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# The Consolidation of Feminine and Feminist Identities: Third Wave Perspectives on Cosmetic Ritual

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The Consolidation of Feminine and Feminist Identities: Third Wave Perspectives on  
Cosmetic Ritual

by

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## **Abstract**

Feminists have long been stereotyped as disapproving of traditional forms of feminine expression, said to ascribe to a “bra burning” Puritanism” (Mann, Huffman, 2005) which does not condone the use of typical tools of feminine expression. And while this feminist disapproval of femme presentation has been somewhat over exaggerated in popular culture, there is some truth to the general feminist critique on traditional feminine accoutrements such as heels, lipstick, the color pink, etc. This is evidenced in seminal feminist works, such as “The Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir, “The Feminine Mystique” Betty Friedan; from these works comes a profusion of anti-feminine sentiment. However, like many aspects of second wave feminism during the rise of the third wave, this conception of feminine expression has been questioned and reformed. Second wave feminist discourse was criticized, initially by women of color and later by a larger community of feminisits, for being too restrictive and for being dictated by white, middle class women who were unwilling to acknowledge the lack of equality among women. Thus ‘third wave’ feminism, as it is often referred to, placed emphasis on choice and on intersectionality (Baumgardner, 2000). Due to these polarizing changes that have taken place within the feminist community over the last three or so decades, and due to wider social changes also relevant to feminine presentation, such as representation in popular culture and new forms of social media, it is worth reevaluating the modern feminist perspective on feminine expression. I conducted 12 interviews with self identified feminist makeup users from the Portland area, aged between 19 and 28. From the subjective interpretations of feminism as well as subjective interpretations and habits each presented on makeup, I concluded cosmetics function as a complex social object which cannot be deemed as inherently oppressive or empowering, but

rather must be treated critically in relation the rest of the makeup users feminist habits and attitudes toward cosmetics.

## **1. Introduction**

Many second wave feminists often found traditional forms of feminine expression to be necessarily toxic. Although not all feminists were aggressively opposed to feminine expression (Mann and Huffman, 2005), a large population of the feminist community felt it was difficult to consolidate a feminist identity with many traditionally feminine behaviors. We see this in their treatment of the lesbian butch-femme construction of gender (Levitt et. al, 2003), in reactions to artistic works which center around traditional tools of feminine self presentation (Hauser, 2001), in the presence of this theme in seminal feminist works, and in debate over the place of feminine accoutrements and forms of expression that continue today.

As each era of feminism is necessarily a response to changing social conditions, it follows that third wave feminism came about largely as a critique of second wave feminism. Dissatisfied, if not oppressed, by some of the prescribed feminist behaviors created predominantly by middle class white women, women of color were in many ways responsible for the rise of the third wave, which focused on intersectionalism as well as women's agency (Mann, Huffman, 2005). While these shifts were predominantly concerned with the inclusion of class, race, gender, and sexuality in discussions of oppression, the ripples of these foundational changes have affected many veins of feminist scholarship and discourse. For example, 'choice feminism' became more popular with the rise of the third wave, and as the name suggests it was the belief that "every decision a woman makes as potentially feminist, if given thought and made

with a political consciousness.” (Thwaites, 57) Favored by feminists like Jennifer Baumgardener and Amy Richards, it was eventually critiqued as an apolitical attitude which women could use to justify quite nearly any decision they made as liberatory. As Hirshman later wrote in regard to this brand of feminism, “[a] movement that stands for everything ultimately stands for nothing” (Thwaites, 57). This strain of feminism will be fairly relevant to later discussion when examining how these evolutions within the feminist community, as well as wider social changes, affected feminist views on feminine expression and where feminists stand on this issue today.

When discussing issues of gender, such as feminine expression and identity, it is imperative to acknowledge gender exists as a socially constructed concept, constantly evolving to reflect collective understandings of what gender is. Every aspect of our lives is colored by gender; it is an omnipresent influence on our way of understanding ourselves and others. Thus, it’s potentially problematic to give a set definition of femininity, as it is a fluid concept created by the subjective interpretations of all who perform and witness gender. Gender is, as Judith Butler describes it, “. . . a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions . . . the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, 214).

For this thesis, I will be exploring many aspects of gender, specifically the feminine, but our main focus will be feminine presentation. Gender is much more than how one dresses or cuts their hair; this is only a singular aspect of a deeply complex subject. It will be important to recall this throughout the discussion to avoid reducing the feminine gender to self presentation. Feminine expression is, in simple terms, the display of a feminine gender. It’s difficult to objectively define what constitutes as traditional forms of feminine expression, however, in this

case, we are mostly concerned with the forms of self presentation that second wave feminists identified as oppressive, often because they felt that these styles of dress were purposefully physically limiting (Beauvoir, 1953), the time and money it took to achieve them was not only inconvenient but intended to be so (Wolf, 1991), and the fact they were only aimed at women rather than men. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir speaks of these feminine accoutrements as such: “. . . high heels, corsets, hoops . . . were meant less to accentuate the woman’s body’s curves than to increase the body’s powerlessness . . . Makeup and jewels were also used for this petrification of the body and face.”

Perhaps in the context of this thesis, heels or long hair could’ve been used as an overarching symbol of feminine presentation, but the consistency of these things in who wears them and how - one can be feminine presenting without wearing heels, one can be masculine presenting with long hair - doesn’t constitute a convincing symbol of feminine expression. Makeup, however, is still typically not worn by those who self-identify as masculine, but most importantly, it is a conscious choice, a time consuming ritual which one actively chooses to engage in. Its use demonstrates a conscious commitment to a feminine identity, an active process of creating and presenting a femme self to the world.

In order to prepare for this, I created an in depth literature review starting late 2018 and conducted a dozen interviews with as many women (and a non-binary participant) January - March of 2019 who identified as consistent makeup users and feminists. Interviews were intended to reveal the actual views of feminist makeup users of a variety races, classes, genders, and sexualities, to contextualize the literature review in the real world.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Gender and Post-Structuralism*

In a discussion which explores in depth the ‘authenticity’ of a gender identity, how it is expressed, and why certain behaviors and forms of self-presentation are associated with a particular gender, a brief explanation of the post-structural concept of gender is necessary to orient the discussion. For this purpose, Judith Butler’s theory of gender in a post structural society presented in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* functions as an important framework. Butler posits that gender is not merely a performance in which we fulfill a role laid out for us, but it is *performative*.

