

**The Idealized Feminine Self:  
Effortlessly Sexy, Confident, and Cool**

Jasmine Simone

The University of California Santa Cruz

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### Abstract

This article explores how women negotiate beauty and body image practices within the context of mass media paying particular attention to the relationship between psychological states and representations of femininity. Drawing on contemporary research, this work is based on an analysis of feminist and psychological theories alongside a popular beauty tutorial series titled *Beauty Secrets* published by Conde Nast and Vogue magazine on the brand's YouTube social media channel. The videos feature celebrities and influencers from across the globe who discuss and perform their beauty and skincare routines in detail within the context that they are sharing "beauty secrets" with their fans, followers, and consumers of popular media. In addition to providing details typically in a beauty tutorial, the contributors discuss their personal experiences and notions of what beauty means to them, how and where they first learned about makeup and beauty practices, and their viewpoints on using visual appearances as a tool to achieve creative expression, confidence, and self-care. When talking about beautification practices they formulated narratives about their own approaches to beauty practices, and draw on various discourses that place women's beautification routines as a highly-skilled, often pleasurable learned behavior that is regularly required in their subjective experiences of life in front of a camera or on social media. Consumers and creators of popular media have adopted and adapted an idealized femininity that is self-confident, sexually empowered, physically enhanced, and habitually appearance-ready for the possibility of photos being posted online. The findings suggest that popular media strongly influences the ideals of femininity and self-confidence which emerges from a women's personal production of visual appearances by using specific beautification practices

and by composing correlating psychological states in relation to appearance. Cultural and media influences on perspectives of beauty and body image are complex and multi-layered. This paper seeks to understand the intertwined relationship between popular culture, women's beautification processes, and psychological states, while examining the fluctuation between contradictory, yet coexisting, visual and narrative discourses including the "no-makeup makeup" look, and makeup as a tool for self-care. The analysis is based on qualitative in-depth examination of Vogue's *Beauty Secrets* videos posted to youtube, and the findings are discussed in the light of Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performance and Fredrickson and Roberts's Objectification Theory of internalized objects of sexual desires in our appearance-based culture.

*Keywords:* femininity, beautification processes, empowerment, body image, mass media, popular culture, women's magazines, social media

## Introduction

Society frequently calls on women and girls to perform multiple beautification processes to transform the body, heighten sexuality, and pursue specific psychological states in order to produce an idealized version of femininity. Media plays a large role in promoting feminine beauty standards by encouraging the participation of female body management and beautification processes through corporate advertising, women's magazines, and social media circulation. Media messages that promote beautification processes are often paired with conflicting messages of self-love, body acceptance, and encouragement of a confident attitude. The pressures to create a hyper-feminine appearance through the use of beauty products and procedures is often paired with the paradoxical message that women should look effortlessly natural and physically confident.

Beautification processes include the actions of manipulating one's body to enhance, improve, or alter one's physical appearance. These practices often involve applying makeup and skincare products topically to the face and body, as well as, more permanent or semi-permanent procedures such as cosmetic surgeries, injections, augmentations, and other invasive and non-invasive treatments.

In response to Foucault's account in *Discipline and Punish* of disciplined bodies acting as tools in service of modern institutions, Sandra Lee Barkey (1998) forms an additional assertion that gendered disciplines are applied to the feminine body as ornamented surfaces. Practices of femininity have evolved to include various styles, shapes, "cultural obsessions, and preoccupations" that are performed by feminized bodies (1998). The disciplinary practices that are unique to the bodies of women seem to be a near endless list as Barkey points out:

“A woman's skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought. Hair must be removed not only from the face but from large surfaces of the body as well, from legs and thighs, an operation accomplished by shaving, buffing with fine sandpaper, or applying foul-smelling depilatories. With the new high-leg bathing suits and leotards, a substantial amount of pubic hair must be removed too. The removal of facial hair can be more specialized. Eyebrows are plucked out by the roots with tweezers. Hot wax is sometimes poured onto the mustache and cheeks and then ripped away when it cools. The woman who wants a more permanent result may try electrolysis: this involves the killing of a hair root by the passage of an electric current down a needle that has been inserted into its base. The procedure is painful and expensive.

The development of what one "beauty expert" calls "good skincare habits" requires not only attention to health, the avoidance of strong facial expressions; and the performance of facial exercises, but the regular use of skincare preparations, many to be applied more often than once a day: cleansing lotions (ordinary soap and water 'upsets the skin's acid and alkaline balance'), wash-off cleansers (milder than cleansing lotions), astringents, toners, makeup removers, night creams, nourishing creams, eye creams, moisturizers, skin balancers, body lotions, hand creams, lip pomades, suntan lotions, sunscreens, and facial masks. Provision of the proper facial mask is complex: there are sulfur masks for pimples; oil or hot masks for dry areas; if these fail, then tightening masks; conditioning masks; peeling masks; cleansing masks made of herbs, cornmeal, or almonds; and mudpacks. Black women may wish to use "fade creams" to "even skin

tone.” Skincare preparations are never just sloshed onto the skin, but applied according to precise rules: eye cream is dabbed on gently in movements toward, never away from, the nose; cleansing cream is applied in outward directions only, straight down the nose and up and out on the cheeks.” (Bartky 1998, p. 31-32)

The extensive list of skincare maintenance does not even begin to address the many other avenues of modern self-care that women regularly participate in such as diet plans, fitness routines, intermittent fasting, striving for healthy relationships, improved mental health, advanced knowledge of makeup products, makeup ingredients, or complex makeup application techniques. Disciplined applications of aesthetic management that have emerged or gained popularity in the last few years include laser hair removal, Intense Pulsed Light treatments, LED facials, gua sha stone facial massages, lymphatic drainage, lifting, sculpting, treatments for puffy eyes, lengthened lashes, glowing skin, sensitive skin, collagen production, fine lines, sculpted eyebrows, sagging necks, scowling jawlines, and glossy—but never grey—hair color worn in a fashionable style with the use of high-quality professional tools. Body modification practices that Bartky couldn’t even imagine discussing at the time of her publication are the less-talked-about procedures of botox, rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, breast lift, forehead lift, body contouring, liposuction, tummy tuck, a mommy makeover, body sculpting, thermal eye enhancement, eyelid reshaping, laser resurfacing, hand rejuvenation, sweat gland procedures, micro-needling, dermal peels, and photo-rejuvenation treatments.

