

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

9-2021

Put Yourself First (In a Sexy Way): Postfeminist Beauty Messaging and Resistant Media Texts

Margarita Artoglou

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/4611

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

PUT YOURSELF FIRST (IN A SEXY WAY): POSTFEMINIST BEAUTY MESSAGING
AND RESISTANT MEDIA TEXTS

by

MARGARITA ARTOGLOU

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New
York

2021

© 2021

MARGARITA ARTOGLOU

All Rights Reserved

Put Yourself First (In a Sexy Way): Postfeminist Beauty Messaging and Resistant Media Texts

by

Margarita Artoglou

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Thesis Advisor

Date

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Put Yourself First (In a Sexy Way): Postfeminist Beauty Messaging and Resistant Media Texts

by

Margarita Artoglou

Advisor: Jillian Baez

The makeover montage trope is one of the most recognizable in media content aimed at young women, sending the message that social status and acceptance are only a new outfit and face of makeup away. While this trope and its message have been heavily critiqued by scholars, the message that beauty—and all its social benefits—can be achieved through consumerism has not disappeared, though the means by which this message is conveyed has changed. As a result of companies co-opting feminist rhetoric, conforming to standards of beauty has been recast as a “choice” one makes for herself, often wrapped in the language of “empowerment” and commodity feminism. My thesis explores the ways in which beauty has been recast and the language of self-care used to encourage women to conform to societal standards of femininity. I also consider the ways in which women with media platforms—both traditional forms of media and social media—critique and resist these notions through parody, satire, and information about self-care that does not involve outer beauty or consumption.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	0
CHAPTER 2: SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM.....	15
CHAPTER 3: PROBLEMATIC TEXTS.....	36
CHAPTER 4: RESISTANT TEXTS	53
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79
FILMOGRAPHY	81

Chapter 1: Introduction

During the summer of 2018, I was having a difficult time adjusting to post-grad life. Two media obsessions helped me through that rough time. One was makeup videos on YouTube. The other was the CW's musical sitcom *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019). The YouTube videos were not a new presence in my life—I had been playing makeup videos in the background to help me fall asleep for at least a year at that point. But I was introduced to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* by accident. I never made the decision to watch it; it kind of just happened when I was working as a camp residential director and some of my campers decided to watch it in the common room. In hindsight, perhaps the show was slightly too mature for the gaggle of thirteen year olds gathered in the room, but even from the first episode I could see that the show was tackling several important feminist topics through comedy and song, and I continued watching it long after my camp job had ended. I did not realize it at the time, but these two comforting forms of media would later merge to inspire the topic of my graduate school research.

Makeup and social media beauty content had long been part of my life, but I treated it as a guilty pleasure for the longest time, because I thought others would judge the content as superficial, and find me superficial as a result. I had heard of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* before my campers turned it on, but never had any interest in the show—with a title like that, I figured it would be stereotypical, misogynistic, and...well, superficial. Imagine my surprise when the first episode featured a musical number parodying the process of beautification in a very tongue-in-cheek manner that reminded me of many of my own bathroom-mirror mishaps and echoed many of my own inner critiques of beauty culture. The show's continued criticism of beauty marketing messages kept me, a lover of fashion and makeup, hooked.

The global cosmetics market is projected to be worth \$463.5 billion by 2027¹, while the cosmetic surgery market is expected to reach \$43.9 billion by 2025.² The desire to be beautiful is a huge motivator in consumer spending—and the majority of these consumers are women. Products and services are not their only beauty-related consumption. Beauty content on social media has seen a huge boom in popularity. In 2018, it was reported that YouTube registered more than 700 million views of beauty-related content per month.³ The hashtag #instabeauty on Instagram had over 7.7 million posts as of August 2016.⁴ While there is certainly pleasure to be found in the pursuit and acquisition of beauty products and services, there is also much anxiety that goes along with it. A group on Reddit called r/MakeupRehab serves as an online support group for individuals who have become addicted to buying cosmetics products. These online users, the majority of whom identify as women, frequently post about the negative impact this addiction has had on their lives: many are deep in credit card debt and are embroiled in marital and familial conflicts as a result; others report being so distracted by their shopping habits that they do not have time to dedicate to other tasks and interests. The pursuit of beauty can be all-consuming. Indeed, consumption seems to be the point of the majority of beauty-related content. While the earlier days of online beauty content like YouTube videos focused on technique and application, most of the content produced today is focused on the consumption of new beauty products, such as haul videos in which the content creator shops for new makeup items and then shows their purchases to their viewers, and reviews, in which the creator gives her opinion on a particular product and shows its application on her own face. The educational aspect of beauty YouTube videos is harder to find in newer uploads—many content creators have noted that

¹ <https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/cosmetics-market>

² <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/press-release/global-cosmetic-surgery-procedure-market>

³ <https://www.digitalsurgeons.com/thoughts/strategy/how-youtube-has-dramatically-changed-the-beauty-industry/#:~:text=YouTube%20Users%20Are%20Obsessed%20with,views%20of%20beauty%2Drelated%20content.>

⁴ <https://www.ion.co/youtube-beauty>

tutorials which show viewers how to enhance their application skills have fallen out of style in favor of more consumption-driven content.

There are also, however, several YouTube creators who have resisted this push towards videos aimed at getting consumers to buy. The rise of the “anti-haul” video genre has provided one way for content creators and consumers alike to think critically about their purchasing habits. Popularized by drag queen Kimberly Clark, the anti-haul is a form of video in which the creator discusses all the beauty products that have recently been released that she is not going to buy and why she believes her viewers should not buy it either. An extension of this video format is the “Will I buy it” format of video, wherein the creator discusses new makeup releases and why she is or is not interested in purchasing each item. These videos allow a creator to speak negatively about products she believes to be boring, unnecessary, or poorly executed while also allowing her to speak candidly as to what products she does believe to be worthy of purchasing. Another way in which internet users have pushed back against excessive beauty consumer culture is through “Project Panning,” a personal project typically broadcasted on YouTube or Instagram where a user tracks her progress in using up her makeup items in order to actually get her money’s worth. This kind of “project” is only necessary because these users own too much makeup and feel they cannot use it all without some kind of accountability system. Many women who participate in these “Project Pan” endeavors lament that their mothers naturally “pan” their products by virtue of only having a few items that they use every day. As a result of the media directed at Millennial and Gen Z women and girls, many younger women find themselves owning far too much stuff.

This project is inspired by my own position as a woman who takes part in the (over)consumption of beauty products and influencer culture. The ways in which beauty has

been (re)packaged and sold to women in the 2010s and now 2020s has evolved since the 1990s and 2000s as feminism has become a mainstream belief rather than one on the fringes. My research questions are: How has beauty rhetoric evolved over the past few decades? How has feminism been co-opted to sell and reaffirm the status quo? What happens when feminist sensibilities are used to uphold capitalism, a structure that undermines the foundations of feminism? In this thesis, I will argue that the beauty industries have adapted to changing social attitudes about beauty, confidence, and feminist ideas. Beauty is now sold through a rhetoric of empowerment and self-care, a shift from the old advertising discourse that informed women of their flaws and instructed them how to fix them. Though the exact rhetoric (and who delivers it) is fickle, the underlying message remains the same. Because influencer marketing has joined in as a new pressure with which consumers must contend, I argue that it is extremely important to identify the weaknesses in the message that beauty will empower women: this is the narrative that our capitalist overlords want us to buy, and they have never had our best interests at heart. I will analyze the ways in which two pieces of media—the 2016 film *The Love Witch* and the TV series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019)—critique and undermine the message that beauty and glamor will save us. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to the body of work dedicated to eroding postfeminist attitudes towards beauty and the methods by which they are sold to us, both through traditional media texts and through social media.

Literature Review

Naomi Wolf's germinal book *The Beauty Myth* (1991) speaks to the pressure women feel to be beautiful. Wolf compares this pressure to an Iron Maiden—these standards, she says, are a torture device meant to keep women in their place. Beauty standards are a tool of patriarchy which serve to prevent women from accessing the privileges reserved for white, straight men.