“Performative”, in this sense, does not mean simply that gender is a display or based purely in it’s presentation, nor simply a role to be filled. Rather, while most assume in a society still largely functioning off the social concept of the gender binary that a gendered action or behavior is defined by the gender identity of the performer, Butler instead asserts that the gender identity of the performer is a result of certain rituals, actions, and displays which are repeated and internalized. In her own words:

gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. - Butler, 1990 (69)

Gender is not an inherent, naturally occurring phenomena, but instead a complex, self-creating concept that is acted out and perpetuated in nearly all aspects of our everyday lives. So pervasive is the presence of gender in our lives, it’s existence as a construct is hidden beneath an assumed naturalness, behind what is not simply a supposition but a given understanding that

gender somehow predates our knowledge of it. Because of its assumed origins and naturalness, we believe that our actions in relation to gender follow our understanding of it, when in reality the ways in which we act out and perform gender inform our understanding of it. In her interrogation of the perceived naturalness of gender, she claims that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.” (Butler, 2002)

In this way, a discussion of gender is based upon an ever-evolving collectively agreed upon set of behaviors, forms of self-presentation, ways of thinking and living, and understanding of self which align with a certain preconceived notion of identity as ‘man’, ‘woman’, or ‘other’. But the true meaning of said behaviors is based upon a complex interplay of the identity of the performer and the perceived nature of the act performed. Thus, when defining something as feminine, we must interrogate ourselves as to what we mean when we say ‘feminine’ and how we came to delineate said something as such. Perhaps we may assume an act is masculine or feminine because it is performed by a man or a woman, when it is a behavior all humans engage in regardless of sex. Maybe we assume there is something in the behavior which inherently genders it, for example, the fallacies that aggression is masculine or compassion feminine.

Asking questions like this can create complications when describing a certain way of dress or self presentation as feminine. The vast majority of people in the U.S. today would consider heels, skirts, bras, etc. to be feminine pieces of attire, and in fact this consideration is so free of scrutiny that the gendered meanings of these items would seem natural rather than socially generated. Here, we must accept that there are certain behaviors which are gendered and

that the foundation of these gendered attributions are context dependent and reflective of a cultural narrative rather than any inherent meaning. This being said, the reality of these gendered meanings cannot be denied as so many actions, beliefs, value systems, etc. are built upon them. In other words, while these gendered attributions to certain behaviors or identities are not natural and are instead built upon the complex socio-cultural milieu in which they are created, we still must acknowledge their existence and the ways in which they shape the social world through which we move.

This is not to say that because a gender binary is popularly perceived as valid and natural that it is, but it has some undeniable power and truth in that it shapes our understandings of our social world, and thus our actions in it. Whether or not these constructions are ‘real’ or inherent aspects of our identities as they are portrayed to be, the choices we make and ways in which we conduct ourselves based on these constructions are ‘real’; they constitute our social reality.

Thus, while the gendered definition of cosmetics as feminine could be considered arbitrary in that this is merely a construction with no objective basis, because it is widely acted upon as a legitimate construction, it will also be treated, for the most part, as a legitimate construction in the following discussion.

### *Contemporary Feminist Discourse*

The very topic of this thesis, differing feminist opinions on makeup, acknowledges that there are varying subgroups and interpretations of feminism. In her book “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center”, bell hooks describes the dangers of an entirely subjective feminism. She argues that “without agreed upon definition(s), we lack a sound foundation on which to

construct theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis” (hooks, 37). When feminist values are reduced to certain aspects of feminist discourse which benefit certain groups, or when feminism is reduced to a mere aesthetic, separate from the intersectional liberation of women, it becomes ineffectual as a political tool. This being said, as such a widely held and debated belief, there will naturally be some subgroups and divisions within feminism. So when does this become a problem? Are all divisions on the topic of cosmetics truly representative of “a growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political tool” (hooks, 37).

Archer and Huffman assert that modern or ‘third wave’ feminism arose out of critiques of the second wave, mainly by women of color, and created a “new feminism highlighted the need for feminists not only to address external forms of oppression, but also to examine forms of oppression and discrimination that they themselves had internalized” (Mann and Huffman, 58). The second wave battle cry of women’s liberation assumed an equality among women, and an equality among men, which did not exist. bell hooks, along with the vast majority of third wave feminist scholars assert that, because of this, intersectional discussions have become central to feminism, and it is the departure from these values which represents the greatest danger to feminism as a means of legitimate change.

In addition to this, bell hooks stresses the importance of an active feminism; a feminism that is reduced to an aesthetic is rendered apolitical and incapable of creating meaningful change. To engage in a legitimate, effectual feminism, one must be active in the feminist community with the intent of addressing class, race, queer oppression as well as ableism. Thus, when feminism ceases to be intersectional and political, the true threat of overly subjective interpretations of feminism is revealed. This serves as the definitive criteria of a legitimate

feminism; analyses of values surrounding cosmetics in their place within any set of feminist values should only be had in relation to the intersectional and political nature of said feminist values.

### *Cosmetics and the Critical Lens*

In her piece, “Audrey Flack’s Still Lives: Between Femininity and Feminism”, Katherine Hauser (2001) discusses a feminist art piece performed at Womanhouse called “Leah’s Room”. The two artists who created this performance piece, Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youldeman, said of their piece that they were illustrating “the pain . . . of beauty . . . We wanted to deal with the way women are intimidated by the culture to constantly maintain their beauty and the feeling of desperation and helplessness once this beauty is lost . . . the "act of self-decoration... [is] a kind of prostitution of the self to gain male approval” (Hauser, 27).

This thesis seeks to understand cosmetics and feminine expression in a nuanced light, but it is important to acknowledge the widely held belief that feminine presentation is inextricably tied to a toxic standard of beauty, a standard both unachievable and oppressive. There is, of course, some truth in this belief. In the quote above we see two of the most well-known second wave critiques levelled against many forms of traditional feminine expression (though of course there are more than these): the shame and anxiety brought on by the desire to meet this standard, and how feminine expression is inherently intended for the male gaze. Third wave feminists today still have issues with a lack of representation for women of color, for women who are above a size zero (i.e. the vast majority of women), for not showing aging bodies or truly anything of the natural wear and tear which comes to the female body as they move through the

world. To fully understand how these criticisms came to be and the relationship women have with feminine expression, the U.S. standard of beauty, and cosmetics, one must look at the socio-historical context of these phenomena.

At the turn of the 20th century, a new cultural force was created with the advent of film: Brumberg discusses how the silver screen became “a cultural mirror” (Brumberg, 1997) for young women, a new template against which they could compare their appearance to others. Beauty products and home goods were aggressively marketed to women, and the measure of ‘a good woman’ was no longer dependent on virtue but appearance. And if the presence of women on screen has served to heighten women’s consciousness of their appearance, then the transition from the silver screen, to color televisions, to computers and laptops and, finally, the cell phone, can only create an extreme awareness of one’s appearance and their ability to meet the standard presented to them constantly. Truly, nowadays women can see perfected images of themselves nearly everywhere.