Facial and body modification procedures are often performed to obtain the current trend of a perfectly symmetrical face with high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, full lips, and the an hourglass silhouette that is ‘snatched’ at all the right places to highlight the shape of a large,

curvy bottom, a waist that is trained to angle toward the midline, and large breasts revealing curvaceous cleavage. Even with so much emphasis on the shape of the body, finer details can not be neglected such as smooth, sun kissed skin, long lashes, extra-long sleek hair, perfectly curled and moisturized natural hair for Black women, large glossy lips, a bunny-sloped nose, fox-shaped eyes, dewy skin, hairless surfaces, and a perfectly-applied face of makeup that lasts throughout the day without revealing a single crease or showing any indication that a hint of makeup is present.

Cosmetic surgery's have been on the rise over the past five years with a new spike in body-shaping procedures such as fat reduction, breast augmentations, and liposuction (American Society Of Plastic Surgeon 2019). The United States leads the world in cosmetic procedures—surgical and non-surgical—with over 17.7 million performed in 2018 with a rise to 18.1 million in the year 2019 (ISAPS 2018 and ASPS 2019). In comparison with men, women account for over 87% of all cosmetic surgical procedures in the United States (ASPS 2018). With these types of enhancements and modifications becoming so prominent, the distinction between masculine and feminine features of the face and body continue to become 'strikingly different' and require even more maintenance for women (Bartkey, 1998). It is difficult to determine if women are performing multiple beautification processes for their own pleasure, or "in obedience to the requirements of femininity" (1998). It is no wonder that our culture has ranked makeup and skincare tutorials as the largest category of videos on the YouTube platform (YouTube, 2018). It would take a lifetime to learn everything a women needs to know to carry out each of these feminized beauty practices, and the capacity to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars.



## **Idealized Femininity**

### ***The Performance of Femininity***

In the essay “Performative Acts of Gender,” Judith Butler builds on Simone de Beauvoir’s theory that “to be a woman is to have to *become* a woman” (1988, p. 523). Each body is stylized in obedience with cultural and historical norms in order to perform a social construction of gender. As an act, gender is performed and reproduced with such consistencies that its origins are concealed and its actors believe gender performance to be natural and necessary (Butler, 1988 p.522). “The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (p. 523). Therefore, the performance of femininity is an artful achievement of cultural compliance enacted on the body. Butler describes gender performance as a theatrical, role-playing act, which positions the hair and makeup-heavy performance of femininity as a normalized and repetitive reality for cis- hetero- women, but which reveals itself as an exaggeration when performed by drag queens and transwomen, especially when outside of an entertainment theater setting. Performing femininity in compliance with social standards confirms one’s femininity and social approval of appearance; conflicting with the expectations of gender performance can have strict consequences (Butler, 1988) Butler argues that the strategy of performing gender can be considered a cultural survival tactic, which if ignored or rebelled against has strict consequences. Performing modern beauty and femininity standards is not passive, nor predestined; it is demanded and must be innovative to each individual; an act to be performed “under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (Butler, 1988, p. 531)—never relinquishing power to the actor—only through its perpetual performance can a sense of confidence and empowerment be provided.

***The Demand of Femininity in Relation to Internalized Self-Discipline***

Women and girls are constantly aware of how their bodies will be looked at and evaluated. When women participate in feminine beautification practices to produce particular appearances, women may experience certain rewards or benefits such as compliments, a feeling of being well-received or listened to, and a sense that “doors just open for you.” The pressure to conform seems to come from no where specific, nor from a particular person or source, yet the pressure to conform is constantly being felt by women. There’s a popular narrative that women get dressed for other women and that men simply *don’t care* about women’s looks or how much effort goes into getting ready. This narrative makes it seem as if men are removed from the role of pressuring or judging women to look a certain way; however, when a women presents herself in a way that is not considered feminine, she may experience comments about how she ‘should’ wear makeup or how she looks tired. The pressures may intensify if a women continues to choose to *not* to participate in producing a particular level of femininity. She may also experience her partner or love interest not feeling attracted to her or fear that they may become interested in another. There are real and perceived consequences of not engaging in feminized beautification practices in order to present a particular type of appearance.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that women and girls are viewed as objects of sexual desires in our appearance-based culture. The feeling of being constantly observed leads to ‘habitual body monitoring’ which leads to an increased internalization of objectification. Shame, anxiety, and a decreased flow state of mental capacity affects women and girls, leading to increased depression, body monitoring, and additional physical and psychological health risks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, 2006). Historically

women are expected to appear and conduct themselves with particular expectations of bodily shape, size, smoothness, posture, gestures, facial expressions, dress, spatiality, and movement (Bartky 1990). Modern expectations of women have expanded into pressures to apply makeup regularly, be sexually empowered, project confidence, and maintain that all of these practices are effortless and enjoyable. Yet if we look deeper, the standards that women are held to can be psychologically and economically damaging, leading to internalized self-objectification and a heightened sense of the way women are “supposed” to look (Bartky 1990).

If women are being constantly monitored and and pressured to perform a particular idealized version of femininity, how much agency do women have to truly accept themselves as they are when they look in the mirror? If a woman decides to leave dark circles under her eyes when she goes to work does that make her brave? Tolerant of other’s remarks? Invincible to judgement? Exhausted from evading micro-aggressions about her appearance? Or drained from fielding questions about her personal life? There are a variety of responses a women could have to that type of situation and the pressures of performing femininity on a daily basis, but it’s not only in-person interactions that she has to sort through.

