markets. Consumerism, on the other hand, concentrates on the desire and ability of the consumer to spend money on various products. Moreover, the competition in the capitalistic markets leads to new products that attract consumers to buy. Hence, the consumption of goods becomes desirable and it sustains, in turn, sales and revenues. The relationship

between capitalism, consumerism, and economy is interweaved. High levels of consumption cause a development in production and investment, and so it contributes to the economic growth and prosperity of any country.

The concept of 'false needs' is one of the components that combines capitalism with consumerism. False needs refer to an ideology developed by the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse. He is one of the prominent members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory that had a fundamental influence on philosophy as well as social and political theory around the world. According to Marcuse (1964) in his book *One Dimensional Man*, the true needs are those basic and essential ones used for human survival. They contain food, shelter, education, and healthcare. The false needs, on the other hand, are those "which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression" (p. 13).

In a capitalistic society, these false needs are imposed on people through various decisive means such as regular advertisements and excessive exploration of the products' false benefits. Technological progress is also one of the objects used by the capitalistic society to encourage and promote consumerism. As long as the true needs of people are satisfied, they can be easily manipulated by the capitalistic system to blindly pursue these false needs. This fact is clearly stated by Han Zhang (2022) as he writes "With the development of technology and the improvement of efficiency, the developed capitalist society has a new form and content of control, namely, the continuous creation of false needs" (p. 153).

Furthermore, these false needs are not naturally arising or stimulating, they are introduced gradually to the individuals for the sake of benefiting the existing capitalistic system. Marcuse criticizes the ways used by the advanced capitalistic society in urging individuals to consume and acquire material goods to achieve gross income. High level interest groups manipulate these false needs to become a normal and dominant social norm, so individuals feel they are natural and beneficent, and they accept them voluntarily. According to Marcuse (1964):

Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individuals has no control ... No matter how much such needs may have become the individual's own, reproduced and fortified by the conditions of his existence; no matter how much he identifies himself with them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they continue to be what they were from the beginning—products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression. (p. 7)

Through the analysis of Marcuse, it is apparent that these false needs create a decisive and fake sense of happiness and satisfaction. Through the pursuit of material goods, individuals get superficial and temporary pleasure. They become distracted from meeting their real needs or engaging in their societal problems. Marcuse highlights the negative impacts of false needs and refers to the concept as a kind of social control. Individuals are trapped in a cycle of consumerism that serves only the capitalistic system depriving them of presenting a genuine or prosperous social change.

The individuals' gratification of their false needs creates a kind of immediate euphoria that makes them penetrate a state of perpetual consuming that may create a persistent sense of unfulfillment and distract them from their deeper authentic needs. This fact is asserted by Marcuse (1964) who refers to the influences of these false needs saying:

Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individuals, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be most gratifying to the individuals, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. (p. 13)

Nowadays, false needs have developed to encompass the need, for example, for the latest gadgets, the newest styles of fashion, different means of entertainment, the latest products of skincare, the most recent plastic surgeries, and the trendy beauty industries. These false needs and many others succeed in providing the individuals with a temporary state of pleasure dissuading them from the need for autonomy, prosperous work, deep relationships with others, and self-actualization. They become alienated in their realm of fulfilling and following the bright light of false needs.

The theory of consumerism can also be viewed through the concept of conspicuous consumption raised by the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in 1899 in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. According to Adam Hayes (2024), "conspicuous consumption is a means to show one's social status, especially when publicly displayed goods and services are too expensive for other members of the same class. This type of consumption is typically associated with the wealthy but can also apply to any economic class" (para. 3). As Veblen suggests, consumers purchase or use products not only for their basic value of use but also for showing their social and economic status. Purchasing expensive goods

adds to their social position a prestigious and wealthy sense of well-being. He confirms “Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (Veblen, 1912, p. 74).

In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen refers to two classes in society. The leisure class and the working class. The leisure class consists of individuals who engage in noticeable consumption of goods to prove their having of wealth and high-class style of life. They spend money and consume luxury goods or services that make them visible to others and differentiate them from other people. The emergence of this class creates a kind of class division among the individuals in the same society. For the nature of this leisure class, Veblen (1912) clarifies saying, “As wealth accumulates, the leisure class develops further in function and structure, and there arises a differentiation within the class. There is more or less elaborate system of rank and grades” (p. 76).