As Jean Kilbourne discusses in her short film, *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising’s Image of Women*, images of women have gotten thinner and thinner, more and more objectified and flawless in advertising over the past 40 years. This aligns with Naomi Wolf’s understanding that, marketing companies made dependable consumers of women by adapting to second wave feminist movements, movements which rendered the once effective deity of the marketing world, ‘the good housewife’, a thing of the past. With the rise of the women’s liberation movement came the fall of the obsessive house cleaner, the pristine wife and mother, and, most importantly to the marketing industry, an entire population of consistent consumers of home goods. A new narrative, a new identity to be achieved, had to be fabricated to regain this consumer base. This

time, the expensive, never ending project was not the home, but the body: “. . . an entire replacement culture was developed by naming a “problem” where it had scarcely existed before, centering it on women’s natural state, and elevating it to *the* existential female dilemma.” (Wolf, 67)

As stated earlier, these ever-changing pressures put on women are often reactions to women’s liberation movements; it ought not to be considered a coincidence that the first Miss America pageant was held only a year after suffragettes finally won the long battle for the vote. As women began to enter the workplace, the pressure to meet certain feminine standards only increased, and has only continued to grow in the subsequent decades (Wolf, 1990). It is unclear how these narratives have evolved alongside feminism in the last thirty or so years, but increased discussions of beauty standards and presentation of women in popular culture in feminist discourse serve as evidence that feminists have become more concerned with pop culture and the media and the images they aim toward women (Richards, 2003).

More recently, post structuralist thinkers have criticized the potential for makeup to contribute to a troubling phenomena under late capitalism; the conceptualization of identity solely as what identity is projected. Gradually over the last century, “a new conception of the self has emerged – namely, the self as performer – which places great emphasis upon appearance, display . . . and the belief that identity was a purchaseable style” (Negrin, 91). In this sense, the most significant parts of identity are not aspects of the ‘inner world’, but rather the self is merely a collection of chosen displays which are not selected for their authentic representation of the self but because they are appealing as projections in and of themselves.

Thus, in that feminine expression is in many ways tied to impossible to achieve standards of beauty which are nearly omnipresent in their cultural representation as well as a certain harmful consumerist habits, it is clear why it has become such a source of contention among feminists and even wider society. What follows is a discussion of how cosmetics and certain forms of feminine expression are not expressly inextricable from these other phenomena, or at least the complexity of their relationships to one and other which throw into question the oppressive nature of cosmetics themselves.

Before discussing possible merits of makeup, it may be beneficial to briefly acknowledge some of the potential drawbacks of a feminism which does not condone feminine expression. Under these critiques, feminists activists who do fight for measurable change and support an intersectional agenda can be excluded if they wear makeup. Their actions and values may seem inconsequential to some because of how they express their gender. This adherence to a strict, unilateral rejection of cosmetics echoes an idea as old as time, and one that exists in direct opposition to feminist ideals: judging women by certain aspects of their appearance rather than their character. These critiques of second wave are far from new; according to an article written over 20 years ago “developments in social thought have heightened our awareness of how theories of emancipation can be blind to their own dominating, exclusive and restrictive tendencies and how feminism is not innocent of such tendencies (Foucault, 1984; Grimshaw, 1993)” (Mann and Huffman, 2005).

Beyond this possible form of exclusion, it creates a sort of caricature of women as either bare-faced, braless, intelligent feminists or mindless, incapable girly-girls. A central theme of this thesis is the deeply contextual use of makeup which reflects the complicated relationship

women have to their identity, their expression of identity, and the tools they use to express them. By “only viewing women as either subject to the cosmetic industry, or as radical subjects who refuse patriarchal interpolation, denies the complex and often contradictory negotiations women make in everyday life and the pleasures and frustrations such negotiations afford” (Hauser, 27-28).

### *Cosmetics and Empowerment*

Clearly there is a substantial population of feminists who feel cosmetics and many other feminine accoutrements are, in many ways, inherently oppressive for the user. As we're about to see, this is a generalization of a social object surrounded by complex conceptions of gender, consumerism, identity expression; it would be ineffectual to attempt to address this generalization with another generalization. It requires the consideration of several interrelated factors and social values surrounding the use of makeup and its oppressive or empowering natures.

Some women have attempted to reclaim “. . . the word “girl” to address what they saw as the anti-feminine, anti-joy features of the second wave. For them, wearing pink, using nail polish, and celebrating pretty power make feminism fun” (Mann and Huffman, 73). These groups felt that second wave feminist discourse, and in fact a variety of popular social discourse, dismissed a feminine identity as one that is necessarily inauthentic. They insisted they derived a certain power and joy from their genuine, feminine identity. Anita Harris relates this back to third wave feminist goals over a decade ago in 2004 when she wrote “it is a progression of feminism that younger “third-wave” women (and men) are embracing girliness as well as

power” (Harris, 59). She goes on to discuss how many girls were confused being brought up under the second wave ideal which rejected so many forms of not only feminine expression, but it seemed many aspects of feminine identity.

The paradox of this kind of thinking is simultaneously conveying to women that they had the right to succeed in a male dominated world, but only by adopting masculine behaviors. As previously discussed, gender constructs as they relate to isolated behaviors, repeated rituals, and identity can be complex, and while nothing inherently delineates things like uncontrolled anger, team sports, or video games as necessarily masculine activities, these activities and behaviors tend to be understood this way. Following the second wave, rather than critically examining gender and validating whatever gender expressions they felt most comfortable with, girls were often encouraged to adopt behaviors that were seen as masculine to earn respect and challenge gender stereotypes. In this way, women (and truly all genders) are trapped between a binary in which they are unable to express their authentic identities. This begs the question, when is a behavior intended to express the self authentic or inauthentic? What is authentic presentation?

There are many ways to wear masks, to alter one’s appearance or self presentation to live out one aspect of the self: “earlier critiques of cosmetics have been based on a mistaken premise that there exists a ‘true’ self independent of the masks one assumes when in fact the self is constituted by these very masks” (Negrin, 84); “The truth of the matter is that the Western adult is always made up already. To get at his true identity beneath the make-up is like peeling an onion to reach its kernel without knowing that it consists entirely of its layers of skin. (Thevoz, 1984: 122)”. Everyone must make a decision when preparing themselves for their day in how they would like to be perceived, in crafting the immediate message they will send to others when

interacting with the world. We are in a constant state of performance, always aware of the projected self upon which our reciprocal actions are built (Butler, 2005). Makeup, it can be argued, is merely one in a diverse arsenal of tools in this everyday creation of self which we all participate in. Thus, when interrogating the merits of certain forms of self presentation, it is important to ask not simply whether or not makeup is used, but in what ways and for what purpose.