## **The Influence of Popular Media**

### ***Media Literacy, Self-empowerment, and self-responsibility***

Women are expected to have high rates of media literacy in understanding identity and representation in a culture that uses *empowerment* ‘to to sell everything from liquid detergents to breast augmentation surgery.’ (Gill, 2012, p. 736). Gill points out that even though women are able to criticize and analyze media, this skill does not make them immune from media

representations that they feel they have to live up to (2012). Perhaps most importantly is the suggestion that women themselves are to be the responsible party in how they perceive and are effected by media representations, while the media itself is not responsible. If someone feels unsatisfied or insecure about their looks, the expectation is that they do not have confidence in themselves, or that they simply are not trying hard enough to participate in beautifying themselves. The suggestion is that with enough time, money, and effort, anyone can be beautiful and empowered. As individuals, women are rarely offered a pass for not understanding the complications of media messaging. They are expected to be able to sort through advertisements, women's magazines, social media, and movies with the cunning sharpness of a wise women who knows what they want and how to get it. The problem with this approach is is that it does not consider the toll of constantly having to sort through media messaging in order to land on a unique and authentic expression of your true, happy self. As a society, we do not expect people of color to be responsible for filtering racist media as a strategy to eradicating racism; therefore society should not expect the same of women around representations of sexual empowerment and self-objectification (2012). And yet, we hold women responsible for feeling subjected to particular standards of beauty and psychological states.

### ***Mass Media as the Primary Source of Understanding Modern Femininity***

Popular media sources such as magazines, advertising, music videos and individually-made media content such as beauty tutorials and social media posts construct broad discourses about social dynamics and norms related to, for instance, class, power, privilege, and political and social norms (Ytre-Arne 2014). Specifically, a dominant perspective of femininity and

constructions of gender are promoted, taught, and recreated throughout media channels. Feminist media scholars, such as Brita Ytre-Arne, have observed discrepancies between women media consumers and the portrayal of women's lives online or in printed magazines. Research shows that women have an understanding of their own socioeconomic status and identities that contrast with the content that is featured in women's magazines. Many are lead to question the motives of the media source and publisher's motives, as well as, the feeling that their the role in society has been reinforced (2014). Furthermore, research has found that women view certain types of media as a means to allow themselves to fantasize and daydream about an ideal self while looking for ways to bridge the gap between their own realities and the media they consume (2014), therefore using media as a visual and textual resource to not only escape from reality, but also to construct their idealized selves. Following Giddens' theory on reflexive modernity, Ytre-Arne argues that lifestyle journalism in women's magazines provides highly relevant information that women use to construct conditions of self-identity narratives and are used as resources for reflection (2014). This critical and romanticized view of media points to a strengthened understanding of one's own position in a social setting and a developed skill of media literacy.

### ***The Psychological Effects of Social Media on the Idealized Self***

Social pressures to perform idealized femininity can be readily seen on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, as well as, in women's glossy magazines. Previous research has found that women view certain types of media as a means to allow themselves to fantasize about an ideal self while looking for ways to bridge the gap between their own realities and the media they consume, therefore using media as a visual resource to construct their

idealized selves (Ytre-Arne, 2014). Women who self-objectify their bodies are more likely to manipulate their photos before posting online, leading to feelings of deception about their online presentation, which, in turn, results in participants having stronger feeling of depression.

Furthermore, self-objectification leads women to participate in increased behaviors of body surveillance, which may, in turn, encourage women to view their body as an object and continue to lead to further self-objectification. In analyzing how many photos a women takes before posting to social media, researchers have determined that this behavior suggests that women do not accept their real selves (Lamp, Cugle, Silverman, Thomas, Liss, and Erchull, 2019). By not accepting oneself and performing behaviors to change ones' appearance before posting online, the unrealistic beauty standards of women are upheld and perpetuated, leading to further objectification of women, self-objectification, and negative outcomes such as depression.

Additionally, women who use social media feel pressured to create realities offline “preparing” for the possibility of photos being posted online; referred to as *appearance-related social media consciousness* (Choukas-Bradley, Nesi, Widman, & Higgins, 2019). Expanding on Objectification Theory, Choukas-Bradley, Nesi, Widman, & Higgins (2019) conclude that those who reported greater appearance-related social media consciousness participated in increased body monitoring, body surveillance, and lower levels of body esteem, which, in turn, leads to an increased tendency to compare to others online and offline, and greater depressive symptoms. The authors point to the appearance-based content of social media as being a reason that many young women feel motivated to present idealized images of themselves and feel that they always have to be “camera-ready,” while believing that their physical attractiveness is one of the most important aspects of their physical selves. Young women reported comparing themselves to

others, while also feeling distracted by the physical expectations of social media both online and offline shifting their attention to their physical presentation in preparation for an online audience. This behavior and psychological shift has potential implications for body image concerns and depressive symptoms. Researchers report *appearance-related social media consciousness* with increased body surveillance, increased self-objectification, increased comparisons of self and others, increased body dissatisfaction, increased disruption of flow state, increased dieting behavior, and increased depressive symptoms such as lowered levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and well-being (Sabik, Justyna, & Jessica 2020) and (Lamp, Cugle, Silverman, Thomas, Liss, & Erchull, 2019). By examining how the pressures of social media can be seen offline in young women's responses of becoming more aware of self-objectification and body surveillance, we can see how social media affects young women's mental health and well-being.

