

Making Women: A Look at the Darker Messages of Cosmetics
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Abstract

Makeup is worn by many women on a daily basis and yet the messages behind makeup and the effects these messages have on how women see themselves remain largely unexamined. Makeup is an important way in which young girls are initiated into the role of proper women and reinforces the belief that a woman's body is something to be examined and judged. Furthermore, makeup suggests to women that their physical appearance is naturally flawed and therefore needs to be concealed or altered. Such messages deny women the opportunity to be their authentic selves. Makeup is often described as a enjoyable pursuit for women but a deeper look reveals makeup's close connection to patriarchy. These darker themes are nowhere as prevalent as with aging products. Aging is cast as a disease and the cosmetic industry capitalizes on the anxiety it creates in order to sell women expensive beauty products. This research merits further attention in order to understand what thoughts motivate women to use makeup and the anxieties created when women are denied the use of makeup.

Take a peak into my makeup bag: 46\$ for Skin Foundation, a “ long-wearing formula evens tone, minimizes the appearance of pores, conceals imperfections,” 33\$ for Creamy Congealer that will “brighten dark circles [and] helps maintain skin's moisture levels for a smooth, virtually line-less look, \$24 for Everything Mascara with an “all-in-one formula that lengthens, thickens, and defines” and 17\$ for L’Oreal Revitalift, an anti-wrinkle and firming moisturizer (bobbibrowncosmetics.com). As a 22-year-old college student and self-proclaimed feminist, I apply makeup once, sometimes twice daily and with each application experience a slight confidence boost. So although makeup is costly, it is otherwise harmless, right? Well, maybe not...

Makeup communicates the value that our society places on women’s physical appearance and serves to initiate young girls into womanhood, introducing and providing a means to practice conformity and inauthenticity, which for many women serve as critical survival skills throughout their lifetime. As enabling what is framed as a necessary transformation of women, makeup stems from and reinforces deeply troubling messages that reflect society’s attitudes towards women. Through makeup use and other cultural practices, these attitudes are eventually internalized, allowing the makeup industry to capitalize on the very anxiety it helped create. Nowhere is the makeup industry’s manipulation of women as profound as with the medicalization of the aging process.

Attractiveness plays a significant role in the lives of women as physical appearance is considered an important element of the female gender identity (Haboush, Warren & Benuto, 2012, p.669). According to objectification theory, the objectification of women causes society and women themselves to view the female body as something to be looked at, evaluated, enjoyed or derided. Through depersonalization and dehumanization, women’s bodies are laid bare to

society's exacting standards, nearly insuring that women are left feeling inadequate. Due in particular to self-objectification, women tie their self-esteem to their physical appearance and more specifically to their ability to meet ideal beauty standards. This creates a dangerous situation in which women who feel positively about their appearance report feeling increased self-esteem, social confidence, and more enjoyable social interactions while women who fail to meet societal standards report feeling dejected and depressed (Gentina, Palan & Fosse-Gomez, 2012, p.117). According to Susan Bordo, the feminist philosopher, the pursuit of these ideals alone itself comes at a serious cost, requiring a considerable investment of time, money, and emotional resources and often leaves women, "distracted, depressed, and physically ill..." (Bordo, 1989, p. 323).

Girls are introduced to makeup at a young age, first as a toy, a fun object of play, marketed using characters popular in TV shows and movies (Intel, 2012). In these early years, makeup is another form of pretend, which helps teach appropriate gender roles, just as dolls and cooking sets show girls how to act as mothers and housewives. As adolescence approaches, makeup moves out of the realm of play and suddenly has the potential to become a source of contention between mothers and daughters (Gentina, Palan & Fosse-Gomez, 2012, p.119). This tension is possibly attributed to mothers' perspective that makeup marks a girls entrance into womanhood, a process that most mothers want to delay. Across space and time, rituals play a role in moving an individual from one status to another. With the advent of the modern extended adolescence, the transition to adulthood has become a "progressive training," rather than an isolated event, during which young girls learn and internalize societal expectations, (Gentina, Palan & Fosse-Gomez, 2012, p.116). Makeup plays an important role in this ritual initiation as it represents both a practice that young girls are expected to adopt and represents societal messages