While makeup *can* be used to craft a single face representative of a conventional beauty ideal, this is not its exclusive function. In *Popular Culture as Everyday Life*, Rebecca Plante discusses makeup as a tool of self creation and identity expression. Examining cosmetics as potentially harmful and potentially empowering, she looks at the true allure of makeup not as a means of turning oneself into Barbie doll replica, but as “a creative, indulgent, mostly gendered, possibly political, often engrossing act that is a ritual and a chore. Putting on makeup is one way to easily modify presentations of self . . . and tell culturally-produced stories about beauty. Putting on makeup can simultaneously be experienced as conformity, as giving in to pressure to create beauty with cosmetics, and as an individualized creative act of transformation and self-expression” (Plante, 166).

Many people argue that rather than self-expression, many women use makeup because of insecurity about being able to meet certain beauty ideals. Not only is a widely practiced rejection of these beauty ideals evidenced in the very visible body positivity movement, but Korichi and his colleagues provide a complex analysis of different reasons women give when wearing makeup which include insecurity as only one of many possible motivators. From their study they found that a concern for meeting beauty ideals, social anxiety, and ‘camouflaging

imperfections' only accounted for some of the participants makeup habits. Rather, many women wore makeup as almost a form of celebration of their own faces, and were in fact "characterized by higher self-esteem, extroversion, and assertiveness" (Korichi, 136). Furthermore, they found in relation to self-image, makeup transcended the mere "application of colorful products to the face, makeup appears as a holistic technique that modifies not only one's appearance, but also helps one to cope with self-image, emotions, and mood".

But the wider context of makeup use goes further than its relationship to authenticity, beauty ideals and insecurity. The use of makeup can actually be used to subvert the gender binary and question it rather than enforce it; this is most clearly evidenced in the lesbian community, who struggled to follow feminist ideas of gender and abandon the lesbian construction of butch-femme. Whereas the lesbian community understood that "femme-butch identities were very complex, and transcended and radicalized traditional gender roles (e.g., Feinberg, 1996) . . . femme women gave feminine signifiers new meaning (Ruby, 1993)" (Levitt et. al, 99), the wider feminist community felt they were simply reenacting masculine attitudes of dominance and the objectification of the feminine.

Femme lesbian women understood the stigma levelled against feminine expression and even the potential dangers of presenting femme; even within the lesbian community, one participant in Levitts study reported her sexual assault from a potential female partner who justified it by pointing out the length of her dress. And yet, these women felt that because they were expressing their genuine selves, things like makeup use were worth facing criticism over their choices in self presentation. Below, Levitt offers a summation of the complex internal debate and firm resolve these women build their feminine presentation off of:

Most of the women interviewed thought that being femme indicated a commitment to

live one's life with the integrity to challenge the status quo, both within the lesbian community and without. In social relationships, they saw femmes as the ones to confront others with the complexity of truths, even when they were difficult to hear. Femmes said that they were determined not to change the way they wanted to look, even if others accused them of being apolitical, notlesbian, or aesthetically unpleasant. One interviewee described her experience of pride: "[I'm] just being me. Being true to myself at last. I'm just now discovering about integrity and pulling all the pieces of me together and being okay with who I am, totally. - Levitt et. al 2003, 109

Additionally, makeup can be used to subvert gender binaries by male use; well-known makeup artists who identify as male, such as Patrick Starr, Jeffree Star, and even James Charles have thrown into question certain traits of masculinity by making cosmetics more accessible to men. "Butler . . . has suggested that the body becomes a gender through a series of acts that are renewed, revised, and consolidated over time. This is exactly what Patrick Starr has done . . . to perform rituals closely associated with femininity . . . raising the question of whether the message these images are sending undermines or simply reinforces cultural stereotypes of femininity" (Elzinga, 14). By engaging in a ritual traditionally considered feminine, Starr and other artists like him open the discussion of what 'feminine' means to the wider public - he forces his audience to ask if a behavior is only feminine if performed by a biological woman, or is femininity a construct that exists outside of the body? Starr also raises the question, "What does it mean to be feminine? Is makeup necessarily feminine?" Clearly, in the context of this thesis and of Butler's work, gender as a construct lives outside the body and is rather created by repeated behaviors, not biological sex. These questions may not have clear answers to everyone, but it is a vital discussion to be had by the wider public when breaking down potentially harmful gender binaries.

Another function of cosmetics is to help trans women potentially feel more comfortable

in their transition. First and foremost, it is imperative to acknowledge all trans women conceptualize femininity differently, and all experience their transition differently. A trans woman does not need to wear makeup or heels or grow their hair long to transition 'properly'. However, for some trans women, decorating the body with feminine accoutrements and styles can prove to be comforting and to alleviate certain discomforts they may feel when using more masculine modes of dress. (As a cis woman without access to these experiences myself, and not having had the opportunity to interview trans women, to make many more detailed assertions about the trans experience in this thesis has the potential to be inappropriate and offensive.)

Feminine expression does pose certain threats to not only trans women, but to all women, in its obligatory nature. Trans women can, and have been, subject to violence for not presenting in a way which clearly delineates them as women, e.g. wearing makeup, having long hair, wearing traditionally feminine clothing. So deeply ingrained into our lives is the gender binary, that when one does not neatly fall into it or perform their gender 'properly', they can be subject to severe critiques and even bodily harm. Even as this thesis was being researched and written, there were attacks on trans women, a city typically known to be more accepting of its LGBTQ community. It is this expectation surrounding socially accepted expressions of gender and the resulting stigma and even violence that follows when they are not followed in a socially acceptable manner that must be broken down, rather than the expressions themselves. The tools themselves have the potential to be innocuous when their use is the result of autonomous choice uninfluenced by social pressures and the consequential repercussions of not conforming to these pressures.

This thesis is concerned with how feminist makeup users understand cosmetics. Clearly the feminist community is deeply concerned with the oppressive aspect of makeup; often the central critique offered by feminist thinkers is that makeup is necessarily oppressive because of the patriarchal context in which it is used. We've explored cosmetics as a symbol of femininity both archaic and empowering, as a source of contention among feminists and wider society, as a tool of personal expression. Makeup is complex in its malleability, in its relationship to the user, in the multitude of ways it is understood and thought of. How can something so multifaceted be necessarily good or bad? Perhaps, dichotomous terms like 'good' and 'bad' aren't the most effective terms with which to attempt to try and understand makeup. Perhaps we ought to look at the habits and values of the user to ask a more helpful, nuanced question: what situations make makeup empowering or oppressive?