Wolf traces the height of the beauty myth's influence as coinciding with women's shift out of the house and into the workplace during the 1970s and 80s. The domestic sphere once held women prisoner, but once they began to go to work in large numbers, something else had to take its place. Enter the beauty myth, which tells women that their social worth is not only linked to their ability to do their jobs well, but also their ability to be pleasing to the eye. Though Wolf's seminal text was published in the early 90s, her acknowledgement of women's "beauty addiction" continues to be relevant 30 years later. Wolf notes, "Women are so well schooled in the beauty myth that we often internalize it: Many of us are not yet sure ourselves that women are interesting without 'beauty'" (p.84). As the beauty industry has, over the past ten years, boomed to previously unreachable heights, her ideas on beauty remain significant.

Wolf and Jean Kilbourne both communicate the ways in which this myth is disseminated through advertising. According to Wolf (1991), advertisers "depend on making women feel bad enough about their faces and bodies to spend more money on worthless or pain-inducing products." Billboards, magazine ads, television commercials and a plethora of other advertising strategies have told women what they should look like and which products they should buy in order to do it. Kilbourne (2000) notes, "Advertising constantly promotes the core belief of American culture: that we can re-create ourselves...by having a fashion makeover, losing weight, having tighter abs, buying the right car or soft drink. It is this belief that such transformation is possible that drives us to keep dieting, to buy more stuff" (p.68). Both Kilbourne and Wolf discuss the ways in which advertising presents women with an impossible standard to meet along with the supposed key to meeting it. While Wolf talks about how women have internalized the idea that their beauty corresponds to their social worth, Kilbourne posits

that all consumers' identities are closely tied to what they buy: "Advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality... To a great extent, it tells us who we are and who we should be." Furthermore, according to Kilbourne, everyone is influenced by advertising, even people who claim not to be. Advertising is inescapable and shapes much of our beliefs, in particular our beliefs about ourselves and how we need to consume in order to transform and attain happiness.

Susan Bordo (2003) builds on Michel Foucault's argument that the body is a "direct locus of social control" (p. 152) by discussing the material body as a "site of political struggle" (p. 20). Bordo discusses the ways in which the body is socially trained: "through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (p. 152). It is not only that social cues tell us what we should look like; they also train us to internally *want* to look that way. Bordo furthers that culture gains a "grip" on our bodies through everyday habits:

Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is 'inner' and what is 'outer,' which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on. These are often far more powerful lessons than those we learn consciously, through explicit instruction concerning the appropriate behavior for our gender, race, and social class. (p. 20)

Included in this training is also the compulsion to surveil and police ourselves to meet these standards. Self-surveillance is the disciplining of one's own behavior and appearance.

Rosalind Gill has written extensively on the subject of female oppression reframed as empowerment. Whereas Kilbourne, Bordo, and Foucault focus on the ways in which the body is socially disciplined as a form of oppression, Gill focuses on the shift in rhetoric surrounding body discipline to reframe it as an act of empowerment and self-care. Though this shift was gradual, Gill (2009) pinpoints several examples of advertisements from the mid-90's to 2000's that exemplify what she terms "subjectification." Instead of treating women as objects, as the advertisements identified by Kilbourne do, these ads position women as subjects with agency who choose to present themselves sexually as a signifier of their status as empowered women. Gill (2009) does not believe that this type of representation is an improvement; in fact, she deems this type of rhetoric as more insidious because "not only are women objectified as they were before, but through sexual subjectification...they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self chosen." In this way, she posits, new forms of oppressive rhetoric aimed at disciplining women's bodies and appearances have effectively shielded themselves from feminist critique by appropriating the language of empowerment and choice. Gill locates this shift in rhetoric within a postfeminist sensibility. Many feminist scholars have weighed in on this rather nebulous phrase, including Gill and Angela McRobbie. McRobbie (2004) identifies postfeminism as an ideology that "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasize that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force" (p. 255). In McRobbie's view, feminism is supplanted by the belief that feminism's goals have been achieved, and that we live in a world *after* feminism. She also notes that "elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism,

while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). In other words, postfeminism actively undoes feminism while presenting the facade of having been informed by feminism itself. Gill, writing with Christina Scharff (2011), has a slightly different definition of postfeminism: they treat postfeminism as a sensibility characterizing many parts of contemporary culture. They identify several ways in which this sensibility manifests in society:

the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a ‘makeover paradigm’; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked ‘resexualization’ of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (p. 4)

The observations of Gill and Scharff overlap and co-exist with McRobbie’s definition, both of which will be relevant throughout my analysis.

Gill also cites Robert Goldman (1991), who coined the term “commodity feminism.” A play on words of “commodity fetishism,” commodity feminism refers to the “attempt [by advertisers] to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism whilst simultaneously domesticating its critique of advertising and the media” (Goldman). Commodity feminism names the use of feminist rhetoric and messages to drive consumption. Wolf also identified examples of this very sort of advertising copy, which “promises that sort of courage and freedom” that goes hand in hand with the ideals of feminism. Wolf concludes that women are trained to crave beauty as it is sold to them, because it is presented as a “shortcut” or “placebo” — that achieving beauty

will allow women to “be confident, valued, heard out, respected, and make demands without fear.” This, of course, is all part of the myth that Wolf identifies. The idea of commodity feminism dovetails well with Kilbourne’s observation that “The story that advertising tells is that the way to be happy, to find satisfaction—and the path to political freedom, as well—is through the consumption of material objects.” McRobbie also identifies commodity feminism as an integral part of postfeminist sensibilities.

Guiliana Monteverde (2014) considers the concept of “female complicity,” which is important in understanding agency, another concept of which Gill is critical, too. Monteverde’s meditations on complicity acknowledge that “it is impossible to never be complicit with patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy or capitalism” (p. 64). Monteverde specifically considers the act of using cosmetics, which she considers to be an act of patriarchal complicity. Her view of complicity does not place blame on women who wear makeup, and acknowledges that “women that wear makeup do so not because they actively want to be beauty objects in order to maintain gender inequality, but because of habit, preference, or because there are certain social outcomes for women who look particular ways” (p. 63). She also maintains that contexts can change the meanings of particular acts and practices, and so is careful to note that the act of wearing makeup and using cosmetics should not be considered “unequivocally oppressive” (p. 63). Still, these acts can easily fall into her definition of complicity, which refers to “the broad notion of participation in a practice, belief, behaviour, or understanding that can lead to oppression, discrimination, or exploitation of your own or another group” (p. 63). I will be building on this understanding of complicity throughout this thesis in order to critique the ways

in which beauty rituals are advertised to women and how participation in said beauty rituals functions to further harm women by upholding patriarchal standards of beauty.

Methodology

This thesis will combine semiotic analysis and discourse analysis to discuss and interpret a mix of media texts. The former, which was invented by what's his name, will be utilized in order to identify and examine visual and linguistic symbols and consider the meanings they produce. Discourse analysis, which draws upon the work of Michel Foucault, will be used to interrogate the ways in which media texts shape our worldview and legitimate unequal power structures.

Semiotics will be useful here in order to understand the ways in which the meanings of media texts are constructed, particularly those texts which rely heavily on symbolic images and words. Principles of semiology will especially be drawn upon in the context of analyzing advertising campaigns in order to understand the ways in which ideology is produced. According to Rose (2006), "ideology is knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations" (p. 70). Furthermore, she notes that "one of the most influential ideological forms in contemporary capitalist societies is advertising" (p. 70). Therefore, I will heavily draw upon semiological concepts in order to expose the construction of patriarchal ideology in advertisements aimed at women and girls, and also recognize similar visual cues that are present within the films I have chosen for analysis, which utilize the symbolic visual and auditory language of these advertisements in order to subvert their messages.

Discourse analysis will be drawn upon in order to interrogate the ways in which discourse produces our sense of self. Rose defines discourse as "groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking...discourse is a particular

knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (p. 136). Discourse analysis draws on Foucault’s assertion that discourse is a disciplinary tool, in that it disciplines our ways of thinking and acting. Indeed, he argued that the very way we understand the world is molded by discourse; according to Rose, “discourse produces the world as it understands it” (p. 137). Furthermore, “Discourses are articulated through all sorts of visual and verbal images and texts,” (p. 136) which makes discourse analysis a useful tool for the interpretation of media texts and the messages they contribute to the formation of discourse.