that young girls are supposed to accept. As they enter adolescence girls becoming increasingly concerned with performing gender correctly, which explains their strong affinity for all things believed to express femininity. Moreover, during adolescence girls are eager to be seen as “grown-up,” which results in the idolization of older girls and the hope that by using makeup they will secure their acceptance and entrance into this new status group. The introduction of makeup during adolescence reinforces a gendered appearance-centric society and at the same time provides a means that young girls can adopt to respond to the anxiety affiliated with their new role.

Society operates as if it is possible to know a woman from her physical appearance, particularly from her face. It is assumed that one can perceive information about a woman’s health, competence, sexuality, and psychological state simply by looking at her face. Yet, the introduction of makeup provides women with the ability to manipulate their appearance and thus craft an outward appearance that does not necessarily reflect anything internal but rather that projects the image she wants society to see. The consequences of makeup in the realm of perception are quite interesting. For instance, women who regularly wear makeup are seen as be healthy and energetic whereas women who fail to wear makeup often receive concerned attention about their health or are questioned about the amount of sleep they had the previous night (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p. 57). Dark circles and a dull complexion can signal sickness or lack of sleep, these telling signs practically vanish with the use of makeup. The fact that women intentionally use makeup in order to disguise their tiredness is supported by an posting in The Daily Muse, a blog that “brings you career advice, helps you with your job search, and resources for navigating life as a professional woman.” The posting, “Saving Face: 4 Simple Beauty Tips for the Exhausted and Overworked,” shares a “plan that can be used both preventatively and

during the chaos to keep your skin glowing” (Mueller, 2012). This posting supports the assertion that a woman’s appearance is a topic of public discussion and shows that society has little tolerance for a woman who looks exhausted. The message conveyed by the post is that matter what you achieved or how late you were up, as a woman you are expected to look fresh and pretty, maintaining an inhuman aesthetic. The fact that it’s unacceptable to look tired, even when exhausted makes it clear that women are not allowed to be human. Similarly, a woman who wears makeup is often perceived as more competent and credible. According to research, “Young women can use makeup to try to look older, and thus more credible, older women can use makeup to appear younger, and thus more competent” (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p. 58). As a result, women who are unaware of these connections or unwilling to use makeup to adjust how they look and therefore how they are perceived, find themselves at disadvantage in a society that rewards women largely for their beauty. Moreover, the use of aesthetics as a method for judging competence and credibility clear means that women are being inaccurately evaluated, as the two are clearly uncorrelated.

Similarly, society often assumes that sexuality can be read from an individual’s body. And as such, the makeup is interpreted as an accessory that marks a woman as heterosexual since apparently makeup shows “respect for, or caring for, men and their opinions” (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p. 57). And yet upon reflection, makeup has nothing to do with sexuality as homosexuals, heterosexuals and everyone in between has the ability to wear makeup. Moreover, wearing makeup is rather low cost for women and thus any woman who wants to project a heterosexual identity can capitalize on this stereotype. The ease with which makeup can be manipulated shows that makeup is neither a valid nor reliable indicator of sexuality. In the same vein, makeup use is often interpreted as a marker of mental health. On in-patient units, a woman’s use of

makeup is often understood as a sign of movement towards recovery while a disinterest in makeup is interpreted as if it were a refusal to eat or shower. This view suggests that wearing makeup is an important way that a woman takes care of herself, rather than simply an aesthetic choice (Jeffreys, 2005). A quick look around the world reveals that there are mentally stable women who do not wear makeup as well as mentally unstable individuals who do wear makeup, again calling into question the use of makeup as a conveyer of meaning. Treating a woman's physical appearance as a reliable indicator of anything internal is problematic as makeup provides women with both the ability and an imperative to both monitor and alter her appearance in order to project what is considered socially appropriate. The smoke and mirrors ability that makeup provides women brings with it certain advantages but ultimately robs women of their freedom to be authentic, instead providing a means, and a responsibility, to conform.