### **3. Methods of Study**

This study was deeply concerned with the experiences of real women rather than focusing primarily on theory, and the voices and thoughts of these women were instrumental in selecting themes that are analyzed here. Because theory can be somewhat detached from the everyday lived experiences of those who are negotiating feminine and feminist identities, it was important to make sure the voices of women who didn't have the opportunity to consistently engage with academic theory were heard. Even as a student enrolled in an accredited university, throughout my research I had difficulty accessing many of the articles which became foundational to my research and, eventually, the evolution of my own feminist values. Many participants were focused on full time, minimum wage work due to their working class status,

and didn't have the access, time, or energy to conduct in depth research on feminist issues to inform their everyday feminist beliefs that many of the college educated participants did. The resulting differences in their understandings of feminist discourse and proper feminist activism illustrated the true width of the gap between feminist theory and 'practical' feminism. From the beginning of my interviews, a classist element in feminist theory, especially in regards to cosmetics use, felt readily apparent.

For this reason, I attempted to make my research relevant and available to this group, by 1) interviewing members of these groups and using their experiences to contextualize my literature review rather than depending on theory alone and 2) distributing my thesis to them after it's completion.

The target population of these interviews was 18 - 30 year old women living in the Portland metro area who wore makeup minimum 4 days a week on average and identified as feminist. They lasted an average of 30 minutes, and all but one interview were conducted in private study rooms in the Portland State Library. Dr. Kelly assisted me in writing out a set of sixteen interview questions which would effectively gather information on the participants understanding of feminist discourse, personal feminist values, socio-cultural understanding of makeup, personal makeup habits, and helpful anecdotal information. Our IRB application was approved November of 2018 and interviews were set to begin early January of 2019.

A practice interview was conducted with a close friend who fit into the target population to assess the efficacy of the queries and to practice for future interviews; this resulted in minor editing, focused on word choice and the order in which the questions were asked.

Twelve participants were gathered with a snowball method, over Instagram, and after speaking to 4 different Women's Studies courses. The recruitment methods listed in the original IRB application included contacting both PSU affiliated groups and non-PSU affiliated groups over Facebook, email, and Instagram. These were women's groups, sororities, feminist groups, and LGBTQ+ organizations. Over 120 flyers were placed around Portland State campus over the course of a month (this took place over the course of four weeks as the posters would be taken down to make room for more posters or covered up fairly consistently); these were placed, with permission, in the Queer Resource Center, the Women's Resource Center, on several announcements boards throughout campus and in women's restrooms.

The methods presented above yielded little to no response, however, the third method of recruitment utilized at this time was the snowball method, which proved far more effective. I contacted multiple close friends asking if they may know people willing to participate, and this accounted for the vast majority of interviewees. Additionally, Dr. Kelly and I submitted an addendum to the IRB which allowed me to visit classrooms and briefly describe the nature of my thesis and ask students to participate. This accounted for two of the twelve participants. Lastly, I contacted over 100 separate individual accounts on Instagram for feminine presenting users who appeared to use makeup and lived in the Portland area, and from this method found one participant.

All but one of the interviews were held in private study rooms in the Portland State University Branford Millar Price Library. These are typically small, bare rooms without windows, not clearly visible to others, and typically quiet and private. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and interviewees answered screening questions about their age, race,

sexuality, gender, makeup habits, and feminist beliefs (information provided in Table 1). Most participants were cisgender women, however I was fortunate to have a non-binary participant and one participant that described themselves as gender fluid to describe the experiences as a makeup user exploring makeup use as a tool of gender expression. In addition, almost half of the participants were women of color and able to offer valuable insight into experiences unique to Asian, Asian American, Black, and Latina women. Finally, half of the participants identified as either bi, pansexual/omnisexual, and lesbian; many women expressed fluid sexualities.

When analyzing the data, I looked for themes that were clear and recurrent as well as themes I had been previously interested in investigating, primarily using the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). For example, the expectation of cosmetics in the workplace was not a theme I had originally planned to analyze in depth, and had not made it a priority in my literature review. However, as this theme came up in quite nearly every interview, it appeared it was a significant enough issue for the target demographic to be discussed. Conversely, while the topic of negotiating perceived social pressures and personal autonomy in self presentation was only brought up explicitly in half of the interviews, it constituted a central theme in my research and I investigated further. In this way, I attempted to maintain a unbiased approach to the analysis of the interviews, by looking for both organic themes and the consistent appearance of themes I had originally intended to analyze.

**Table 1**

\*N/A = Information not provided

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Days per Week Makeup Use</b>
Joan	N/A	24	Woman (cis)	Queer	6/7

Bell	White	24	Woman (cis)	Bisexual	3/4
E	White	25	Non-Binary (Alien)	Queer	7
Hannah	Black	25	Woman (cis)	Queer	4/5
Lana	Asian		Woman (cis)	--	5/6
Camille	Asian-American	21	Woman (cis)	--	5/6
Ashley	White, Hispanic	26	Woman (cis/fluid)	Pansexual/Omnisexual	7
Claire	White	26	Woman/Non-binary (genderqueer)	--	3-5
Jill	White	20	Woman (cis)	Lesbian/Bi	5/6
Alexis	White	28	Woman (cis)	Straight/Queer	5-7
Gabby	Latino	--	Woman (cis)	Straight	--
Simone	Whit passing, mixed race	22	Gender Fluid (Woman coded)	Bisexual	5-7

(Pseudonyms used)

### 3. Findings

#### *Subjective Interpretations of Feminism*

Two questions posed within the interview asked directly for the participants conception of feminism, both their personal values and conception of wider, social feminist values. These answers provided tended to vary greatly in not only content, but assurance and confidence. For example, while some participants pondered the question at length, in a practice interview, the participant responded instantly saying: “If your feminism isn’t intersectional I don’t want it. If it

isn't intersectional f\*\*k you." Undoubtedly, a surprisingly diverse proliferation of feminist beliefs was represented in a group of only twelve, among them different focuses on feminism for the individual versus social groups, on political agendas, and on central themes in discourse and activism. As you will recall, the literature review reveals that these varying subjective interpretations could be problematic.

As stated above, some participants quickly proclaimed their feminism was concerned with representation and diversity - Gabby responded quickly and without hesitation: "Well, to me, feminism isn't feminism if it is it intersectional . . . being an advocate when in situations that don't necessarily pertain to yourself". Other participants, like Lana, hesitated before saying they felt it was about women's confidence. Lana saw feminism "as self confidence for a woman. And I know it can be super vague, but the confidence can make a big difference in a lot of things."