Rose also highlights the “eclecticism” (p. 142) present in the choice of sources for many discourse analysts, and notes that because discourse is inherently intertextual, this eclecticism is to be expected and even demanded of discourse analysts. This fits well with my choice of texts, which compares a musical satire television program to a film that blends the genres of horror, erotica, and comedy. While the texts themselves are extremely dissimilar in content and aesthetic, the feminist discourse to which they both contribute connects them. Additionally, I draw from an assortment of advertisements, online videos, and social media posts to further support my discourse analysis.

This project also builds on Foucault’s concepts of the panopticon and biopower and explores the ways in which beauty serves as a tool of power. Foucault put forth the argument that power in societies is not always wielded by a particular person or group but by the rules of society itself. We learn through experience what kind of behavior is acceptable and what kind of behavior is not. Following this logic, women and girls are socialized into understanding the rules of how they must present themselves to the world. I am interested in exploring how this biopower operates in a world where the pressure to be beautiful has been critiqued by feminists and has reached mainstream popularity. This thesis will interrogate the way these lessons are

reiterated with new language in a manner that bypasses feminist critique, allowing the panopticon of beauty standards to continue to hold sway over the populous.

The main texts that were chosen for analysis—*The Love Witch* (2016) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019)—were selected as a result of my own enjoyment of both the film and television series, respectively. In fact, I had already watched both in their entirety long before deciding to explore these research questions. Both media texts have helped to shape my research questions and the project at hand, a process which Rose identifies as essential to discourse analysis. The ad campaigns I mention, like those of Botox, Dove, and Venus, were other texts I noticed that helped to inform and shape my research questions. Some of the other supporting texts, such as *The Breakfast Club* and *Clueless*, have been my favorites for years, and immediately came to mind when planning this thesis. Others, like *How to Look Good Naked* and *Tall Girl*, came up in my search for examples of makeovers in the media. These texts were important in understanding the different ways in which consumption is normalized via makeover narratives. Finally, the YouTube videos I cite have come from my personal viewership during the months over which I wrote this thesis. These are helpful both as examples of problematic texts that reiterate the same messages as the corporations, and as resistant texts.

Finally, I want to express that while this thesis is certainly not the first to utilize these research methods and apply them to images and discourses surrounding standards of beauty, the significance of this project lies in the application of these methods to new media texts—not just the more recently produced television shows and films that are analyzed in the fourth chapter, but also the consideration of the ways in which “new” media helps to shape discourse. Social media websites and apps like YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit all play an important role in my consideration of the ways in which attitudes about beauty are shaped. While I am not the first to

consider the ways in which beauty language continually changes to reflect social attitudes about women and empowerment (see for example the work of Rosalind Gill, who I quote from extensively), my research includes attitudes reflected and proliferated by influencers, who now represent a tool of advertising that did not exist just 15 years ago.

Many of the texts from which I cite, including the works of Gill, Bordo, and Wolf, were written before the rise of social media and mostly focuses on traditional forms of media and advertisements: television and movie content, TV ads, magazine and billboards. However, because of the novelty and ever-changing nature of social media, there is not a large body of work dedicated to contemporary social media's role in disseminating and/or criticizing commodity feminism rhetoric. Michele White's (2018) analysis of beauty-related YouTube content reviews the ways in which content creators, particularly women, utilize cosmetics as a tool for resisting and critiquing patriarchal norms. White's examples "refute some feminists' assertions that makeup is inherently part of an objectifying system that normalizes" women's appearances, as the video creators in question subvert expectations by changing makeup names, discuss feminist beliefs as they apply their makeup, and create looks that do not necessarily conform to normalized standards of beauty. While White's study is helpful in understanding the ways in which social media can be used as a tool of resistance, this thesis aims to also understand the ways in which social media often functions to keep women on the beauty myth's hook. The companies that sell beauty are aware of the social shift: feminists are no longer viewed as ugly, man-hating extremists, as they once were. Now, feminism is in fact expected of modern women; feminism is in style. As the advertising copy continues to change in the ways Gill identified in the 90's and early 2000's, so too does the type of content that is popular on social media.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, I trace the problematic way beauty has been restructured by corporations as self-care by highlighting examples of brand advertisements that do it well, like Botox and Dove, as well as problematize postfeminist narratives of agency and choice. I argue that the idea that women participate in beauty practices “for themselves” is inherently flawed by showing how they are making a “choice” that has been prescribed by patriarchal norms.

In Chapter 3, I identify and analyze media texts that reinforce these messages, including classic teen films like *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Clueless* (1995), and newer Netflix offerings like *Tall Girl* (2019), as well as reality TV makeover shows, particularly *How to Look Good Naked* (2006-2011). These texts, I argue, serve to educate female viewers on what constitutes acceptable femininity, and that all the materials required to “do” femininity correctly can be purchased. Furthermore, I posit that the rise of social media, and influencer culture in particular, serves to normalize and encourage unsustainable levels of consumption.

In Chapter 4, I analyze two resistant media texts that critique and counter the idea that beauty is equivalent to empowerment: one is the 2016 film *The Love Witch*, and the other is *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, a show that ran on the CW network from 2015 to 2019. *The Love Witch*, helmed by feminist filmmaker Anna Biller, tackles the idea that a woman’s power is accessed through her beauty and femininity. The main character, a witch named Elaine, belongs to a coven which espouses the idea that a female witch can only be happy and fulfilled by being everything a woman “should” be: beautiful, glamorous, perfectly groomed, submissive. In the end, these things do not empower Elaine. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* takes a more humorous route. Using musical parody, songs throughout the show subvert and critique messages women receive about beauty

and their appearances, including the idea that painful beauty rituals are done entirely for oneself and that conforming to traditional standards of beauty is the key to happiness.

Chapter 5 concludes my thesis by theorizing the importance of my observations and showing examples of women and girls who resist and negotiate dominant narratives of beauty and consumerism on their own social media platforms.

This project's significance lies in the ubiquity of beauty and its commodification. Beauty messages were already inescapable—even a woman who does not use social media will be bombarded with beauty messages through the media she consumes, advertisements in the street, and the people she knows. Social media has turned the consumption of beauty messages into a form of entertainment, even a hobby. No one is forcing viewers to tune into a YouTuber's latest review—viewers seek out this content because they like it. While there are certainly women who begrudgingly primp themselves because of the societal expectation, many women—especially the ones who have developed “addictions”—consume this content and engage in beauty rituals like buying and applying makeup because they like it, whether for its relaxing and leisurely aspects, its potential to be a creative outlet, or any other reason. (I, myself, am one of these women.) It is important to understand the ways in which women have become willing, active and happy participants in the oppression of their own gender through the innocuous-seeming rituals sold to us by the beauty industry. While I do not argue that women should shun beauty and its rituals by any means, especially if they enjoy it, I do believe it worthwhile to understand what our patriarchal society stands to gain from keeping this inequitable system intact. Furthermore, I hope this project helps women who wear makeup and participate in other beauty rituals to interrogate their relationship with beauty and ask themselves to what extent their participation in beauty culture is truly an act of self-care.

Chapter 2: Summary of the Problem

How do women talk about beauty? Turn to BeauTube (beauty YouTube), Reddit forums, Twitter and Instagram, and you will find a wide range of answers. On the one hand, there is an overarching narrative about cosmetics, fashion, and grooming being an act of self-love, empowerment, and pleasure. Dig a bit deeper, though, and there is a more sinister message below the surface. Beauty practices are not always innocuous forms of self-expression. The Reddit forum r/MakeupRehab is an online space dedicated to individuals, nearly all female, who feel that their “addiction” to makeup warrants rehabilitation. Scroll through the forum for a few minutes, and you will discover a plethora of women who feel held hostage by the pressure to purchase: some are thousands of dollars in debt, others spend hours researching and planning purchases, while still others are not able to focus away from the world of beauty for long enough to be productive. In these terms, beauty really has become an addiction for many women. But how did we get here?