The working class, on the other hand, depends on gratifying their basic needs. However, the individuals of the working class may engage in a kind of conspicuous consumption that is lesser in degree than that of the leisure class. They often have a desire to emulate the leisure class and prove their ability of social mobility and success. Therefore, a class of ‘impecunious gentlemen,’ as Veblen calls it, appears and engages in a system of ‘hierarchical gradations.’ (Veblen, 1912). Fascinated by the high-level standard of living owned by the leisure class, these new impecunious or poor gentlemen have a great desire to raise and improve their social position through gaining recognition and respect from this leisure class as well as others. Hence, these “... processes of emulation ... have emerged as a growing influence upon the everyday construction of social class” (Miles, 1998, p. 19).

Not only does the concept of conspicuous consumption create a kind of variation among individuals of the same community, but it also leads these poor gentlemen to be passive and dependent characters. Their personalities and self-esteem may be abolished while they search for their self-worth by being close to the leisure class. To this fact, Veblen (1912) explains, “These lower grades, especially the impecunious, or marginal, gentlemen of leisure, affiliate themselves by a system of dependence or fealty to the great ones; by so doing they gain an increment of repute, or of the means with which to lead a life of leisure, from their patron” (p. 77).



The standard of living, according to Veblen, indicates the level of consumption to which people adhere. Through this fact, he highlights the idea of conspicuous waste which refers to the allocation of time, effort, and different resources, and results in drawing individuals from the basic life process. The conspicuous waste does not only imply an illegitimate expenditure of human products, but it also encompasses human life as a whole. Therefore, Veblen chooses to call this kind of illegitimate expenditure a 'waste' "because it does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole" (Veblen, 1912, p. 97). As a sign of high social standing, the leisure class may engage in different activities or consume various kinds of expensive goods that waste their money, effort, and time. Such wasteful behavior is driven by social norms, pressures, and a desire to maintain one's prestigious position in the community. Consequently, Veblen warns against the fact that an element of the standard of living may be set out as being purely wasteful, but it ends up becoming a necessity of life for the consumer. An element may change to be one of the consumer's indispensable or habitual ways of living. This is one of the negative impacts extended by conspicuous consumption. For this reason, Veblen sets a criterion to measure if these indispensable things, after becoming habitual by the consumer, are categorized as waste or not waste. This criterion is obviously discussed by Veblen (1912) as he writes:

The test to which all expenditure must be brought in an attempt to decide that point [being waste or not waste] is the question whether it serves directly to enhance human life on the whole- ... For this is the basis of award of the instinct of workmanship, and that instinct is the court of final appeal in any question of economic truth or adequacy. (p. 99)

The pursuit of a high lifestyle through conspicuous waste diverts consumers away from being productive and it also weakens their human nature for useful work.

### **Discussion:**

Considering the theory of consumerism, particularly the concept of false needs elaborated by Herbert Marcuse and the notion of conspicuous consumption developed by Thorstein Veblen, the research paper deals with the literary work of *Natural Beauty* written by Ling Ling Huang. Huang is a Grammy-award-winning violinist and writer, and *Natural Beauty* is her debut novel. It is a 2023 satirical horror novel that tells the experiences of an unnamed Chinese American girl who immigrates with her father and mother to the United States after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The narrator's parents are piano teachers who work to make

ends meet. She acquires the skill of piano playing through her parents. She gets a scholarship to a high-class music conservatory with a stipend. At the end of the school year, there is a recital and all the children's families are invited. The narrator's parents attend the recital and at night they leave for home. While driving home, they get into a car crash that requires a long-term care facility. After this accident, the narrator blames herself for having a hand in what happens to her parents. She decides to abandon her dream of being a successful pianist convincing herself that her hobby and selfishness are to be blamed. As she was in need of a good paid work, she works as a dishwasher at a restaurant. Then she gets an opportunity to a well-paying job at Holistik, a famous beauty company that uses the latest versions of technology in producing natural products. Her new job requires her to conform to some strict procedures and escalating body measurements to meet the demanded aesthetic standards of this company.

Based on her own experience of working in the beauty industry field, the writer of *Natural Beauty* highlights the evils of exploitative industries and the temptation of modern capitalistic societies. The novel delves into themes of consumerism, self-worth, and the unlimited societal pressures required for a high standard of beauty. The story of the unnamed narrator offers a thought-provoking critique of the ideal beauty standards prevalent in contemporary societies in general and New York society in particular.