### **Vogue's Beauty Secrets**

In our modern, fast-paced, internet-age era, most women and girls learn beauty and fashion tips and tricks from popular media sources such as YouTube beauty tutorials, magazines, beauty blogs, and Instagram influencers. Social media is the number one source of digital video content in the US, with YouTube as the second most popular social media platform (Oberlo, 2020). Makeup and skincare tutorials make up the largest category of videos on the YouTube platform (YouTube, 2018). Beauty-related content generated more than 169 billion views on the video platform in 2018 (YouTube, 2018). Videos produced by independent beauty vloggers make up the largest group of content creators, with branded beauty vlogs featuring a diverse and widely-known list of personalities. One of the most popular video playlists featured on

YouTube's platform is the *Vogue Beauty Secrets* series which features well-known celebrities and public figures that perform and narrate specific elements of their beauty routines and discuss psychological beauty philosophies directed specifically to their fans and viewers. Vogue describes their *Beauty Secrets* video series on their webpage: "This intimate series takes us in the bathroom with well-known and beloved beauty, fashion, and pop culture faces. *Beauty Secrets* shows the routine and products beloved by the biggest stars" (Vogue Beauty Secrets, [vogue.com](http://vogue.com)). These videos are a significant source of material to draw from because they feature insights into popular cultures' expectations of beauty norms, the details of beautification processes, philosophies around makeup and beauty enhancement, and at times, a revealing look at the vlogger's psychological reasons for participating in general or specific makeup, skincare, haircare, and body care practices. Vogue selects each participant to produce the brand's desired effect and viewership. Vogue's YouTube channel describes its influence on culture as:

"Placing fashion in the context of culture and the world we live in—how we dress, live and socialize; what we eat, listen to and watch; who leads and inspires us. Vogue immerses itself in fashion, always leading readers to what will happen next. Thought-provoking, relevant and always influential, Vogue defines the culture of fashion."

(Vogue, [youtube.com](http://youtube.com))

With the creation of this category of beauty videos, Vogue is telling society that the beauty industry and the beautification practices that follow are considered a part of a women's fashion routine, and maybe more importantly, that the secrets that lie within the videos will be revealed by our culture's elite celebrities and influencers, not by the average beauty vlogger.



These highly-regarded beauty secrets are available to each of us simply by watching any of the 195 videos currently published in the *Vogue Beauty Secrets* playlist.

The *Vogue Beauty Secrets* video series features women, men, drag queens, and non-binary presenters, with each host sharing a specific beautification routine that they have mastered. Transgendered individuals may or may not use pigmented makeup in their videos, though they are performing specific forms of beauty practices that are considered feminine, such as self-care and skin care, which are not typically practiced by cis- hetero- men. This division of gender practices on the *Beauty Secrets* playlist suggests to viewers that either males do not perform self-care, skin care, or participate in beautification processes, or that the public is simply not interested in viewing masculine-identified performers reveal their beauty routines.

Culture and society are influenced by the beauty routines and practices of celebrities as much as the clothes that are featured in the glossy pages published monthly. I chose *Vogue Beauty Secrets* video series and the philosophies of public figures to make my points about femininity and beauty routines because, as recognizable figures in popular culture, the view points shared by celebrities and notable figures are influential while being relatable to women who closely follow beauty, fashion, and popular culture. The videos provide insight into the psychological musings of its presenters around the topics of makeup, beauty, fitness, mental health, gender, and confidence—especially in regard to how makeup can be used to create specific psychological states such as confidence and individuality. The presenter may mention issues they have experienced related to the struggle of having a prolonged beauty routine or a history of “mistakes” in doing one’s makeup a certain way, or importantly, the lack of confidence

they feel until they cover up blemishes, contour the angles of one's face, or prevent fine lines from forming through out the day.

The Vogue *Beauty Secrets* playlist contains, at the time of this writing, 195 published videos of beauty tutorials. Qualitative data was collected from the top one-third of the *Beauty Secrets* playlist with videos ranked in order of most interactions, which includes an average of the total views, likes, and comments for each video.

### **Learning Idealized Femininity**

One fascinating aspect of Vogue's *Beauty Secrets* videos is that the title of the series *Beauty Secrets* presents certain ideas about how much there is to know about understanding and performing beautification process. With little knowledge of how to apply makeup at a young age, girls often turn to older and more experienced women in their lives for inspiration as role models of the feminine ideal. Girls often see their mothers and friends performing a particular type of femininity and physical enhancement through the use of makeup, curling irons, high heels, and clothing. Kim Kardashian explains a specific aesthetic that she admired about her mom's beauty practices: "I loved my mom's makeup. She always had a red lip—red nails and a red lip—always; so I just loved that about her" (Vogue, 2018, 03:33). In her *Beauty Secrets* tutorial, Liv Tyler points to the framed black and white photographs of her beauty role models, her mom and grandmother, in her bathroom. "That's my mom and my grandma in the back and they're my beauty inspirations. I think I've always been sort of enchanted by watching them do their face and their skincare routines and their makeup" (Vogue, 2019, 00:17). Many women described admiring their mother's beauty practices by watching from afar like former Victoria's Secret

Angel Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, “I learnt to do my makeup from my mom when I was a little girl before she got ready to go out or to go to work and I’d watch” (Vogue, 2018, 01:31). Other women would sneak into their mother’s makeup kits and play when their mother wasn’t around as Winnie Harlow recounts, “Before I had money to like pay for makeup I used to go into my mom's room and snatch all her makeup and bring it into my room and just, like, have fun” (Vogue, 2019, 09:17).

Some mothers who worked in the fashion, beauty, or entertainment industry would invite their daughters to participate at a young age in beautification practices by sharing with them specific tips and techniques. Victoria’s Secret model Taylor Hill describes learning about hair and makeup practices through her close relationship with her mom:

I learned a lot of makeup tricks from my mom because she was a beautician and worked in a salon for like thirty years. My mom used to do my makeup sometimes for like gymnastics competitions and she would ... braid my hair ... because you had to have your hair and makeup be a certain way when you compete. And then I started modeling and learned more from the pros, you know. She’s a pro. She still cuts my hair to this day. (Vogue, 2018, 01:41)

Others mention the extensiveness of theatrical makeup that is expected of young girls to wear who perform in dance competitions or work in the entertainment industry as pointed out by social media influencer Addison Rae:

I learned how to do my makeup from my mom. When I was growing up, she was a makeup artist. Also, growing up in competitive dance, you learn how to do your makeup,

because stage makeup is super fun, and red lipstick, and glittery eyeshadow, and fake eyelashes. So I kind of learned as I grew up in dance. (Vogue, 2020, 03:52)

Mothers are central to a young women's understanding of feminine practices. Simply by watching and admiring an older woman perform beautification routines, girls are sent the message that a major aspect of being a woman is learning how to apply makeup and create a glamorous appearance. From an early age makeup is seen as a tool that, when used properly and paired with the right talents, can literally reward you with trophies and accomplishments.