There has been much feminist debate on beauty practices. Some believe beauty practices to be inherently oppressive, machinations of a patriarchal scheme. Others believe makeup to be a tool for self-expression and even protest (White). It is not my intention to contribute to this debate; I stand in the middle. What I attempt to do in this chapter instead is expose and critique the ways in which beauty marketing has transformed. In recent years, there has been a marked shift to co-opting and appropriating a quasi-feminist rhetoric in order to encourage consumption and distract from the patriarchal implications of taking part in beauty rituals to a consumer base (women) that grows more concerned with their own empowerment. A 2020 Pew Research study

concluded that the majority of American women (61%) identify as feminists.⁵ As such, women have become more critical of the world around them, including the notoriously misogynistic beauty industry. And yet, as mentioned in Chapter 1, beauty buying is at an all-time high. It would seem that beauty industries have distanced themselves from their sexist roots. This chapter proves that beauty narratives continue to be rooted in patriarchy, but have taken a different form from the straight-forwardly oppressive language of the past.

Beauty marketing has become more insidious over the years. Gone are the days when beauty advertisements openly relied on heterosexual attraction to sell products. Rosalind Gill (2009) notes the shift from sexual *objectification* to sexual *subjectification* in advertisements in the 1990s and 2000s, in which women were presented as agentic actors who made their own decisions regarding their appearances surrounded by a discourse of fun, power, and pleasure. But Gill (2009) also points out that in these advertisements, “women’s agentic capacities are confined to [their appearances] and, moreover, their power as agents is directly tied to consumerism.” This chapter will interrogate the on-going shift in messaging aimed at women that equates consumer behavior with feminism. This shift is one part of the postfeminist sensibility identified and defined by Gill and Scharff (2011). They argue that postfeminism involves the shift from objectification to subjectification (for some women)⁶, an emphasis on notions of choice and empowerment, and a focus on consumerism. In this chapter, I highlight some of the ways this

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/07/61-of-u-s-women-say-feminist-describes-them-well-many-see-feminism-as-empowering-polarizing/>

⁶ “Some women” primarily refers to white, thin, able-bodied women. Women of color have historically been denied subjectivity and often continue to be shown in the media as objects, rather than subjects, of desire. See Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics*.

postfeminist sensibility manifests in advertisements and other marketing materials aimed at young women.

The beauty myth was, according to Wolf, primarily transmitted directly to women via magazines. But this was before the internet. Now, women can tune into any social media platform to seek the advice of real beauty enthusiasts—professional makeup artists and amateurs alike—and get a non-censored opinion. On BeauTube, women sit in front of cameras in their homes and discuss the latest releases, reviews, and tips. Beauty Instagrammers post tutorials and reviews. There are hundreds of Reddit forums for people to post product reviews and FOTD (Face of the Day) photos. The internet has allowed for a network of women to correspond directly with each other, without the go-between of women's magazines.

Of course, this free-for-all environment did not last long; it was not long until advertisers got involved. Now, the beauty spaces online have been infiltrated by brands, sometimes outwardly and sometimes covertly. Sponsorships (in which companies pay users for posts that include their products) and affiliate codes (coupon codes specific to a particular content creator that allows users money off a purchase and earns the creator a commission) abound throughout the beauty world. Many users have spoken out against “undisclosed sponsorships,” which means that an online content creator was paid for a post but did not tell their audience. For a long time, users did not know that influencers received money when their coupon codes were used. Regardless, the accessibility and egalitarian nature of posting on the internet means that it is not hard to find a plethora of “non-biased,” or, more accurately, non-sponsored, opinions on products and services. Despite internet creators' freedom from having to appease advertisers—which Wolf presents as a kind of indirect censorship—online users in the beauty sphere still often conform to

standards of beauty set forth by powers that seek to profit from ideals about beauty. Gill's assertion that the overarching message targeted at women is that "buying the product will empower you" still holds true. A new range of lipsticks from Nyx Cosmetics, the Shine Loud Pro Pigment Lip Shines, have names like "Goal Getter," "In Charge," "World Shaper," and "Ambition Statement." Product names like these allow cosmetics consumers, the majority of whom identify as women, to feel good about their purchases. How could they be catering to societal expectations of female subordination when their lipstick carries an empowering name? Similarly, in 2020 former Disney star Selena Gomez released a line of products at the beauty retailer Sephora called Rare Beauty, with shade names like "Inspire," "Courage," "Brave," "Heroic," "Fearless," and "Transform." The brand's website proclaims, "Rare Beauty is breaking down unrealistic standards of perfection. This is makeup made to feel good in, without hiding what makes you unique—because Rare Beauty is not about being someone else, but being who you are." How they do this by selling foundation, concealer and eyeliner is unclear. The European Wax Center, a chain of spas which specializes in de-fuzzing the body, proclaims that customers will "Walk in, strut out." Their marketing campaigns focus on the benefits of waxing for *oneself*—confidence, pampering, self-care. Nowhere does the company acknowledge that most women "choose" to remove their body hair in accordance with the societal and patriarchal expectation that we will because visible body hair is only a privilege accorded to men. Pain is not mentioned either, despite being a primary companion to the waxing process. According to Gill, "the work associated with disciplining the feminine body to approximate to standards that are normatively required is made knowable in new ways that *systematically erase* pain, anxiety, expense and low self esteem." (Emphasis in original) Similarly, the women's razor brand Venus

has slightly tweaked its slogan: “I’m your Venus” has been changed to “I’m my Venus,” suggesting that women who shave do it only for themselves. In a world where it was not expected for women’s bodies to be hairless, I do not think the hair removal industry would be as lucrative as it is. While adornment has been part of human cultures since before the advent of the first department store, it is likely that makeup would still be a big part of our society, even in a world without beauty standards. With hair removal, though, there is no particular pleasure to be had, unless razor burn, folliculitis and getting hair ripped out of the skin are pleasurable to some individuals. Another company that has recently changed its marketing language is CoverGirl. “Easy, breezy, beautiful CoverGirl” was once the brand’s iconic slogan; in 2017, it was replaced with “I am what I make up.” The new phrase emphasizes consumers’ *actions* rather than their perceived beauty, as the old one did. Furthermore, the new slogan establishes an equivalence between who the consumer is and the choices she makes—she is defined by what she chooses to put on her face. Beauty standards continue to be sold in terms of empowerment, which erases the actual harm they do to the women trying to uphold them, mentally, physically, and economically.

The job of an advertiser is to sell products, and it seems that this method is working, given its continually increasing popularity. Here, however, lies the problem: women and girls are being led to believe that they are making informed and empowered choices when in fact they are feeding into the capitalist system that preys on them and devalues their labor, all while holding up patriarchal standards of beauty. This marketing tactic was termed “commodity feminism” by Robert Goldman, a pun on commodity fetishism, because “Turning feminism into a commodity value fetishizes feminism. When appropriated by advertisers and editors, feminism has been

cooked to distill out a residue—an object: a look, a style” (p. 336). Feminist discourses are relocated: “objects are thus made to stand for (or made equivalent to) feminist goals of independence and professional success.” A famous (or perhaps, infamous) recent example of commodity feminism can be seen in Dove’s Real Beauty campaign. The Real Beauty campaign began in 2004 as a supposed attempt to fight back against the common narratives and images espoused by the beauty industry by showing women with different body types and from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Its message was that women should celebrate their unique differences, and the models who exemplified these unique differences were meant to make women and girls feel good about their own bodies. While I believe the diversification of models used in beauty advertisements is a step in the right direction and that there are definitely positive aspects to the Real Beauty campaign, it is important to remember that Dove is a company, so its primary objective is to make profit. Dove’s ad executives did not create the campaign simply to do good. While the ads certainly disrupted the norms of the beauty space, the campaign was also criticized by those who found it to be sneakily sexist. My intention here is not to criticize Dove; rather, I bring up the Dove Real Beauty campaign as an example of corporations utilizing the language of feminism in order to make their way into the good graces of consumers in order to sell more products. For marketers, the key here is to make consumers feel good about buying a particular product.