Underlying makeup, there are several powerful messages, which often get ignored. Makeup covers dark circles, lengthen eyelashes, and blushes cheeks, transforming the self or at least the appearance of the self. Makeup communicates the message that "women's bodies must be altered in some way—that their natural state is unacceptable" (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p.55). Women are expected to invest their money, time, and energy into altering their natural state so that "the face, and the person, undergoes a significant elevation, existentially, morally, and aesthetically" (Carter, 2011, p.105). This suggests that although objectively makeup operates on the surface, it is believed to have implications for the woman as a whole and its use reflects something important about her character.

In descriptions of the changes that makeup causes for the individual, it becomes apparent that makeup does far more than just make a face look pretty but instead operates as a means of controlling disorder, normalizing women, and discipline their bodies. For instance, makeup

evens out the skin tone, conceals pimples, and covers dark circles, thus erasing the flaws that if left unchecked, represent one of the worst kinds of chaos for a looks-obsessed society, ugliness (Carter, 2011). Framing women's natural state as a threat that needs to be controlled, warns women that they must be vigilant of their own appearance since it could erupt into chaos at any moment if unchecked. This anxiety and distrust of one's own appearance creates a deeply troubling relationship to with self. Similarly, makeup in many ways removes or covers up those elements that make individuals look unique. According to Bordo, makeup, "is always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal" (Bordo, 1989, p.311). Here the narrowness of our society's beauty standards is revealed and it becomes clear that makeup exists as a tool that assists women on meeting these homogenous ideals. And since they are granted this tool, there is the expectation that women make use of it and conform. Finally, makeup serves to discipline the female body by providing products and practices for women to use in order to squeeze themselves into the narrow boundaries in which female bodies are expected to exist (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Makeup implies that the female body needs to be transformed, controlled, normalized, and disciplined since the natural female body is unacceptable, ugly, and out of control. These troubling messages are evidenced in the way in which makeup is discussed among women and in the way it is advertised and yet rarely is attention dedicated to exploring these messages or the implications that their internalization must have on a woman's self-esteem.

Although popular media largely avoids any deeper conversation surrounding makeup, those that do engage in such discussions largely present makeup in one of two ways, either as a socially empowering and pleasurable pursuit/tool or as a representation and tool of patriarchy. The framing of makeup in purely positive terms misconstrues the role makeup plays in women's

lives, ignoring the deeper message and the impact they have on women. Those who are pro-makeup, frame it as socially positive for women both in the choice it offers and the benefits its use provides. For instance, these individuals argue that since women are free to choose whether to wear makeup or not, makeup represents exactly the kind of liberation fought for by feminists. However if one considers the negative social consequences of not wearing makeup it becomes questionable whether women can actually freely choose to wear makeup. The opposition argues that makeup has “become a requirement that women [can] not escape instead of a sign of liberation” (Jeffreys, 2005, p.113).

Others who view makeup positively, point out that not only is makeup freely chosen but that it can be used as a tool by women to gain social rewards. For instance, makeup allows women to assert their femininity and increase their attractiveness. And research shows that attractive women for the most part have higher incomes, more advantageous relationships, and feel better about themselves (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). From this viewpoint, makeup wearers are “active agents who perform beauty work to consciously reap certain rewards and avoid stigma” (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p.64). According to this logic, women who wear makeup clearly understand that makeup makes them more attractive, that there is benefits associated with attractiveness and therefore choose to use makeup as a socially advantageous tool. Although this argument does acknowledge that women operate in a system that objectifies them, it is nevertheless framed in positive terms and completely fails to challenge the system. These individuals do not stop to question the fact that the system distributes rewards to women solely based on physical attributes.