Others verbally walked themselves through a definition centered on a mix of aesthetics, emotions, and political change which changed through the interview, for example:

. . . feminism is more of like an attitude and a way of taking in the world and putting yourself out into the world. So when I hear feminism, it's more of not necessarily anything to do with gender at all or like femininity, but it's more you support . . . you don't take shit lying down . . . You don't let anybody tell you the way it is. Like you have a voice . . . just really fighting for what your, just human rights are . . . I guess it is a, it's a female thing, but it's also just a human right thing . . . I guess it does tie into like gender a little bit . . . (Ashley)

At the beginning of the text, choice feminism and its importance is briefly discussed. Clearly the relevance here is the ease with which women could use this logic to potentially justify toxic behaviors as empowering, including some forms of makeup use we have discussed. A handful of participants did briefly address this topic, like Simone, who in relation to her reconciliation of her makeup habits and feminist values noted ". . . . when I started makeup there

was a little more like choice feminism was most of what I was seeing. And so I kinda internalize some of that. But then, you know . . . I do recognize that there are ways it's harmful and there are also ways that it's beneficial" (Simone). Even in regard to their own potentially flawed feminist reasoning behind their makeup use, participants displayed a sort of introspection and criticism.

Not only were several different sets of values and beliefs represented in each answer, but different levels of confidence and assurance. This being said, it's important to recognize these statements given in the interview aren't always entirely representative of the participants feminist views. Take for example a section of Alexis' answer when asked what feminism meant to her:

So right now I'm super obsessed with this idea of like women embracing their sexuality and not feeling shame about it. And for me like that's a huge part of feminism. Like supporting sex workers and yeah, and just like validating that and like if a woman wants to put on makeup or wants to shake her ass naked, then I can let her do it and appreciate that shit and give her health benefits . . . (Alexis)

Here, we don't see any discussion of intersectionality, but it is important to note that she opens her statement saying "right now" meaning it may not be representative of broader values, additionally that she brings in political action by addressing health benefits, and later in her interview that she discusses her work as a photographer and how important it is in her work to represent "all sorts of women and all different sizes, all different colors, all different sexual orientations". Additionally, as Alexis was recruited from a mutual friend, I understand that as a fiercely intersectional, well-educated woman of color, our mutual friend would likely not tolerate non-intersectional feminism in her close friends. It is even possible that Alexis found intersectionalism to be so obviously a part of feminism she didn't feel the need to state it aloud.

Despite this, it did become clear with some participants that intersectionality was present, but there was much discussion of feminism as an aesthetic. One participant, in a short exploration of feminist history, noted that “. . . 1920s at that point, I think feminism was women cutting their hair off, wearing more androgynous clothing . . .”, mostly focusing on the fashion of feminism rather than the political action. Granted, there was a cultural feminist movement at this time, but arguably the most significant feminist accomplishment of that decade was the victory of a long fought battle for the right to vote, and this accomplishment was never mentioned. This serves as a powerful example of how a movement for change can be thought of as a fashion trend, or merely an aesthetic.

As we observed above, these statements don't always precisely represent the participants views of feminism, and the majority of these participants showed intersectional values even if they didn't say this explicitly. However the fact remains that there are those who consider themselves feminists who are more concerned with aesthetics rather than actions. This is precisely the dangers bell hooks speaks of; the danger of rendering feminism apolitical, of removing it's vital meaning as an agent of change.

All of the participants in these interviews did use cosmetics, and many of them used other feminine accoutrements to express a feminine identity. These behaviors clearly do not preclude the possibility of an intersectional, political, informed feminism. As said before, the majority of participants cited the importance of change and of the acknowledgement of class, race, sexuality, etc. when addressing systemic oppression. If these understandings are key to being an effectual feminist, cosmetics do not necessarily negate the possibility of being one.

When it comes to feminist values, it appears the more pressing issue in divisions on feminism appears to be a lack of unity on intersectionality and political action rather than stances on makeup. Three-quarters of participants discussed race, class, and sexuality as important factors in modern feminism, indicating that cosmetics use and even the utilization of cosmetics as a means of empowerment didn't negate the most critical aspects of an effectual feminism: intersectionality, desire for political change, and taking action based off these previous values.

### *Negotiating Autonomy and Socialization*

However one feminist interprets feminism and ascribes to feminism can influence their desire to use makeup and, if they do decide to use it, their judgements of themselves for using it. We see this struggle clearly with Jill, who discusses the difficulty of excluding feminists from the feminist community for cosmetics use: “. . . I don't know, no, it's such a, it's such a hard ground to walk and it's like you can't say if it's one or the other the other because either, either way it's going to alienate someone. People who wear makeup are going to be like, "Well, no, it makes me feel empowered . . .” and other people who are going to be like, "You're just catering to the patriarchal society.””

As stated before, a unilateral idea of makeup has this polarizing effect: it is one thing to critique a behavior or a standard, but rarely do these critiques end at the concepts. In other words, often times when there is prejudice against makeup or makeup use, there is prejudice against the makeup user. Women can be “alienated” in many ways from the feminist movement when asserting they find makeup empowering. This goes directly against so much of what the second wave asserted regarding the potential toxicity of feminine expression, an assertion the third wave

has questioned since its inception; like the femme lesbian community, like Audrey Flack, like many of my participants, like many of my friends, a considerable number of third wave feminists have experienced both internal dissonance and external reproach for this behavior.

Many cosmetics users face appear to struggle with balancing internal desire and external expectations and the perceived authenticity of self when it comes to presenting the self, or in any number of behaviors which go beyond appearance. One action or practice may not be pleasurable or desirable, socially acceptable, and true to one's self all at once, and in fact behaviors that perform all of these functions are quite rare.

It is no secret women are expected to uphold many paradoxical expectations. Often when women are evaluated by others, they are reduced to being either promiscuous or frigid, naive or manipulative, overly aggressive or weak willed (Korichi et. al, 2008). Women have not only the varied expectations of the feminist community to contend with, but with that of the world. How does one negotiate these expectations, whilst being aware they are negotiating them? How does one balance the desire to be true to oneself and to move comfortably through the world? How does one know the self to express it? Bell exhibits some of these questions below as she discusses her reasons for wearing makeup:

“Um, there are so many reasons why I can like circle, like think "Do I like wearing makeup because society makes me feel like I have to or because I feel ugly without it or do I like wearing makeup because I feel like I, I like I have to do to be a girl?" . . . and then also like try like avoiding wearing it for those reasons because I think I'm doing it for a certain like agenda . . . I notice how I feel a little different without it and I liked that or I like . . . confidence it gives me, and like I shouldn't have to like roll it over in my head a million times. Why? . . . I just like it because I like it . . .”