Botox, an injectable meant to reduce wrinkles, has also recently shifted the message of its advertisements in a very similar way, utilizing a “documentary short” format to tell the stories of actual Botox patients. The participants are asked, “How do you see yourself?” A patient in one of the commercials, a Black woman identified as Monique, discusses her need to “put herself first”

sometimes, because, as she says, she is often taking care of her family so much that she forgets to care for herself. Many modern women can relate to Monique's struggle, and the advertisement suggests that Botox can fix the problem. The language of the ad works to connect self-care to the act of receiving Botox treatment to reduce the look of one's wrinkles. The commercial does not go on to explain how or why injecting one's face with onabotulinumtoxinA should count as caring for oneself; when Monique lists the ways she cares for others, she mentions running from football games to work and "trying to balance it all." While caring for her family involves fulfilling their mental and emotional needs, caring for herself involves *only* tending to her appearance. Because women who get cosmetic work done are often the subject of ridicule and are sometimes seen as superficial and shallow, the shift in Botox's ad copy towards emphasis on caring for oneself makes sense: corporations must make consumers feel good about their products, not guilty. By reframing Botox as a way of *caring* for oneself, those considering using the treatment can feel like they are doing something for oneself rather than for others. Of course, in a society that did not punish women for aging, wrinkles would not be viewed as the taboo they are now, and Botox would not matter.

Michelle Lazar's (2011) work "examine[s] how advertisers, known for their opportunistic ability to read a society's pulse and respond adroitly by selectively appropriating social discourses, link the normative practice of beautification with an emancipated identity" (p.37). Lazar uses critical discourse analysis to engage with several beauty advertisements from the 2000s to identify the use of emancipatory rhetoric to sell makeup and skincare products. She also notes the way choice feminism has been reappropriated to serve capitalistic gains:

the notion of a woman's right to her own body has extended from 'pro-choice' abortion debates to the pursuit of feminine self-aestheticization. Not surprisingly, choice feminism supports and is supported by a late capitalist culture replete with consumer lifestyle choices. 'Choice' standing in as a shorthand for 'feminism' thus can be easily appropriated to fit into consumerist imperatives so that the implied message is that women may reach feminist goals through their consumer choices. (p. 40)

Advertisers utilizing feminist rhetoric and empowering images make it easy for consumers to make "feminist" choices through their spending habits. Words and phrases like "choose," "freedom," "liberate," and even "your right to health and beauty" and "your right to own the perfect body" suggest that women are empowering themselves when they spend money on beauty products or weight loss programs, rather than capitulating to the male gaze. The images that go along with these phrases often show women in positions of power and strength, such as "a young woman featured in a 'kick ass' pose – with clenched fists, and arms raised to throw punches and a knee lifted to kick an invisible assailant" (Lazar, p. 41). While this co-opting of empowerment rhetoric and images may seem innocent on the surface, I believe this marketing tactic is deeply insidious for a few reasons. First, as noted earlier, these ads may cause women and girls to believe they are making empowered, self-informed choices, when in reality they are spending their hard-earned money to support the very capitalist machine that oppresses them. Second, according to Lazar, it depoliticizes choice, offering women the illusion of choice and emancipation rather than actual freedom. In a world where the choices granted by *Roe v. Wade* are in serious jeopardy, these consumer choices serve as a stand-in and distraction. Third, this kind of choice/commodity feminism renders much of the reality of female suffering invisible.

Gill (2009), drawing on Goldman, discusses at length all the types of violence that are obscured through the messaging in these “empowering” advertisements. There’s the self-inflicted violence I mentioned earlier: the pain of hair removal, extreme dieting, plastic surgery, and any other form of disciplining one’s body. Then, there’s the mental anxiety, or what Goldman terms “the mundane psychic terror” of not having others validate one’s appearance, of losing one’s looks, of losing control over one’s body and weight. Finally, there’s the physical violence that is all too often inflicted on women by men (sexual assault, domestic abuse), both when women meet these standards of beauty and when they do not. Ads that rely on empowerment rhetoric and images serve as systematic erasure of these very real sources of female suffering, and instead paint a picture of a postfeminist world in which “the depiction of heterosexual relations as playful, and women as having as much - if not more - power as men in negotiating them.” Of course, this depiction is far from accurate, and it is dangerous because it fuels political complacency and inaction as well as isolation on the part of women whose experiences drastically differ from those seen in the media.

Furthermore, Gill and Elias (2014) critique what they call “Love Your Body” (LYB) discourses in advertising as post-feminist articulations of sexism. They trace the ways in which ad campaigns from companies like Dove and others, such as Special K and Weightwatchers effectively reframe societally-induced insecurities as issues stemming from within the individual that can be easily stopped with a change in self-talk and attitude. The authors use direct quotes from the campaigns themselves to sum up the problem: “LYB discourse repeatedly suggests that women ‘do this to themselves’ (i.e. the blame and responsibility lies with them) and can therefore simply ‘stop’ ‘because the power is in your hands’” (p. 185). This belies the actual ways in which

women's self-esteem issues are "dislocated from their structural determinants in patriarchal capitalism and shorn of their psychosocial complexity" (p. 185). Though these seemingly-empowering discourses might feel like a breath of fresh air compared to more straight-forward articulations of sexism, they actually serve to obscure the need for structural change and instead place blame and responsibility on individual women, and perhaps even worse, make it seem like an easy feat. These ad campaigns also help corporations and advertisers avoid taking accountability for the roles they have historically played in destroying women's self-esteem, as "many of the companies at the forefront of promoting LYB are precisely those invested in maintaining female body dissatisfaction in order to sell their products" (p. 184). After years of sending the message through advertising that being overweight makes one undesirable and unlovable, it is ironic (and strategic) for companies like Special K and Weightwatchers (now called WW, perhaps to escape even more blame) to flip the script by encouraging women to "shut down fat talk" (p. 181) and "never forget how incredible [they] are" (p. 181) when these very companies played a large role in reinforcing fat talk and helping women to forget how incredible they are if they are not thin. Through LYB discourse, which is but one example of empowering post-feminist ad copy, beauty companies are simultaneously able to skirt widespread critique from consumers with feminist sensibilities, position themselves as feel-good, feminist options for consumption, and secure their bottom lines by continuing to reinforce the same ideals they claim to repudiate.

As Lazar illustrates, cosmetics companies take a similar approach to this so-called LYB discourse—perhaps Love Your Face or Love Yourself would be more fitting monikers—in order to encourage continual spending. In the landscape of social media, everyone's appearance is on

display for scrutiny in a way that only celebrities were in the past. Instagram and selfie culture have only made women more attuned to their own appearances and perceived imperfections. Gill and Elias (2018) describe the ways in which the “girlfriend culture” (defined as “warmly couched hostility ’in which criticisms of potential users for procrastination, sloppiness or bad habits are articulated carefully in an address that is explicitly ‘non-judgmental’” (p. 71) even though it is, in fact, judgmental) proliferated first by magazine and now even more so by social media apps encourages women to scrutinize themselves in order to fix their flaws through consumption.

Of course, I am not arguing that women are uniformly manipulated into performing beauty rituals; I understand that every woman has a personal relationship with her appearance and practices, myself included. While there are some practices I believe to be uniformly uncomfortable and unpleasant (waxing, crash-dieting, etc.), there are many aspects of a beauty routine that can elicit pleasure, relaxation, and creative expression. Such daily practices which many individuals express as pleasurable include makeup application and hair styling. While these seemingly innocuous practices can be distinguished from other inherently painful beauty rites, they are also important to consider here as they are still rooted in patriarchy.

Sarah Elsie Baker (2017) explores the complexities of glamour, which she argues has historically been a tool of capitalist systems and patriarchal objectification. According to Baker, glamour is equated with the allure of “the good life,” one which takes place in a world with limitless money and time. Glamour, then, becomes a tool of capitalism by eliciting feelings of longing in consumers—longing for that good life which can only ever be attained by a very elite few.