Concerning the title of the novel, it has a surface meaning and a deep one. At the surface meaning, it refers to the pure beauty that most women aspire to have. A kind of beauty that implies physical and effortless attractiveness without the need for artificial means. But the title deeply infers a desire by a specific category of people to reach this ideal standard of beauty. According to Ling Ling Huang (2023):

The book's title stems from a fascination with the term. Together, the phrase natural beauty acknowledges that those at the top will always be those who were born there, people from whom everything comes naturally. It also catalyzes the desire and subsequent consumption of products for those of us who want to appear more fortunate. *Natural Beauty* and its subsequent iterations (clean-girl makeup – and no-makeup makeup) imply that there is something frivolous about chasing beauty. (para. 3)

But to what extent do people, or women in particular, go to maintain this unreachable kind of beauty? Certainly, the capitalistic system plays a crucial role in perpetuating this concept of ideal beauty. The capitalistic system's tools

represented in the great commercial companies have the lion's share in imposing their policy of exploitation and consumerism on people. They sell products through convincing and promising consumers that they can reach this degree of ideal natural beauty when they consume their products. On her first day in the company of Holistik, the protagonist is told that the company proliferates various products whose objective is to achieve human intelligence and clarity. At Holistik, "Creams, powders, serums, cleansers, oils, dry oils, drips, essences, acids, toners. A never-ending treasure trove of human ingenuity. Each with unique ingredients, targeted benefits, and very specific application methods" (Huang, 2023, p.18).

Moreover, working at this famous company requires some procedures and shape standards girls should obtain because they will be used as a marketing interface for the customers. Actually, "Holistik in its pursuit and commodification of perfection, tracks its employees for optimization" (Hughes, 2023, para. 3). Hence, to be accepted at Holistik, the protagonist is asked to learn not to eat or drink specific things, which are almost everything. She is asked to eat eggs at a specific hour of the day and by the sea. Furthermore, "... there are places and substances to avoid. Specific energies are not allowed, and certain feelings are cautioned against. The compendium of things to feat is so vast, it often feels too risky to take a deep breath" (Huang, 2023, p. 48). In addition, among the other rituals workers at Holistic should do before encountering customers is that they get a spray on their wrists made of ambergris to make themselves irresistible to their consumers. So, gratifying and attaining the satisfaction of the consumers becomes the main goal of Holistik.

"Visible goods give status that invisibles do not," (Schor, 1998, p. 48). This is a reality developed by Juliet B. Schor, the American economist and sociology professor at Boston College in her book *The Overspent American*. She refers to a fundamental concept of advertising which is social visibility. Through the procedures the protagonist is required to adopt, the company depends on her visible shape as a means of attracting consumers and as an evidence of its products' credibility. So at Holistik, workers tell her "We're testing the composition of your body and facial skin to make custom products and supplements for you" (Huang, 2023, p. 17). Moreover, at Holistik, the narrator sees that "people dressed in white lab coats move with urgency" (Huang, 2023, p. 17). These white coats are also a sign of the idea of visibility as they give the impression of pure and well-tested products. Consequently, "... the white coats of the salespeople (to make them look scientific), the hype about company 'laboratories,' and the promises made in the advertising" (Schor, 1998, p. 49) are

all significant factors used by the company to entrap consumers and achieve the required economic profit. In addition to these factors, the manager of Holistik, Saje – the woman who chooses and asks the protagonist to join the working team of Holistik, tells the protagonist that they favor an international staff, while the protagonist notices that “none of the other staff seem particularly international to me” (Huang, 2023, p. 15). The notion of international staff adds to the company a deep meaning of trustworthiness and is also used as a means of attracting consumers who will feel comfortable while they are purchasing the products of a worldly trusted brand.

The narrator in the company of Holistik is drawn into a high-end beauty and wellness industry that depends on the strategy of Marcuse's false needs to convince consumers that they need specific products and treatments to be beautiful and have a natural look. For example, while the protagonist is making a round at the sections of the products, she sees a case of empty glass jars, and each one of them is priced at several hundred dollars. When she asks her colleague about the benefit of these empty jars, she is told that they contain snake food. Consequently, she answers: “There's nothing in them. Well, it's not physical food. It's spiritual food to awaken Kundalini, the power serpent of divine energy that lives at the base of our spine” (Huang, 2023, p. 19). The beauty industry marketers drive individuals to believe that their standard of beauty is not adequate, so they need to indulge in “a fantasy of beauty and sexiness, buying ‘hope in a bottle’” (Schor, 1998, p. 49). Based on Marcuse's idea of false needs, consumers are unconsciously driven by these false needs and remain preoccupied with fake desires rather than seeking real fulfillment and self-liberation. To this reality, Marcuse (1964) refers saying, “The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those false needs which demand liberation ... while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society” (p. 14).