Still others, less concerned with the social power, simply frame makeup as a pleasurable bonding experience for women. For these individuals, makeup use is an intrinsically rewarding

experience. The ritual of putting on makeup, of taking time for oneself, of making oneself feel beautiful is depicted as providing a source of enjoyment and comfort to women (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Yet, it appears that these advocates overlook the time and money that makeup incurs and the anxiety, which motivates and surrounds its use. Moreover, these individuals argue that makeup provides a shared experience over which women can bond. This argument falls rather flat as there are numerous issues over which women could unite and so the celebration of makeup for having a unique ability to create solidarity among women is a rather weak argument. Not to mention the messages that underlie makeup as discussed above are critical of women in their natural state, which makes makeup a rather troubling topic for women to bond over.

In contrast to the positive presentation of makeup, there is a growing consensus about makeup's connection to patriarchy. These individuals acknowledge the arguments made by those who argue in favor of makeup, providing a rebuttal to each of their assertions. In response to the argument that makeup is empowering for women, these individuals argue that women are deceiving themselves when they make this assertion. These individuals suggest that in order to argue that women make a real choice to wear makeup, one must ignore both the circumstances under which this decision is made and the implications of this decision. Of course, a woman can either put makeup on when going out or not but it is important to understand the social pressure and consequences of this simple decision (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011).

In searching to understand why so many women reject the idea that makeup is part of the patriarchic system, these individuals introduce the concept of the neoliberal self. Above all else, the neoliberal self values autonomy and thus to admit that their use of makeup is guided by anything but free choice would challenge their value system around which they orient their lives (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p.117). Instead, these women frame makeup in unthreatening terms,

by “pre-emptively undermining an assumed feminist critique in which patriarchy requires from women active efforts to comply with narrow beauty standards” (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p.117). This framing is understood as an effort to protect their sense of independence and allows them to ignore the extent to which societal norms truly guide their behavior. These individuals argue that by prematurely dismissing the idea that patriarchy is involved, the opposition “displaces any engagement with a critique of the darker side of beauty ideals” (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p.118). In contrast, the movement that challenges the use of makeup calls for a skeptical attitude and the use of consciousness raising to produce an awareness of the ways in which the other side’s proactive framing ignores the darker side of makeup and the

Individuals who question the innocence of makeup also address the argument that since it is largely women who promote makeup that means that makeup is free from patriarchal influence. In refuting this claim, these individuals need only invoke the concept of hegemony, the indirect or passive domination of one group over others. Hegemony provides a successful regulation system as it allows for the exercise of control with minimal effort. With makeup for instance, women, whether those selling products or a woman’s friends, largely self-police other women, thereby upholding the patriarchic value system with minimal male interference (Carey, Donaghue & Broderick, 2011, p.301). These individuals cite traditional practices such as foot binding, to make the point that there are multiple “harmful cultural practices [that] are frequently carried out by and among women when the agency of men is not apparent” (Jeffreys, 2005, p.116). The concepts of hegemony and the existence of other similar cultural practices suggest that a visible male presence is not necessary to indicate patriarchal control.

Beyond addressing the arguments that frame makeup in positive terms, those who question makeup argue that makeup is based on and reinforces gender hierarchies and power

relations. In terms of gender hierarchies, makeup as one form of beauty work, is a way of performing traditional female gender, and as such by wearing makeup women express and thus perpetuate traditional femininity (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p.60). Moreover, women are expected to use makeup to not only meet society's beauty standards but they must do so effortlessly, which perpetuates the stereotype of femininity as a natural, effortless feat (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p.59). Regarding power relation, these individuals argue that unequal power relations insure that women have little real choice when it comes to issues of conformity. For instance, at work, women feel compelled to follow gender and cultural norms since they as a minority group they are not in a position to weather the added discrimination that would result from rebellion (Jeffreys, 2005, p.126). As such, the choices that society offers women are in most cases, not actually choices.