The allure of glamour is clearly alive and well on social media. Influencers represent a new type of celebrity, one that does not need to book acting jobs or worry about recording music and touring. Influencers, I argue, are the ultimate purveyors of the promise of glamour in the 21st century; they are often paid millions of dollars to sit in front of a camera and put on makeup. Many influencers have immaculate backdrops in the form of their large and beautifully decorated homes. They have all the trappings of wealth—designer clothes and handbags and flashy cars—and all the time in the world, since there are no set work hours for an influencer who makes her own schedule. Worse, it feels real, because to an extent, it is; these influencers share real life events with their followers in an intimate and familiar way that traditional celebrities do not, while simultaneously casting themselves as ordinary people with normal lives. Of course, for most viewers who *are* ordinary people, this kind of lifestyle is obviously unattainable. What is easily obtainable, though, is the makeup product that all the top influencers are raving about any given week.

While buying new makeup products might help the average woman temporarily experience glamour, the feeling cannot be permanent because glamour is inherently a fantasy. The feeling does not last, and to fill the void, another new product is just around the corner. New makeup products are released every day, with entire Instagram pages and blogs dedicated to announcing and documenting these new cosmetics. While it is rationally understood that one person can only use so much product before it expires, it becomes tempting for the average consumer to increase her consumption—to increase her escape. Beauty gurus get new products sent to them every week by brands for PR purposes, and those very same gurus also share new “hauls” of products they have purchased independently as well. If our favorite glamorous

Youtuber can have two drawers of blush, then why can't we? This constant cycle of longing and consuming fuels capitalism.

The irony, as Baker notes, is that capitalism is also the *reason* for those feelings of longing:

in liberal capitalist societies people remain attached to fantasies of 'the good life', despite evidence that the conditions for obtaining this fantasy have been taken away. Brief moments of satisfaction and agency are found in consumption practices, but these are short lived...While moments of pleasure and agency are found when consuming glamorous objects, the way in which we engage with, and acquire, these objects in capitalist neoliberal societies actually impedes ever obtaining the life we fantasize about (p. 65-66)

The path to the good life has been blocked by the conditions of capitalist society, so many try to self-soothe via material (over)consumption, rendering a short-lived sense of satisfaction until the next "hit." Women, in particular, are especially affected, because statistically, they are doing an unprecedented amount of work. More women than ever work outside the home, but continue to do the majority of the housework and childcare, even if they are the primary breadwinner. It follows then, that more women would be looking for an escape or a fantasy, one that is provided by the beauty industry and its new language of "self-care."

The glamorous ideal is particularly relevant here because "time for self has become particularly valuable for women due to the radical dispersal of their labour, whereby boundaries between time for work and non-work, time for care, and time for leisure, are more difficult to trace...the desire to be glamorous can be read as...a way of getting relief from everyday

pressures” (Baker, p. 58). There is nothing inherently wrong with the idea and/or pursuit of glamour in and of itself, especially if it provides pleasure or comfort to people. The problem, however, is that most glamorous acts involve the market: buying cosmetics, shopping for new clothes, paying for beauty services. As such, Baker notes, “we should question the agency involved in such activities, as well as the extent to which they can challenge patriarchy” (p. 59). In other words, women purchasing Venus razors in order to shave their socially unacceptable body hair becomes no less intertwined with patriarchal ideals and neoliberal capitalism just because messages of glamor, empowerment, and choice are echoed throughout Venus ’ad copy. Baker quotes from McRobbie (2009), who warns that this “pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire plays directly into the hands of corporate consumer culture eager to tap into this market on the basis of young women’s rising incomes” (p. 158). It comes as no surprise, then, that industries aimed at women continue to skyrocket in growth—like the beauty industry, whose executives know that women have increasingly more disposable income and a desire for the escapism offered by glamor.

The question of agency is an important one to consider, though impossible to fully answer. Still, it is worth it to ask: to what extent do women who engage in beauty practices have agency? First, it is imperative to understand that it is impossible to quantify how many of their actions can be attributed to free choice and how much of it is from social and internalized pressure because there is no way to isolate one’s actions from the structures which shape the society in which one lives. Constrained agency refers to the idea that structures influence the choices available to actors and shape their motivations and actions; there is no way to truly measure agency separately from structures because we do not live in a vacuum. As previously

discussed, Foucault's concepts of self-policing, docility and biopower ensure that individuals are societally programmed to understand what constitutes acceptable behavior and what does not, what kind of behavior is rewarded and what is punished. This subconscious knowledge relayed to us through societal structures certainly influences the actions we choose to carry out, including beauty practices. As Gill (2009) points out, "a notion of women as completely free agents who just 'please themselves'... cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone's individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organised around a slim, toned, hairless body." Women do not make aesthetic choices in social conditions that they have chosen, but marketing rhetoric that obscures this fact causes women to feel that their consumer choices are empowered—a clever tactic in a world where feminist sensibilities are more mainstream than ever before. By equating choice with feminism itself, it is easy for brands to suggest that "women may reach feminist goals through their consumer choices" (Lazar, p. 44). In this way, choice is depoliticized and women are offered only an illusion of freedom—which is especially worthy of critique in a political climate where many women are at risk of losing protections afforded by *Roe v. Wade*. Another reason to critique "choice feminism," which in this context bears similarity to Goldman's concept of commodity feminism, is that it "leaves much of the traditional gender order undisturbed" (Lazar, p. 47). Avelie Stuart and Ngairé Donaghue (2012) further explore the ways in which "choosing to conform" is expressed through neoliberal discourse, which especially comes to the fore when speaking with women and girls who engage in beauty practices. They note that the importance women place on the concepts of agency and choice when it comes to beauty practices trace back to the construction of the neoliberal self. The

concept is a hybrid of postmodern notions of selfhood as consisting of “multiplicity, performativity and pastiche” and contemporary western culture’s shift “to the development and expression of the ‘true ’individual self” (Stuart & Donaghue, p. 101). This combination has resulted in a neoliberal self which places “an emphasis on autonomy and self-responsibility that holds ‘individuals ’accountable for their own fates and eschews any acknowledgment of meaningful social or structural constraint on the self” (Stuart & Donaghue, p. 101). These expectations shape women’s views on their own beauty habits. Because of the neoliberal tendency to deny social constraints and place responsibility—or blame—on the individual, many of Stuart and Donaghue’s study participants (Australian women between the ages of 18 and 42 who were interviewed about their attitudes on beauty rituals) spoke about their beauty practices using language of choice and empowerment; however, when further asked to elaborate, it became clear that the participants were aware of social pressures regarding their appearances. However, they mostly denied that their own choices were shaped by these social pressures, regardless of the fact that they *were*, in fact, shaped by social pressures.

One example of this can be seen in the participants ’attitudes towards body hair removal. The participants noted in their interviews that while not removing body hair was technically a choice available to them, it was not one that many felt they could take due to the social repercussions. These interviews reveal the “complexity involved in choice; while decisions are constructed as ultimately residing with each person (e.g. you choose to keep or remove facial hair), the consequences may serve to effectively remove that choice as a genuine option” (Stuart & Donaghue, p. 113). However, when further pressed, the interview participants ’responses

mostly reflected the individual's responsibility for whatever consequences she experiences from the choice she makes, rather than blaming the social preferences that encourage the removal of body hair. The researchers also found that among their study participants, passive decisions (such as declining to remove one's naturally occurring body hair) were framed as a choice, while the active decision to remove body hair was spoken of as the "default position." This reflects the fact that women have internalized a conformist mindset, at least to some extent, as acting against the natural state of one's body has been reframed as natural, while accepting it is viewed as an out-of-the-ordinary, strange choice. Indeed, as historian Rebecca Herzig (2014) notes in her history of hair removal, "in the contemporary United States, few practices are as taken for granted as the deliberate removal of body hair" (p. 9).