At Holistik, the beauty industry is deeply tied to economic profit and success. The owners invent a new term for their products' marketing plan as a new trend that should be followed even by the protagonist and her coworkers. It is the Dianaism religion. After some months, the narrator could understand what this religion calls for. She clarifies saying, “... Dianaism is the worship and ardent endeavor to eat, dress, and live like Princess Diana” (Huang, 2023, p. 58). The owners of the company depend, in their productions, on some substances that are extracted from animals' bodies. The eyelash extensions, for example, are made of spider silk. Remoras are used for copycat treatments. A mascara is made of a rare

sea algae used to strengthen lash growth. Jellyfish transdifferentiating cells are used to reverse aging. There is also the procedure called mandalas that is based on the tachistoscope technology. This technology can track one's eye movement and pupil dilation. It can also measure how long the eye may settle on a specific product. Overall, "The mandalas infer emotional content from your autonomic nervous system responses" (Huang, 2023, p. 63). These few processes are the innovative means used by the company to grab and maintain the consumers' attention. The more it uses varied techniques and technological procedures, the more it serves the customers and in turn, achieves economic sufficiency. Consequently, the narrator explains the hidden fact of Holistik saying, "What starts as an enthusiasm for improvement becomes an all-consuming infatuation. Caution becomes paranoia, eventually, fear. Is there anything more comforting in life than knowing what to fear? At Holistik, they teach me what I need to be afraid of to become beautiful" (Huang, 2023, p.48).

The production of Holistik depends on some other products related to other cultures. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is told that her lips are numb because of the venom that is extracted from 'Japanese mamushi.' Through the writer's experience as a saleswoman in the beauty and wellness industries, she elaborates on the fact that the economy of these famous companies requires the achievement of financial profit regardless of any other considerations. Concerning this exploitative strategy Huang (2023) writes "... In this, I saw the ghost of the gig economy, which prioritizes extraction of work from people sans interaction" (para. 6).

All these products and the latest technological techniques of producing beauty industries developed by the company of Holistik are classified under the concept of false needs because according to Marcuse (1964), "Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs" (p. 13). Throughout the novel, the effect of these false needs on the protagonist is terrible. As long as she joins the work team at Holistik, she begins to resemble all of her colleagues. She is piled with various products that slim her thighs, lighten her skin, thicken her hair, and inflate her lips. She even confesses "... I barely recognize the lithe woman looking back at me in the mirror" (Huang, 2023, p. 83). She is also asked to change her name to 'Anna' to make it easier for customers who find difficulty in uttering her Asian name. She develops a deep friendship with the company's owner niece 'Helen'. Her shape and personality change gradually to become someone else. As Marcuse suggests, following these false

needs causes individuals to be alienated from their true selves. This fact is cleared by Huang herself (2023) when she writes about her experience denoting:

These industries are so loud, and their messaging so subtly crafted, that I had stopped being able to hear what my actual needs were and had become completely disconnected from my body. I couldn't begin to care for myself because I didn't know who that self was ... I had become my own magnifying mirror, incapable of seeing anything beyond my own reflection. Any counterpoint to the ideas these industries manufactured were out of frame. (para. 8)

Through the unconscious and blind gratifying of these false needs, the consumers find their soul in what they own, and identify themselves with their own commodities. They reach this uncompleted cycle of identity conflict because of the goals driven by the capitalistic society. As a result, Marcuse (1964) states:

... The concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. (p. 16)

In *Natural Beauty*, the society of beauty products and treatments in which the protagonist indulges is marketed as a luxury life. These beauty products and goods are not just for achieving self-acceptance, but they also include status symbolism. The characters in the novel consume these products to gratify their desire to be naturally beautiful and to signal and feel proud of their wealth and high social status. This reality is referred to by Veblen as conspicuous consumption and waste. For this reason, Lilith, the major official of the company, tells the narrator "We aren't selling products. We're selling lifestyle. Desire. The possibility for them to become us" (Huang, 2023, p. 51). The words of Lilith denote the fact that some people have a wish to own the same special and unique lifestyle of the Holistik team, and they aspire to resemble it.