A few women explained that their mothers didn't teach them anything about makeup because they themselves didn't wear makeup much such as Cindy Crawford, "My mother never wore makeup, you know. I only ever saw her with like Noxzema or some, you know, Ponds or Oil of Olay cold cream. And when I started modeling I knew zero about makeup and skincare" (Vogue, 2019, (01:22)). She goes on to describe an embarrassing story about not being educated on how to properly apply makeup when she started modeling as a young girl:

"My very first modeling job they had you do your own makeup. I went and bought a foundation and mascara. The job was with Iman and Diane DeWitt—these divas were painting themselves and I just remember standing in the mirror kind of trying to mimic what they were doing. And in the actual picture I end up I look like a little girl" (Vogue, 2019, (01:42)).

Even though she remembers her mother having skin soothing and makeup removing products, Cindy Crawford explains that since her mother didn't regularly apply makeup, she was not prepared when she was called upon to perform an advanced makeup application. She states that because she failed to perform a bold and fearless makeup portrayal, she did not look like a full-

grown woman like the other models, or “divas,” who knew how to apply, or “paint” makeup on their faces. Instead she appeared as herself—young and naïve. While Crawford has likely evolved to master a few makeup techniques, she goes on to point out that her “husband hates makeup” and her ‘basic face’ tutorial is ‘already too much makeup for him” (Vogue, 2019, 06:19).

A few contributors mentioned that they learned tips and tricks about beauty maintenance and skincare from their famous fathers. Liv Tyler describes spending time with her father Steven Tyler, singer of Aerosmith:

My dad is so into skincare. When I go visit him I usually spend half the time in the bathroom with him just going over products and he's got his whole bathroom filled, but if you look at him—he's turned 70—and he has the most beautiful skin, but it's because he takes really good care of it. (Vogue, 2019, 02:37)

Sofia Richie's famous dad, multi-award-winning singer, producer, and actor Lionel Richie, makes a brief accidental appearance during the filming of her *Beauty Secrets* video and is described as having an extensive beauty and skincare routine himself and has helped his daughter learn how to navigate her own skincare practices:

My dad probably gets his nails, his hair, and gets facials more than me, so I aspire to be more like him. He is obsessed with skincare. He is the person who will come to me and be like, ‘I love you, your skin looks a little dry. Do you need a facial? I love you. Your skin's a little dry. Maybe we should do a mask?’ That's who my dad is. (Vogue, 2019, 01:13)

Working in the entertainment and beauty industries has required a lot of men and women to learn about makeup from a young age. Some women described learning about makeup when they began working: “My mom doesn't like makeup and I don't have an older sister so I think all I know about makeup I learned backstage. It's not much” (Vogue, 2019, 01:34) explains Brazilian actress Bruna Marquezine. Many contributors describe paying close attention to the makeup and skincare techniques that are being done to their faces while being on set. Specifically Victoria's Secret model Kelsey Merritt explains:

I'm in a makeup chair a lot and I love observing what makeup artists put on my face. So a lot of the things that I'm doing I learned just through watching them, and so like, they usually put some [highlighter] on my lips, on my nose, and some put here [on my brow bone]. (Vogue, 2018, 06:32)

A few actresses describe learning makeup and skin care techniques from their peers and colleagues in the entertainment industry as shared by Camila Mendes, “Lili, my co-star, she teaches me a lot about skincare. She's like an expert, so I definitely go to her a lot for advice” (Vogue, 2019, 01:08). LGBTQ individuals describe accessing makeup and skincare from the other women in their lives. Pablo explains, “I used to borrow makeup from my sister and friends” (Vogue, 2018, 3:32).

One or two participants described how they learned makeup and beauty techniques without much help from others including *RuPaul's Drag Race* star Trixie Mattel, “For me—for better or for worse,—it's very apparent that no one ever taught me how to do makeup, 'cause I kind of just do my own version of everything” (Vogue, 2019, 02:13). Other independent learners have looked to YouTube's extensive category of beauty tutorials. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

explains, “You know, I kind of learned this on my own, and as a millennial, through YouTube as well” (Vogue, 2020, 06:14). Riverdale actress Madelaine Petsch describes the wide variety of ways that she has learned about makeup:

“I actually used to be a competitive dancer for a really long time. So, I was doing my own makeup at a very young age. I'm not gonna say I was good at it. I wasn't when I was a kid. But it was very sweet because I really wanted to just do it myself. So, my mom would let me. Very cute. So, trial and error was really my thing. And just watching I love to learn from makeup artists. I watch everyone who does my makeup. I watch a lot a YouTube videos—I watch a lot a these videos. I just like to learn tips and tricks from everyone.” (Vogue, 2020, 08:47)

While learning about makeup from a women’s mother or sister is a privilege, it can also be a pressure that begins at a young age especially if a girl is in the performing arts. In the entertainment and fashion industries, makeup is a requirement for an appropriate feminine appearance, and at times is demanded to be learned quickly without preparation. The techniques of applying makeup, creating an efficient routine, and enacting a flattering execution that meets society’s standards needs to be learned, adopted, perfected, continuously transformed, and performed on a near-daily basis over the course of a lifetime. These processes require hours upon hours of learning and adjustments that can not possibly be taught by a mother, sister, father, or friend alone. Beautification practices are learned through many channels, from multiple avenues and sources, either intentionally and through visual and social absorption. The more sources a women references to learn and perfect her beautification techniques, the more diverse her

expertise, range of beauty “looks,” depth of her beauty repertoire, and the less her chances of humiliation or embarrassment.