Through these choices, women are complicit in upholding patriarchal norms. In this discussion of complicity, it is important to understand with what, exactly, women are complying. A discussion of power dynamics is useful here. Building on Foucault, Bordo notes that power is not something that individuals or groups have and wield; instead, it is comprised of a "network of noncentralized forces...within which certain groups and ideologies *do* have dominance" (p. 30). She sums up the way this power functions exceptionally well:

Where power works 'from below,' prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may certainly contain such elements), but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms. Thus, as Foucault writes, 'there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his

own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself.’ (Bordo, p. 31)

This self-surveillance leads to the complicity which Monteverde discusses, and which I build upon in this thesis. Monteverde writes:

It is important to stress that I do not consider any individuals to be culpable of their own oppression; I refer to inadvertent collusion with the system. I also consider everyone to be complicit with the various social systems they live within. As people living in particular societies, we must fulfil certain roles...It is not possible to act always—or ever—in total accord with one’s sincerely-held political beliefs...With this in mind, I recognise it is impossible to never be complicit with patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy or capitalism. (p. 64)

While I note that women’s actions in participating in beauty rituals are complicit in patriarchy, I agree with Monteverde’s assertion that women are not responsible for their own oppression; in fact, I vehemently reject that notion, as complicity in this case is often necessary for survival with a patriarchal capitalist society. Bordo agrees: while she notes that “Many, if not most, women also are willing (often, enthusiastic) participants in cultural practices that objectify and sexualize us,” much feminist discourse fails to “admit female responsibility...though understandably so, given the swiftness with which the acknowledgment that women *participate* in reproducing sexist culture gets converted to the ideas that we ‘are our own worst enemies,’ ‘do it to ourselves,’ ‘ask for it’” (p. 33). I believe acknowledging this complicity, or responsibility as Bordo puts it, is important because women are not “‘cultural dopes, ‘blindly submitting to oppressive regimes of beauty’” (p. 34). Indeed, the studies conducted by Stuart and Donaghue

and McCabe et al. (2020) demonstrate that women are aware of oppressive beauty standards, and negotiate their own behaviors, as well as their mindsets around these behaviors, within these oppressive regimes. As stated earlier, conforming to beauty ideals is often the most rational “choice” a woman can make: “given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it” (Bordo, p. 34). As I mention many times over the course of this thesis, I myself take part in beauty culture; I love applying makeup and painting my nails, and while I abhor removing my leg hair, I do that too. My aim here is not to suggest to women what they should or should not do when it comes to their own appearances and routines. Rather, my goal for this project is to identify and critique the underlying power structures that influence the decisions that women make on a daily basis, my own decisions included.

Of course, women’s willingness and/or active desire to comply with patriarchal beauty standards is rational, as it is self-serving: women who fit patriarchal norms stand to gain much more than do women who shun them (Wolf). Women who change their appearances to better fit beauty norms by getting breast augmentations, for example, have “correctly discerned that these norms shape the perceptions and desires of potential lovers and employers. They are neither dupes nor critics of sexist culture; rather, their overriding concern is their right to be desired, loved, and successful on its terms” (Bordo, p. 24). In a world where the only actions guaranteed to produce a positive response is to actively fit these beauty norms, women make a *rational choice* when they choose to shave their legs, dye their hair, wear makeup, and get plastic surgery. When they choose *not* to do these things, they are often punished, making it that much harder to live in a society that already places enough hardship on women. The situation is even worse for women of color, who are often compelled by their schools or workplaces to chemically relax

their hair to better fit into Eurocentric norms. Women from ethnic minority groups know they will gain social capital if they undergo surgery to “correct” their ethnic facial features. The pressures about which I write are compounded for women of color, making it that much more difficult to embrace the natural state of their bodies. Stuart and Donaghue add, “The cultural privilege attached to beauty creates a compelling reason for women to engage in beauty practices, which thus should not be understood as unthinking conformity to externally imposed ideals; whatever else these practices may be, they are a means by which women can enhance their status within the dominant social order” (p. 100). While all this is true, it does not negate the damage done when women engage in beauty norms by “reinforcing the patriarchal ideology that naturalizes and normalizes these practices for all women” (Stuart & Donaghue, p.100).

The importance of women being “seen as self-responsible, flexible and autonomous” (Stuart & Donaghue, p. 116) when it comes to their beauty habits and routines can be seen in McCabe et al.’s ethnographic study in which a group of female participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with makeup. Most of the responses mainly centered around self-expression, confidence, and pleasure, while fewer responses discussed the societal pressures the women felt to look a certain way and fit a certain set of standards. Even when the participants did consider the “insistent demands of beauty culture” (p. 657) and the ways that “cosmetic industry discourse reinforces gender bias,” (p. 659) they still seemed to overall “create their own negotiated meaning[s]” (McCabe et al.). These negotiations combined the positive feelings they experienced about themselves and their appearances while wearing makeup with the negative feelings they had about advertising discourses that “[portray] women and various aspects of their bodies as sexual objects” (659) and “[assume] a gender bias toward female inferiority and

objectification of women's bodies" (p. 670). Women's willingness to negotiate beauty philosophies indicates a strong adherence to neoliberal discourses that emphasize autonomy and agency in a world that also values and rewards conformity to beauty. By claiming "choice," women are able to reject the notion that their beauty rituals constitute "conformity," a neoliberal taboo. The neoliberal capitalist society in which we live "makes little allowance for women to explicitly acknowledge restrictions or social pressures that impinge upon their 'free choice'" (Stuart & Donaghue, p. 116). Corporations know this, and as a result, the marketing rhetoric identified by Lazar has become the standard when marketing to women.

Because this new framework for understanding beauty rituals as empowering continues to uphold oppressive capitalist and patriarchal systems, rearticulates post-feminist sexism, and equates consumer action with political action, I believe it is problematic and worthy of closer critique. In the following chapter, I will trace the ways in which beauty rituals have been represented in the media and what kind of messages have permeated the public consciousness as a result.

Chapter 3: Problematic Texts

According to Rachel Moseley, (2002)“ teen films and television shows have been profoundly engaged in the policing of difference and the construction and validation of hegemonic femininities, in the correcting of ‘aberrant ’femininity” (p. 405). Media texts aimed at young women are part of the social conditioning which informs self-surveillance parameters. The makeover montage is perhaps one of the most recognizable in American cinema. Though they differ in content, they tend to take place in shopping malls, bathrooms, girls ’bedrooms, or a combination of these settings. There are so many examples of the very same scene repeating itself throughout media content that it is difficult to narrow down the examples. One of my favorites—because I, like many others, thought the makeover recipient looked better in her “before” form—is Allison’s (Ally Sheedy) makeover in *The Breakfast Club* (1985), courtesy of Claire (Molly Ringwald). Allison is a “weird” kid throughout the duration of the film. She wears dark, baggy clothes, heavy black eyeliner, and combat boots. After becoming friends, Claire, the popular girl, redoes Allison’s makeup and hair, giving her a much more traditionally feminine look. Everyone else is impressed with Allison’s new look, and she smiles genuinely for the first time in the film. It is only after she has achieved a classically feminine look that Allison gets the attention of Andrew, the jock played by Emilio Estevez. The message is clear: there are unacceptable appearances, and acceptable appearances for women. This is in stark contrast to the other pair of love interests; notably, Judd Nelson’s rebellious Bender does not have to change his grungy appearance to win over prim and proper Claire. Makeovers are aimed at correcting “aberrant” femininity, which can be defined as a woman or girl “performing” femininity incorrectly, or not at all. Allison is doing it wrong: Moseley calls her an “animalistic outcast”

transformed into a “conventionally pretty ‘nice girl.’” This is the right way to “do” femininity, and she is rewarded for her transformation. Of course, femininity is inherently a performance; even those who do it “correctly,” femininity is always “a kind of drag” as there is “no original, or natural, femininity, it is always a kind of staging” (McRobbie, 2008, p. 542). Though there are some to whom the staging comes more easily, every display of femininity is a staged one. In *The Breakfast Club*, then, it can be said that Claire’s appearance is as much a costume as Allison’s post-makeover look.