"Buying stuff is supposed to make us happy" (Huang, 2023, p. 74). In accordance with the Holistik community of beauty, material possessions and beauty substances lead consumers to happiness and fulfillment. By the usual and permanent use of these substances, they turn out to be necessary and irreplaceable for the consumers. But according to Veblen, this destructive behavior of familiarity is considered a kind of waste; a waste of time, effort, and money, because it does not enhance human life in one way or another. In the story, this category of

individuals who become mostly addicted to the idea of ideal beauty and spend their time in a vicious circle of waste is indicated as the largely targeted consumers chosen by Victor, the owner of the company. Hence, it is stated that "His whole business model privileges the already privileged. Those who can spend exorbitant amounts of time and money on self-care and making themselves beautiful" (Huang, 2023, p. 74).

Through the events of the novel, it is obvious that the social pressure put on consumers to reach a specific standard of beauty directs them to spend conspicuously on products that promise to sustain their outer and physical appearance. In accordance with Veblen (1912), this class of people is called the leisure class. "...leisure is still fully as effective as evidence of wealth as consumption" (p. 92). This behavior is driven by them not by necessity but by a desire to be seen as superior and favorable by others. Consequently, it is confirmed in the novel that "Clients waiting in line justify their purchases by murmuring the word self-care as they hold their new products as tightly as a nun might grasp her rosary" (Huang, 2023, p. 51).

This kind of conspicuous consumption and waste leads to a variation of social classes. Throughout the story, this variation of classes appears in the relationship of the protagonist with Helen. Helen is the niece of the Holistik owner. She is one of the richest girls in the community of Holistik. She is specialized in designing the jars used for saving the products of the company. She advocates the products of Holistik and sees that they are better than the other toxic beauty products that have a negative impact on people. In her friendship with Helen as well as Lilith, the protagonist feels a sense of respect. When she is invited by Helen to spend time with each other, the protagonist always says yes, although she feels that Lilith does not like her company. The protagonist describes her feelings when she is close to Helen and Lilith by saying, "I can't remotely afford to keep up with their lifestyle, so I look and never buy, which does not matter; there's nothing I want more than the joy of being seen with them anyway ... I want to become someone who belongs next to Helen and Lilith, in all the spaces they occupy" (Huang, 2023, p. 77). The narrator stems her self-worth from belonging to Helen. Her work at Holistik and her relationship with Helen gives her a long-awaited sense of belonging.

The narrator's behavior and her satisfaction as being one of the Holistik team are consistent with Veblen's critique of those impecunious people who maintain their status through their social connections with others. They find the power among other reputable communities. Over time, this impecunious class of leisure

turns to be passive individuals whose independence, liberation, and worth are tied to other prestigious ones; a fact which is highlighted through the personality of the narrator. Later, in the novel, Helen dies because “her lungs were inflamed by bits of bone and plaster that were slowly expanding ... Extranatural, that is. There's too much organic material in her” (Huang, 2023, p. 162). Helen is portrayed in the novel as the embodiment of success and a supporter of Holistik natural products. Her sudden and mysterious death represents a shock for the entire community of Holistik. Her last words to the protagonist were ‘Stop taking everything.’ Her words insinuate the dark side of beauty industries that the protagonist should discover, but she stays passive. She and Lilith find a payroll including several volunteer women who register their agreement for all the processes and products they are exposed to. Eventually, Lilith tells the protagonist: “Who would believe us? And what would we even say? She's right. I think to myself” (Huang, 2023, p. 166). Although Helen's death serves as a wake-up call for the protagonist, her initial response is negative. She is reluctant to take action or even save herself from the clutches of this community.