Makeup's connection to power relations is also evidenced by trend in which increased opportunities for women have been accompanied by increasingly restricted female body practices (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). As women seek to enter positions of power and prestige, they are distracted by and made to feel dependent upon the pursuit of physical attractiveness. According to many, these practices are "diversionary and subverting," and represent attempts to prevent gender equality (Bordo, 1989, p. 309). In the context of beauty conformity women are faced with an impossible decision in which either option perpetuates their marginalization and unequal status. Women can either rejects societal norms and be caste as unattractive, unenergetic, lesbians, and thus marginalized. Or women can attempt to pursue societal beauty standards and thus support a system that objectifies and discriminates their sex, remaining marginalized and sexualized.

Makeup encourages a preoccupation with the women's physical appearance and this vigilance translates into a hyperawareness of the aging process. As aging becomes a concern, makeup takes on additional significance as it offers a potential way to cope with aging and the related anxiety. From a young age, society transmits the message that old age is not only undesirable but in fact evil. The media is one of the main conduits through which these negative representations of old age are delivered. Take for instance the dichotomy presented in Disney movies with the old wrinkled villainess and the young, youthful princess (Smirnova, 2012, p.1240). Eventually these pervasive negative associations with old age become personal as women have the anxiety provoking realization that aging represents their own fate. A recent study shows how this fear is shaped by our culture as the greater extent to which a woman internalizes North American beauty ideals the greater the likelihood that she will develop anxiety about aging (Haboush, Warren & Benuto, 2012, p. 676). And as anxiety of aging develops, there is an increased likelihood of purchasing makeup and related anti-aging products. According to the National Institute on Aging, aging is a normal process but it is one that our society fears due to our obsession with attractiveness, which is believed to vanish with age. The role that appearance plays in signaling a woman's health, competence, and sexuality insures that any threat to women's physical appearance is interpreted as socially significant and therefore aging is in a sense social death. The anxiety associated with the aging process is further amplified by the discourse surrounding aging.

Aging is cast as a disease in our society and this choice of framing shapes the attitude towards, understanding of, and reaction to the process. In looking at the dialogue surrounding aging, it is clear that efforts have been made to have aging meet the main criteria for constituting a disease. For instance, diseases are anxiety provoking because they threaten loss and are

associated with uncertainty. This is true for aging as well. As women begin to age, they are told that there is no way to predict how her body will deteriorate and that all will now is that if unchecked, it will not be pretty. Additionally, the aging process threatens the loss of attractiveness, potentially diminishing a woman's social cache and sense of self. Similarly, diseases are typically understood to have a set of physical symptoms, which can be located on the body. Aging is located in the skin and some of its signs or symptoms are, "wrinkles, sagging breasts, and fragile skin" (Smirnova, 2012, p.1237). As evidenced by the list of symptoms, framing aging as a disease results in the biomedicalization of the skin (Smirnova, 2012, p.1236). Moreover, diseases are typically understood to effect a certain population and according to VivaWomen.net, a website promoting, "naturally beauty inside and out," women need to begin to worry about aging at age 30 but the site warns that "visible aging of the skin actually starts at about age 25" (Sesame, 2012). But since all women will age, barring premature death, all women are at risk of contracting the aging disease, and for those women over 25 or 30, the process has already begun. Continuing on with the parallel, diseases have the potential to be devastating but there is typically the belief, or hope that it is possible to prevent, treat, and possibly cure illnesses. Framing aging as a disease suggests that the same is true with aging, which effects how women the process. Aging becomes a "threat from which people ought to protect themselves and/or engage in preventive measures" (Smirnova, 2012, p.1236). Armed with the knowledge that they are at risk, women take action to prevent or treat the natural process of aging.

Framing aging as a disease shapes the language and nature of the discussion surrounding the process. Advertisements, websites, blogs, and advice columns on aging routinely cite doctors in an attempt to legitimize the aging as medical condition arguments and increase sales of anti-aging products. Moreover, the content on these sites use medical buzzwords and scientific

language. For instance, on Vivawoman.net Dr. Wright explains that “as we get older production of collagen – the protein which acts as scaffolding to the skin – slows, and elastin, the substance that enables skin to snap back into place, has less spring and can even break” (Sesame, 2012).