### **Makeup as a Tool for Confidence, Creative Expression, and Self-Care**

Many contributors of *Beauty Secrets* reveal their practices of using makeup and skincare techniques as a tool to acquire confidence, perform an act of creative expression, and/or to nurture themselves in an act of self-care. This language is often mentioned directly or is referred to as a feeling or a state with the expectation that the audience understands how beauty and makeup should

#### ***A Tool to Increase Confidence***

Numerous contributors referred to using makeup as a tool to increase or even project confidence when worn, though often this sense of confidence seems to be born from an initial feeling of insecurity. Named as the “the youngest self-made billionaire of all time” in 2019 (Friedman et al., 2021), Kylie Jenner, made her fortune from her company Kylie Cosmetics, which sells Kylie Lip Kits, liquid lipstick and lip liner sets. She reveals in her *Beauty Secrets* video the inspiration for her company, “When I was insecure about my lips I turned to make up to help me feel more confident” (Vogue, 2018, 07:28). She continues, “Playing with makeup makes me feel more confident. I feel like I can transform into whatever mood I'm feeling ... makeup is definitely like an art form to me and being able to just express myself—be creative—and it is very, very fun, but it's also challenging” (Vogue, 2018, 00:27) Not only has Kylie transformed her insecurities about her natural appearance into a successful makeup brand, she



regularly uses makeup to reconstruct her image to match her mood despite the complicated techniques she has to master.

Many suggest that before applying makeup, they feel insecure or unprepared to face the public. Feeling self-conscious can occur from something as natural as acnemarks, hyper pigmentation, scars, or a bare face. A few public figures describe not feeling as if they can perform their jobs to the fullest extent without the assistance of makeup products to help them feel a certain way. For example, multi award-winning Bollywood film actress Sonam Kapoor describes that when she applies more highlighter to her face she feels “like a movie star”— interrupting herself to say—“I mean, I am one—but I feel like one [when I put more highlighter on]” (Vogue, 2019, 09:22). She goes on to elaborate the confidence she feels after applying another specific makeup product, “I feel like I can conquer the world when I wear red lips. It just makes me feel so good” (Vogue, 2019, 10:24). Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explains how her “signature red lip” has helped empowered her to perform her job and earn recognition as a young woman in politics:

One of the reasons why I even started wearing a red lip was when I was running in my primary election the first time. Outside of our community, no one knew who I was and we were out, we were knocking doors, we were making sure that people were being heard. And one of the things that I had realized is that, you know, when you're always kind of running around, sometimes the best way to really look put together is a bold lip. And of course, being Latina, this is like very much our culture where we come from. I will wear a red lip when I want confidence—when I need a boost of confidence. (Vogue, 2020, 04:20)

In addition to her signature red lip, AOC goes on to explain how even though she initially had doubts about experimenting with wearing glitter eyeshadow, after experimenting with it she has found that the application of shimmer in the work place supports her ability to improve her job performance, to be taken more seriously by her colleagues, and to feel as if her peers are listening to her more intently:

I used to think that I would be taken less seriously, and as you know, as the youngest woman in Congress and as a woman of color, it's so hard to be taken seriously. It's just, you know, it's like any workplace where sometimes it feels like you have to jump up and down for anyone to listen. It's just really difficult because some people are just born in bodies that are naturally taken more seriously, you know? I used to think that glitter or shimmery eyeshadow [...] isn't gonna help me out, right? Like people already try to diminish me, diminish my voice as young and frivolous and unintelligent. And so, first of all, I tried the shimmer and it looks fire! It looks good. It helps me feel better. And I feel like it helps make my eye pop a little bit. So, you know what? I was totally wrong!  
(Vogue, 2020, 13:48)

She concludes her makeup tutorial by speaking directly to viewers about how to feel beautiful, internally and externally, by using positive self-talk and self-love as a tool to increase confidence and unearth the power to perform your job or any task of the day:

“If I had to give one piece of advice, it is that the key to beauty is the inside job. The key to beauty is feeling beautiful. And no amount of money or makeup can really compensate for loving yourself. So make sure that you do that. That is the one foundation of everything. And if you need a little boost or if you're feeling particularly

challenged that day, look in the mirror and say, 'I'm the bomb and I will make the world a better place in my own little pocket, because that's what I'm here to do.' You are a blessing to the world. Your talents are a blessing to the world. No matter who you are, there is something that you bring and you need to know that. And that is the best beauty secret of them all ... I hope you feel beautiful, however you are, and let's go seize the day and find the power! (Vogue, 2020, 16:37)

AOC, as she is widely known, is telling us makeup matters even in the world of politics. She gives voice to her own insecurities in Capital Hill and explains those feelings can be overcome with a bit of shimmer eyeshadow, a red lip, and "a double wear [foundation] when ... it's going to be a long day because it never goes anywhere" (Vogue, 2020, 03:31). She particularly touches on the sentiment that younger women and women of color can earn a sense of confidence from performing the carefully selected application of makeup products. She exclaims that makeup has offered her a faith in her own abilities which may or may not have been resolved by working through her insecurities with another approach.