Days later, the narrator is informed that her parents had advanced Kuru. As a Chinese family, the doctors who are caring for her parents think that they are used to dietary customs because the kuru disease is associated with cannibalism. The protagonist negates the reality of their being cannibals. After testing the supplements her parents have been ingesting regularly, the doctors discovered that all the supplements are from a place called Holistik. She is finally told that “Everything your parents were taking had traces of human bone and flesh” (Huang, 2023, p. 186). Shocked by this severe reality, she blames herself again. She uses her financial power at Holistik to help her parents as much as she can, but she is now the main reason for losing them. She regrets saying “... And it is my fault ... The supplements. The unanswered questions because they were unasked ... Now I have lost not only my culture but my family as well” (Huang, 2023, p. 188-189). After these two accidents, the terrible fact of Holistik now comes to light. Its dark and exploitative aspect is gradually unveiled as the events progress. The company promises its consumers miraculous natural results but they turn out to be fake and unreal. The company “... was engaging in illegal activity that ranged from testing dangerous products on humans to inseminating young women with animal sperm without their knowledge” (Huang, 2023, p. 201). In addition to its dependence on human and animal bones in producing beauty substances, the company of Holistik extends its policy of exploitation to encompass young needy women. The company makes its experimental tests on animals and young women “to perfect the services offered to wealthy clientele” (Huang, 2023, p. 201). Women are offered financial



support in exchange for trials and experiments they even cannot remember. Holistik, the pioneer in clean beauty, is just one tool used by the capitalistic system to commodify beauty and ideal physical appearance. As a result, the protagonist at Holistik is told “We literally sell beauty” (Huang, 2023, p. 86).

“For as extractive as the beauty and wellness industries are, they mostly extract from us, the consumers” (Huang, 2023, para. 12). This truth is highly denoted in the story of *Natural Beauty*. In a capitalistic society, profit is preferred over the well-being of individuals. For this reason, Huang writes this novel as a critique of the profitable motive aspired by the capitalists. Consequently, she confirms “I challenge the notion the world feeds me that I am only a creature of consumption” (Huang, 2023, para. 12). The company's basic goal in the story is to maximize revenue even if it is at the expense of the consumers' or the employees' health and safety. Under the umbrella of capitalism, the concept of ideal beauty is commodified by turning the perfect physical appearance into a marketable product for the capitalists and a self-acceptance goal for the consumers.

### Conclusion:

*Natural Beauty* serves as an alarm against the dangers of submitting to the societal pressures and exploitative nature of profitable companies. “The novel is a meditation on vanity, the ways in which the pursuit of physical beauty can betray the other sources of beauty in one's life” (Hughes, 2023, para. 7). Huang wants to emphasize the value of accepting and embracing one's pure self rather than conforming to decisive and fake standards of beauty. Penetrating into the cycle of unrealistic ideals has, in the long run, a destructive influence. The beauty and wellness industries have a bright beam that gradually fades and unveils its real terrifying face. The reality of these hoodwinked industries is asserted by the writer as she states “... The beauty and wellness industries are like those magnifying mirrors turning everything about me into a problem with a viable (and expensive) solution” (Huang, 2023, para. 7).

The author's previous work at a company selling beauty and wellness industries gives her a meaningful motive to write *Natural Beauty*. She presents her former experience embodied in the personality of her story's narrator. Anna, as she is named at Holistick, is a reflection of Huang's life and her complexities in the field of beauty and wellness production. At the end of the novel, the fate of the protagonist is completely different from what she aspires and strives to achieve. She tells the readers “Everywhere I go, people look away, their faces streaked with

alarm and sympathy. Children often run or scream when they see me. One little boy pointed a finger at his mother and hollered at the top of his lungs, "Liar!" You told me monsters weren't real" (Huang, 2023, p. 205). The protagonist is caught in a fire related to a farm specialized in producing substances for Holistik. At the hospital, the nurse tells her that she has taken a lot of pills and supplements during her working at the company. These substances cause severe changes to her body. When she stops taking these products, the body will take time and is left on its own "to regulate the volatile substances" (Huang, 2023, p. 203). This terrible fact of the protagonist is portrayed through the author who says about her own experience "But, in truth, wellness as it is sold and packaged by companies today only made me poor, depressed, and ill. I didn't fail – the wellness and beauty industry failed me" (Huang, 2023, para. 13).

Through *Natural Beauty*, the author gives a powerful call for all people in general, and women in particular, to have confidence and acceptance of their true selves. The pursuit of perfection is unattainable and also destructive. The fate of the protagonist in the novel symbolizes the futility, danger, and loss of aspiring to reach an idealized version of beauty. Ultimately, Huang hopefully declares "... You are a natural beauty no matter what your name is, what your culture is, that is what makes you naturally beautiful, your body trusting it, and it would be impossible not to be a natural beauty. And only when you buy into the claims of the industry of natural beauty are you really, you're doing really wild stuff to your body that it doesn't need and that it can be really harmful" (Harrison, 2023, para 31).

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