No doubt, a very socialized desire or behavior can feel natural or authentic, but is in fact conditioned. However, depending on how terms like ‘authentic’ are operationalized, socialized

behaviors could possibly be deemed authentic in nature, considering that quite nearly all behaviors are socialized to a degree. If socialization precludes the possibility of authenticity, then what desires or behaviors can we truthfully deem 'authentic'? Exceptionally few, it would seem.

Ultimately, Bell asserts that she likes and wears makeup simply "because I like it". It is the purpose of almost any academic work to question what is given, to search for new meaning, and to contextualize phenomena as to understand it in greater depth. Certainly those functions have been performed here, and it would be appropriate in this text to continue them: to discuss makeup and the consumerist identity, makeup and shame-inducing beauty standards, makeup and queer expression, or any number of relevant themes. This being said, is it reasonable to expect Bell to have this in depth discussion with herself every time she gets ready? Here we should question the expectation for her to "roll it over in [her] head a million times" every time she feels the desire to wear makeup, and to really interrogate what reasonable level of discussion we should expect from women when approaching the topic of cosmetics as empowering or oppressive in their everyday lives.

It is difficult to say whether the mere presence of this doubt and introspection is 'enough'. It indicates a critical negotiation which, whether it occurs consciously or subconsciously, includes some of the critiques of makeup listed above, as well as arguments for the use of cosmetics. This critical analysis of one's own behaviors in relations one's values and ethics is essential in many contexts, but it would be entirely it's own thesis to explore whether the presence of this kind of introspection is sufficient to constitute 'moral' or 'healthy' behavior and self understanding.

It is also necessary to interrogate this emotional reaction to makeup, this desire which can feel quite innocuous to those who experience it, and ask what role it plays in the socio-psychological context surrounding makeup use. As discussed previously, this desire to wear makeup is contextual and motivated by a complex variety of situations, personal preferences, and social pressures. Thus, like makeup itself, whether or not this desire is empowering or oppressive is dependent on several interrelated factors and, once again, is not inherently oppressive or harmful but has the potential to benefit the user.

### *Locational and Culturally Specific Makeup Use*

It seemed clear, in multiple interviews, that ideas surrounding makeup use could be exceptionally culturally specific, and in fact that Portland itself seemed to be a bubble of relaxed cosmetic standards, compared to larger cities. However, these differences appeared far deeper and more complex than what was originally expected, but the very conception of what makeup was and its purpose appeared to vary from location to location and social group to social group. For Claire, she noticed that certain parts of the U.S. appeared to have different standards for cosmetics use, noting that “In Portland. I think we have it a little bit easier. Um, I've worked in a, I worked at a law firm before where, you know, um, it was business casual and like there were tons of women who weren't wearing like a full face, you know, it was like definitely more relaxed . . .” (Claire)

Being most familiar with the Portland area, it was interesting to hear firsthand how cosmetics were perceived and necessitated in other parts of the country and across different cultures. Surprisingly, participants who had grown up in restrictive places that seemed to require

makeup continued to justify their makeup use to themselves in Portland, continuing to engage in the practice when they no longer felt obligated. It's difficult to say whether or not this is the result of an internalized desire to fulfill these expectations or simply an authentic urge. Below, a participant discusses the transition from a culture that is deeply concerned with a highly stylized mode of self-presentation into a culture that is far less restrictive on standards of self presentation.

“... I'm from Dallas ... which is the like rich, boujie, big blonde, total plastic surgery, complete fake tan capital of Texas ... growing up and being in that culture ... you didn't go to the grocery store if you didn't have full makeup on, you didn't go to the grocery store in sweats. You had a full outfit, you had your heels on, you had your nails done. And that was kind of the way you were meant to go ... And even now going back ... if I do go out without makeup looking kind of the way I do now that I live in Portland, it's like people are just appalled that I would be in public ... in Portland ... I find I feel very safe here in like the way I present ... I do not feel I need to [wear makeup].” (Ashley)

Ashley specifically notes multiple times how she feels able to go out without makeup, and yet her makeup was typically the most stylized; in the interview she describes how she learned her makeup skills and developed her style from drag culture in New York, and typically spends 40 minutes to an hour doing her makeup each day, complete with false lashes and a contoured face. And yet, she stresses multiple times that in Portland, she is more free to express herself. Without strict standards surrounding how she presents herself, she continues to engage in this daily ritual and present herself to the world in this way. Circling back to an earlier theme, it is useful to ask here whether or not this constitutes as authenticity indicates an authentic desire.

The question of makeup as an obligation seemed to be key in exploring contexts of its use in nearly all forms of analysis: authenticity, cultural and locational context, professional and personal life, and especially in asking whether or not it could be empowering or oppressive. It's

still difficult, however, to separate ‘obligation’ from the internalization of conventional beauty standards and their projected worth. Thus, it’s difficult to assess the potential of cosmetics as a tool of liberation or patriarchy in situations like these, in which makeup is used simply to kill time: “I transferred here from San Antonio and in San Antonio there's not really a whole lot to do. So like girls there spend a lot more time like going all out, like beating their face more then they would have here.” (Camille)

While it may be unclear in this specific instance whether or not makeup is a positive or negative force, it once again demonstrates that cosmetics and their uses vary widely and thus makeup in and of itself cannot be one or the other. In some places makeup was a way to kill time, in some it was an obligation, in others, merely an option. These revelations supported the idea that makeup use is too deeply contextual to be labeled as inherently oppressive or empowering.

Again and again we find that makeup transcends the typical expectation that it is used to beautify, to conform. Not all of the contexts in which cosmetics are used are empowering to the user, especially so with situations in which the user appears to feel obligated to wear makeup, but it is the wide variety of uses which requires further analysis than the assumption of inherent, oppressive qualities.

### *Cosmetics and Expressions of Queer Identities*

Many of the participants identified as cis-gendered women, however, those who expressed more gender fluid or non-binary (three of twelve participants) all cited makeup as an important tool in expressing different gendered identities: “I do feel more comfortable looking more effeminate, but I love playing with androgyny . . . I should say it's not no makeup at all. I

do what's in the makeup community called a "boy beat". And so I do, I actually contour my face the natural way. And so it does look at, it's more structured, a little more masculine . . .”

(Ashley).

Other participants were still negotiating their feelings on gender expression in relation to the reinforcement of gender binaries, and described how this internal debate continued day to day. One participant, Jill, felt that for her personally, makeup was an expression of insecurity and was thusly a part of a toxic force in her life. However, she acknowledged that many makeup users had different experiences and for them cosmetics had the potential to be empowering. Specifically, Jill brought up how makeup, or other forms of feminine expression, could be meaningful and pleasurable for those who felt they had found their authentic selves to express, regardless of restrictive gender norms. Jill posited that “. . . sometimes I get caught up in like, the Gender Nihilism thing where it's like, "I just want to abolish it all, like just across the board dismantle it!" And then like a trans person will come up to you like, "But I like gender. I like wearing skirts and things like that." And then I'm like "Yeah, you do you! Gender is great!"”