### ***A Tool to Look Like Yourself but Better***

Another technique to achieving confidence through beauty practices comes from the perspective of French culture: appearing as if you're wearing less makeup or no makeup could make one feel confident and empowered in one's own skin. French-American model Camille Rowe who appeared on the cover of *Playboy* in 2016 describes:

I feel like people are like, "Ooh French beauty, they don't do anything!" But I think it's more about looking as natural as possible. At the end of the day, I'd rather look like I

have no makeup on, and if you go to a party and then you look like you have no makeup, it's a win-win situation 'cause you're either like, 'Oh, she looks amazing and she doesn't have any makeup!' or, 'Wow, she's not wearing any makeup and she still has the balls to show up!' You know—'She's so confident!'" (Vogue, 2019, 04:45)

In France, there's a particular phrase about a women who looks perfectly put together without giving away her *secrets*. It's referred to as *je ne sais quoi* which is be directly translated from as "something (such as an appealing quality) that cannot be adequately described or expressed" (merriam-webster.com). Non-native French speakers often speak of this as *the french girl vibe*, which typically makes reference to a women who has put in just enough effort to appear presentable and feminine, but who does not give the impression that she has done much to perform any particular version of idealized femininity. Lily Colins, British-American actress who plays an American transplante in Paris on the newly released Netflix series *Emily in Paris* explains in her *Beauty Secrets* video:

Something that I love about the *je ne sais quoi* French girl vibe of the like no-makeup makeup is—I've always, always loved fresh, clear skin. And I've always been someone that's kind of about less is more. I've always said, 'the less you have on your face, the less there is to go wrong throughout day'" (Vogue, 2020, 05:42).

Other contributors share their perspective on the no-makeup makeup look as a goal to be obtained to make others think that they also have that *je ne sais quoi* characteristic of not appearing as if they have tried too hard. Sofia Richie proclaims, "My goal is to be like, 'Oh my god, I woke up like this and I didn't really try that hard,' but I did do 30 minutes of makeup..." (Vogue, 2019, 09:32). Korean-American singer, Jessica Jung states her makeup goals as having

“a lot of my friends say ‘Did you put on makeup?’ ... that's exactly what I want” (Vogue, 2016, 1:30). K-Pop star Tiffany Young describes the no-makeup makeup look when applying lipstick as, “It looks like your natural lip color—MLB —*my lips but better!*” (Vogue, 2019, 03:17).

The no-makeup makeup look is one of the most popular references on the Beauty Secrets playlist. In a few cases, the natural makeup look actually takes the longest to complete. By hiding all of the work that goes into performing femininity, women are making the labor of beautification invisible—erased and replaced with even more complex treatments that aren't as readily discussed. In order to produce a no-makeup look that meets the same levels of femininity and youthful beauty, complex body modification processes are required such as cosmetic surgeries, botox, fillers, lip injections, chemical facials, and a time-consuming, multi-step skincare routine performed multiple times per day. These procedures are often performed behind closed doors, by an individual in their home or at the doctor's office with doctor-patient HIPAA privacy laws, making the processes of beautification isolating and hidden, not discussed in public, or denied altogether, while becoming increasingly industrialized.

### ***A Tool for Creative Expression***

Looking as if you're wearing no makeup can beckon feelings of confidence for some, while for others makeup is used as a tool to fulfill a fantasy, express yourself, or just have fun. American model Jordyn Woods proclaims, “Your face is your personal coloring book” (Vogue, 2018, 04:14). American drag performer, actor, and television personality Valentina enthusiastically exclaims, “What is a real secret to beauty? Fulfilling your fantasy girl! If my fantasy tonight is, ‘I'm going to be the most beautiful woman that walks into that room’ and if I

believe it—girl it's over! And granted, I'm not even a woman!” (Vogue, 2017, 00:54) Makeup is almost always used as tool to express gender, but oftentimes it’s concealed as a performance of the fashion, beauty, and entertainment industries. Selena Gomez, singer, actress, and producer, describes makeup as a creative tool to enhance other aspects of artistic creation:

“I think growing up, I for sure felt like makeup was a part of my world. And you know, being in different facets of the industry, it's been really fun to play with it because it's so—it makes a character when you're on set, it creates something magical when you're in, you know, music—you can create stories with it. And then for fashion, there's so many different ways that makeup's expressed even beyond what they're wearing. It's almost like it's a part of it. It has to be a part of it (Vogue, 2020, 03:03).”

Conversely, makeup can be used as a form of creative expression, though many individuals admitted to feelings of inadequacy when it comes to performing makeup application techniques. Troye Sivan, Australian queer pop star describes, “I kind of blend that out with my fingers. I don’t know if I’m supposed to do that, but I do it anyway” (Vogue, 201, 02:05). Taylor Hill describes applying liquid eyeliner in a particular shape as, “It's taken me years and years of practice to be able to perfect the art of my cat eye and I still suck at it, but I'm gonna attempt it anyway” (Vogue, 2018, 06:12). K-Pop Star, Tiffany Young, convinces herself and viewers that she has a firm understanding of her techniques, “Trust me, I know I look like I'm doing *whatever*, but I know what I'm doing... I know what I'm doing!” (Vogue, 2019, 03:37). Kendall Jenner, American model and media personality who rose to fame on the reality television show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, describes her struggles with not always knowing how to create the right makeup look, “It's a blessing and a curse to grow up in the spotlight, because it has not

always been cute, and I have not always known what to do, or what the right makeup move is. So I've definitely had some *probably not* hot moments. (Vogue, 2020, 08:13) She goes on to compare her makeup skills and techniques to her sister, Kylie Jenner, "I'm like, so not a professional. You'll see all the differences between me and Kylie. Kylie's like a legit professional. And I'm like, 'You know what? This works.'" (Vogue, 2020, 06:28). Overall, her approach to makeup seems to be "No real rules here" (Vogue, 2020, 08:57). In contrast, Halsey, who shows viewers how to recreate her self-designed makeup look that was featured on her album cover, seems to counteract that statement by suggesting to viewers that "Being good with a brush, is super, super important and an underrated beauty skill" (Vogue, 2020, 03:24).