The use of words like collagen and elastin are intended to impress upon readers the serious and medical nature of aging. Using such approaches to solidify aging as a disease, it is then possible to suggest a medical treatment for aging, cosmeceuticals. The term cosmeceuticals playfully combines terms cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, thereby creating a tie to the pharmaceutical industry that helps to justify the medicalization of aging (Smirnova, 2012, page 1237).

Cosmeceuticals include skin creams and serums, which are said to contain “cell renewal ingredients that can encourage collagen production and help prevent fine lines” (Sesame, 2012).

Serum, the protein-rich liquid part of blood, is invoked to create the connection between these products and natural healing properties and the reference to cell renewal similarly suggests that these products create fundamental biological change. The invocation of scientific and medical approaches in response to the disease of aging helps support the extremely profitable makeup industry. According to a recent article in the Huffington Post, anti-aging skin care is a booming industry and “by some estimates, the U.S. market for cosmeceutical products-cosmetics with medicine-based ingredients—is approaching \$20 billion a year (Crary, 2011). The makeup industry is so successful due to its ability to monopolize as the sole cure for the disease of aging, using the message “Aging is your fault and we’ve got the cure” (Crary, 2011). By marketing its products to all women using a fear campaign, in which the industry introduces a disease, only to offer a cure, enables the makeup industry to continue to achieve unprecedented profitability to motivate their purchases (Haboush, Warren & Benuto, 2012, p.669).

Not only is the makeup industry one of the largest perpetrators of understanding of old age as a disease but it also does little to help women through the process. On a practical level, despite their high cost the anti-aging cosmeceuticals do not have a dramatic on women's appearance. These false promises likely result from the fact that unlike prescription drugs, anti-aging cosmetics are not subject to government testing (Crary, 2011). And on another level, the existence of makeup creates a nearly impossible situation for women to navigate. Society values youth and beauty and so it seems that it would be socially advantageous for women to use makeup and anti-aging products in order to make themselves appear younger. Yet research indicates that women who use makeup to adjust their age appearance are received negatively. These women were understood as trying to pass as belonging to a social group that that they actually did not belong to and thus were seen as deceitful (Schoemann & Branscombe, 2011, p. 89). As this effect was greatest among young adults who strongly identified with their age group it is likely that the use of makeup products to conceal age was received negatively as because these women were seen as impostors who posed a threat to group identity (Schoemann & Branscombe, 2011, p. 93). And so aging women find themselves in a nearly impossible situation. Women can either choose to age naturally and as their looks deteriorate become socially devalued and marginalized or they can attempt to avoid aging or at least mask its effects using anti-aging products and therefore be derided as impostors and again socially stigmatized.

The feminist movement seeks to empower to live the lives they desire, unrestricted by unequal power relations and gendered hierarchies. Therefore, if a woman wants to invest her time and money into makeup, that is her prerogative, right? But it is crucial to first insure that this is a choice that can be freely made. In order to do so, work must be done on two levels, both in terms of research and in terms of social action. First, it is important to understand just what

drives women to wear makeup. A study should attempt to record the women's thoughts as they embark on their makeup ritual—what is it that they are saying to themselves or thinking about that motivates the mascara. Similarly, a study is needed to understand the anxiety that arises for women who are denied the ability to wear makeup, what is their internal dialogue, what are they saying to themselves that makes this anxious?

Let's return to the 22-year-old college student and her makeup regime. Her makeup ritual is, if nothing else, a significant financial drain. But beyond that, makeup problematizes her sense of self, by legitimizing a connection between her appearance and her self-esteem. By choosing to wear makeup and cover up her natural state, she is clearly good, beautiful, competent, and heterosexual. Otherwise, unaltered, she is bad, ugly, lazy, and her sexuality is questioned. Maybe it's time for her to take off the makeup in order to understand what she is really made of, rather than what she and society have used makeup to make her.

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