(Jill).

Gender in and of itself is such a deeply complex subject it has both oppressive and empowering aspects to it; consider Jill's example above and how empowered and even joyous a trans person may feel when they are finally able to recognize or acknowledge their true gender identity, or consider the pleasure Bell described earlier when engaging in feminine expression with cosmetics. This being said, the journey of transitioning is often difficult for many reasons, and in this way the concept of gender has the potential to oppress and cause pain. Like cosmetics, gender is not inherently one thing or another, but an ever-evolving construct.

As a masculine non-binary person, E reported this same comfort in their ability to manage their gender expressions: “I think it's really expressive. Um, I also like feel like a lot of times it makes me feel like more androgynous or more queer to have like control over the way that I'm perceived.” (E) Certainly in these instances, these interviewees - and many members of the LGBTQ+ community - use makeup in this way. It can be comforting, affirming tool to those transitioning, and for the lesbian community it has presented an opportunity to “differentiate stereotypical, passive femininity from femme-inity and to respond to claims that androgyny is the only way to challenge patriarchy” (Levitt et. al, 100).

As stated before, cosmetics, feminine expression, and beauty standards are tied inextricably together: beauty standards can be considered the socially accepted, even expected, performance of feminine expression, and in some cases cosmetics are used as a tool to meet this standard. For transwomen, it can be difficult to negotiate makeup use when a specific way of presenting feminine is forced upon them. Some transwomen report that they don't feel the need to grow their hair out, wear feminine clothing, and apply cosmetics everyday, but in the desire to pass they feel pressure to do so. In this case, similarly to that of cis-women being expected to meet the beauty standard, it is necessary to acknowledge that the true toxicity of the situation comes not from the cosmetics themselves, but from the expectations surrounding them.

#### **4. Discussion**

*Subjective interpretations of feminism*

Reducing one's evaluation of an effectual feminism to how one dresses and presents themselves rather than the feminist action they take and to what purpose purports a deeply anti-feminist value: assessing a woman's character based on her appearance rather than her actions. Evaluations of this nature have the potential to exclude women from the feminist community who, based on their actions and contributions to feminist discourse, ought to be a part of it.

The findings of this thesis align with the idea that wearing cosmetics or expressing feminine does not negate the presence of a healthy, active, intersectional feminism. General feminist critique should focus more on reducing feminism to an aesthetic than the negation by cosmetics. Many interviewees, who all wore makeup consistently for a myriad of reasons, expressed a feminism that 1) was concerned with the impact race, sexuality, class, and gender had on one's experience of oppression, 2) did not reduce feminism to an aesthetic and 3) recognized the importance of activism to use feminism as a tool of change. As bell hooks asserts, the real dangers of a subjective feminism lay in its possible descent to an apolitical tool.

### *Negotiating autonomy and socialization*

Through the course of these interviews, I began to feel as though the participants were more concerned with the origin of their inclination to use makeup - whether it was nature or nurture - than with the makeup itself. A sense of shame seemed to be associated with the idea that it was taught; many of these women reported that the desire to wear makeup felt like an authentic expression of identity, creating dissonance between this and the commonly held idea that makeup is only a symptom of the desire to meet beauty standards, that feminine expression

is only a symptom of a patriarchal society. It appears at the root of the issue was contending with the idea that a feminine identity was not only associated with many of the commonly known negative stereotypes but was necessarily an inauthentic, purely socialized identity.

The majority of these participants were deeply critical of their own makeup use, exhibiting, in some cases, a near constant concern with whether they were performing this behavior for others or for themselves. They illustrated, at the very least, an interest in the origin of their motives and, in extension, with certain aspects of their femme identity. In this, there was a clear negotiation of the idea that a desire which felt natural and gave them pleasure was merely the result of a toxic cultural narrative they had been trained and conditioned to not only accept, but to accept it so completely it became an aspect of themselves indistinguishable from their natural desires. To this end, it is useful to remember that even the way in which we conceptualize the term 'natural' is a mere construction, and no behavior remains completely untouched by socio-cultural influence. People are products of society, our identities are in large part products of cultural narratives, whether we are aware of them or not, whether we desire to be a part of them or not: to deny an identity authenticity on the grounds that it is a socialized identity is preclude the existence of authenticity in any identity.

The understanding each participant had of these external pressures, internal desires, and their relationship in the context of authentic expression often resulted in personal negotiations with the self. These introspective analyses often focus around the desire to indulge in makeup use, be able to move easily through social situations, and express one's authentic self. Cosmetics are complex social object and the content and conclusions of these negotiations are responsible for the meaning the user attributes to them; when one chooses to wear makeup, their use

contributes to the broader social constructions surrounding cosmetics and gender expression, thusly it is the nature of these introspections which have the true potential for defining contexts in which makeup is empowering or oppressive.

Despite the social pressures surrounding their use, cosmetics in and of themselves do not necessarily have to be oppressive. The argument that women wear makeup for themselves and not for men, that it is a tool of identity expression or comfort, or that it simply makes them feel good when they wear are popularly used by everyday makeup users, such as the participants in this interview. Many scholars or feminists, when they dismiss these claims, dismiss women as autonomous beings who do in fact think and dress for themselves rather than men, and often dismiss their feminine identities as authentic or genuine. It is perhaps this rejection of women as agentic, introspective, and authentic simply because they wear makeup that is the truly oppressive force in this situation.

### *Cosmetics as Contextual*

Critiques often levelled at cosmetics use have to do with how it's use is influenced by a patriarchal society and in extension by how it contributes to the pressure women face to meet conventional beauty standards, however, it appears that makeup is used for a far wider variety of reasons. This frame doesn't account for the femme lesbian construction surrounding cosmetics, or that used by genderqueer folx subverting the gender binary, varying locational and cultural contexts of use, obligatory versus authentic uses, or any number of women who wore makeup for the pleasure of decorating their bodies and not for audiences. And as it has already been said, in regard to this final group, it may be the assumption that women could not possibly be performing

a behavior for themselves instead of men that is toxic and oppressive, rather than the makeup itself.

Some of the most common arguments against makeup and cosmetics appeared to be based on a unilateral understanding of its use. However, as a tool of expression, the use of makeup is too varied and contextual for critique regarding inherent value. The purpose of its use, the level of obligation involved, and the identity of the user often seemed, in both the literature and the interviews, were deeply important when interpreting makeup as oppressive or empowering. By looking at these factors as well as the wider identity of the user and their methods of expression, one can achieve a far more complex, satisfying answer than by making mere summations.

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