### ***A Tool for Self-Care***

Even if some don't feel confident about their beauty skills, many reported using makeup and skincare routines as a form of self-care. American model and new mom, Gigi Hadid describes how she uses makeup to create a self-care moment "I really think about makeup ... as like taking a moment with myself, and being creative. And that doesn't always mean that you have somewhere to go, or someone to see, or someone to do it for" (Vogue, 2021, 10:37). Singer and actress Sabrina Carpenter reiterates similar feelings about applying makeup for yourself even on days where there's no where to go:

"It'll be funny, like especially during La Pandemic, there's been days where I don't have much to do and I'll just come down to the kitchen with a full face of makeup. My mom's like, 'Where you going?' I'm like, 'Nowhere, just had to feel alive today.' So it's definitely a therapeutic thing for me. (Vogue, 2020, 08:23)

Brazilian pop queen Pablio Vittar echoes those sentiments, “Makeup, for me, is like therapy” (Vogue, 2018, 01:12). American actress and businesswoman, Jessica Alba elaborates on the importance for all women to have a makeup and skincare routine as a form of therapeutic self-care:

“I think it's important, whether you have kids or not, as a woman in the world, trying to do the things, get your hustle on, wearing all the hats... I think it's important that we take time to take care of ourselves, and if you can do that on the daily, even if it's for like, 10 minutes, it's important, and don't let anyone take that away from you. (Vogue, 2020, 04:01)

Camila Mendes describes having a beauty routine as a form of self-care to support the management of stress and exhaustion from having an overflowing schedule:

“I feel my most beautiful when I'm really taking care of myself, mentally and physically. When you're overworking yourself or when you're putting too much on your plate, making your schedule too packed with things to do, then you become the last priority in your life, you know? Everything else is important but you're ignoring yourself” (Vogue, 2019, 12:25).

Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez prescribes a self-care routine that has multiple uses: to combat low-self esteem, unreachable beauty standards, and patriarchal oppression:

“Our culture is so predicated on diminishing women, right? And kind of preying on our self esteem. And so it's quite a radical—my opinion—it's quite a radical act and it's almost like a mini protest to love yourself in a society that's always trying to tell you, you're not the right weight, you're not the right color, you're not the right, you know,



whatever it is. And when you stand up and you say, ‘You know what?! You don't make that decision. I make that decision!’ It's very powerful, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun” (Vogue, 2020, 05:15).

Selena Gomez describes how she views makeup and skincare routines as an act of self-care in service to mental health, “When you are taking care of your skin, you're taking care of your body and your mind and soul ... because I think it's all connected” (Vogue, 2020, 01:50). She goes on to explain how she created her own cosmetics line to help young women struggling with low self-esteem and the power of makeup to heal and transform:

“I was heavily involved in the entire process [of creating her own makeup line] because I also care so much about mental health. And I believe [makeup is] a part of your self esteem. It's a part of how you see yourself and you shouldn't have to have makeup for you to see yourself that way, but makeup isn't a joke. It's actually beautiful and it's wonderful. And it brings people together. And I have so much respect for that community because it's just—it really is art” (Vogue, 2020, 04:06).

Without doubt, makeup is used as a tool of creative expression to play, to transform, to pronounce, and to offer confidence where it did not exist before. It's unclear from these statements if confidence can truly be achieved from the use of makeup and the performance of beautification processes alone as a form of self-care, or if the practices are a façade to conceal for deeper insecurities and disappointment in not obtaining social standards of beauty or status.

While a few contributors referred to the long amounts of time that is required to perform a presentable makeup look, only one, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referred directly to feeling exhausted at the pressure to present herself in a *full beat* every day in preparation for

photographs being taken in. This conures up questions around makeup as self-care, and for whom. Can makeup be both an exhausting task and a form of self-care? Or are the pressures of an idealized femininity so deeply entrenched that most of the contributors don't typically question the beautification practices that are demanded of them on a near-daily schedule unless their skin starts to break out from the 15-hour days on set of wearing makeup that begins to clog their pores and requests further attention for a skincare routine? Makeup and skincare routines as a form of self-care can be considered a questionable activity without further analysis. While taking time to focus on one's self is no doubt relaxing, the pressure to improve or enhance one's appearance to match society's standards of idealized femininity could be re-considered from a self-care activity to simply an appearance-enhancing practice that may or may not increase a sense of confidence.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have made a number of critical points about how femininity is produced using multiple beautification practices to enhance physical appearances and produce certain psychological states. At a young age, girls begin to observe the fascination of makeup and a feminine appearance from older women in their lives or media outlets. The process of learning to apply makeup can be a lifetime process of practice, though it can also be performed hesitantly without a strong idea of what one is doing. Social media and online content can be a resource to learn about beautification processes that are popular and accepted as an expression of femininity. Performing idealized femininity through a well-practiced makeup and skin care routine can be used as a resource to escape from reality in the same way that women use media and magazines

to romanticize their identities and bridge the gap between reality and the messaging produced by media and society. The repetitions in narrative suggest that using makeup as a tool to achieve a certain appearance can produce a particular state of confidence that can enhance one's abilities. The dependence of using makeup as a tool to acquire confidence points to a problematized social standard that a women's physical appearance can be a significant stand-in for her own capabilities and achievements. This sends the message that the way a woman looks is more important in our culture than what she has to say, what her accomplishments are, or the contributions that she can give to society.

To draw large sweeping conclusions beyond these statements about the use of beautification processes to enhance confidence and craft an idealized presentation would be doing a disservice to the realities of the contributors and the women who share similar sentiments. In my own experience and dialogue with others, I have found that makeup and skin care is a frequent demand, but one that does indeed contribute personal joy and empowerment. The conclusion is not straightforward, nor does it draw a hard line between beauty standards and beauty practices. Recognizing the systems at play that were "built for the convenience of men and oftentimes were designed with the subjugation of women and queer people in mind," as AOC has said (Vogue, 2019, 13:32), can be analyzed and critiqued while also being used to inform our own decisions about our well-being and mental health. To act against the norms of idealized femininity can be done but not without consequence or trial by peers.

My next step in this research process would be to explore how drag queens, queer, non-binary, and trans folks are paving the way for creative expression, breaking the stereotypes, and combating appearance standards.

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