Another famous example of the high school makeover trope on the big screen comes ten years later, in 1995’s *Clueless*. The rich and popular Cher Horowitz takes the new girl, Tai, under her wing and immediately declares that Tai needs a new look. Tai is also performing femininity incorrectly: her hair is dyed an unnatural red, her clothes are baggy and unfashionable, and she speaks with an accent that marks her working-class background. At first Tai is apprehensive, but eventually gives in. The ensuing scene involves washing the bright red dye out of Tai’s hair in Cher’s lavish bathroom, surrounded by expensive hair products, doing Tai’s makeup, and editing her wardrobe. At the end, Tai seems genuinely thrilled by her appearance, despite the fact that she looks like a completely different person. Post-makeover, Tai gains massive popularity at school that she had not previously enjoyed, despite being the same girl she had been before.

The prevalence of makeovers in the teen genre of movies and television sends the message to young viewers that their worth is reliant on their appearance. A more recent example can be found in the Netflix original movie *Tall Girl* (2019), in which a high school girl, Jodi (Ava Michelle), who stands at over six feet tall, feels isolated and ostracized by her peers for her

appearance, and decides to let her glamorous sister and mother give her a makeover to help improve her confidence around the new boy in school. Though Jodi's pre-makeover style is not very fashionable, it seems that her biggest aberration, when it comes to the performance of femininity, is that she is taller than most of the boys and men around her. Jodi's height is not something that can be buffed, trimmed, or manicured away. Even so, the ensuing montage follows the sisters and their mom through the MAC cosmetics store, clothing stores, and the beauty salon in hopes of helping Jodi feel more comfortable in her own skin—or, perhaps, to distract from the aberration of her height by “doing” femininity right in every other way possible. It is noteworthy that this “transformation” happens via consumption: of new clothes, makeup, and beauty services. Indeed, most makeover scenes involve shopping and the consumption of goods in some way, shape, or form. Even makeovers that do not explicitly show consumer behavior carry the suggestion. Claire and Allison never leave the high school in *The Breakfast Club*, but Allison's makeover involves Claire's soft brown eyeliner and pink lipstick; it is understood by viewers that these tools that must be acquired to reach Claire's level of acceptable femininity are available for purchase at drugstores and makeup counters.⁷

The ubiquity of the makeover permeated into reality TV as well. The 2000s saw a proliferation of makeover TV shows, including *Extreme Makeover* (2003-2007), *What Not to Wear* (2003-2013), *The Swan* (2004), and *How to Look Good Naked* (2006-2011), to name a

⁷ The makeover trope, while ubiquitous, is not the only way media texts aimed at women promote consumerism and (over)consumption. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) is another piece of 90s pop culture that normalizes and even celebrates consumerism by creating a “rampant, insatiable and quite unreflexive world of consumption” (McRobbie, 2008, p. 541) through its various shopping montages. While there are no makeovers of which to speak in *SATC*, the show relies on the same longing for the glamorous fantasy life discussed in Chapter 2 and helps to “mobilize the consumer” (McRobbie, 2008, p. 541).

few. All of them perpetuate the same messages: there are acceptable ways for a woman to look, which are rewarded, and unacceptable ways for a woman to look, which are shamed and punished. They also equate a woman's worth and quality of life to her outward appearance. A common narrative—both in fictional makeover scenes and in reality television makeover episodes—is that the woman felt unworthy of attention, affection, success, and love prior to her makeover, and after the fact feels empowered to live her best life.

Though this project focuses on the ways in which women's appearances are put under a microscope, it is important to note that male makeovers are not an untapped market. There was of course *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and the more recent reboot, *Queer Eye* (2018-) (which does not solely focus on making over men though its primary target is men). Additionally, several weight-loss competition shows, like *The Biggest Loser* (2004-2016), include both men and women. These shows have a similar effect on self-esteem for everyone, not just women. However, it is still worth it to note that even a show that featured both men and women seemed to send a message about the acceptability of women's bodies: on average, the women on the show had much lower starting BMIs than the men, meaning the threshold for being unacceptably overweight is much lower for women. This suggests that there is much more leeway and social acceptability given to overweight men than overweight women. Driving this point home is the fact that most of us can name several overweight male actors and musical artists, while the number of overweight famous women one can name can usually be counted on one hand, especially considering the extent to which many formerly fat famous women lost a considerable amount of weight, like musical artist Adele or actress Melissa McCarthy.

Though there are a plethora of reality TV makeover shows from which to choose, *How to Look Good Naked (HTLGN)* is by far the most interesting (and relevant to this project) due to

its insistence that it is somehow fundamentally different from the others of its genre. Admittedly, *How to Look Good Naked* never includes plastic surgery or cosmetic procedures unlike many of the others, and weight loss is not a focus of every episode. The show purports to embrace diversity, including that of size, age, and race (Rodrigues, 2012). Kim Toffoletti (2014) argues that this particular reality makeover show was especially insidious in its promotion of beauty messaging because “it is premised on depicting and celebrating ‘real women,’ thereby appearing to offer an antidote to contemporaneous makeover shows and media images of women more generally that are said to promote unrealistic beauty ideals” (p. 108). Like many of the advertisements discussed in Chapter 2, *How to Look Good Naked* similarly takes feminist critiques of the makeover genre into consideration and claims to present an alternative to the outwardly misogynistic makeover narrative, particularly by embracing the diversity of its contestants. This, of course, is misleading, because *How to Look Good Naked* does, in fact, rely on the very same rigid patriarchal standards—they are simply wrapped in more encouraging language. According to Sara Rodrigues, “[A]t the same time as it promotes the right to body acceptance for women of all ages, shapes, and sizes, *How to Look Good Naked* is dependent on ideologically constructed conventions of beauty that end up homogenizing its candidates” (p. 43). In other words, the show still aims to help women fit into the accepted norms of feminine appearance: there is a particular way they should dress, do their hair, and apply their makeup to help them become as conventionally attractive as possible. While this particular show does not always directly include weight loss and a fitness routine as part of its makeover, the process often entails helping women to find clothing and undergarments that help them to appear thinner. Although the show claims to celebrate diversity, the makeover always results in a more feminized appearance that is deemed to be acceptable. Rodrigues’ analysis also draws on

Foucault's concept of docile bodies as a tool of ensuring the contestants' compliance with normative femininity by the end of the makeover. Docility, according to Foucault, is achieved through the discipline of the body, which is primarily done through social institutions like hospitals and schools rather than through forms of physical punishment. Through this social discipline, "the body is optimized, becoming more useful as it becomes obedient to the point where the body begins to discipline itself" (Rodrigues, p. 46). The candidates are shown to be very happy with their newly acceptable silhouettes. The end of each episode portrays a huge contrast between each woman pre-makeover (insecure, unhappy) and post-makeover (confident, elated). Audiences internalize the message that normalized femininity is the only legitimate option for a woman's appearance by eliminating deviations in appearance, thereby pathologizing ugliness and then "[presenting] the remedy of normalization disguised as a narrative of empowerment" (Rodrigues, p. 47). *How to Look Good Naked* relies on the postfeminist sense of agency by positing that inner insecurities can be remedied with outward physical changes. This can be particularly damaging because "such 'agency' is a trap that not only saddles women with the responsibility of letting themselves go, it also further burdens them with the task of picking themselves up" (Rodrigues, p. 49). This sets a standard wherein if a woman feels badly about herself, it is her own fault; what's more, she has the ability to change her reality simply by disciplining her flesh. This, of course, completely ignores the realities of injustice and violence that cause much of women's self-esteem issues in the first place. Moreover, most of the attitude transformation for the participants on *How to Look Good Naked* and other makeover shows occurs in spaces where consumption occurs: malls, salons, and the like, thus sending the message that inner acceptance comes as a result of external acquisition.

Rodrigues draws a parallel between *How to Look Good Naked* and the Dove campaign mentioned in Chapter 2. She notes, “Both projects appropriate feminist themes of empowerment but suggest that liberation can be achieved solely through grooming and shopping” (p. 49). Furthermore, both the show and Dove campaign place the responsibility of challenging unreasonable beauty norms on individuals, when in reality this problem is not something that can be solved by consumption but by social change. Still, Toffoletti notes that the idea that consumption can solve these problems is explicitly communicated on the show, as the host Gok Wan teaches the contestants (and therefore viewers) that “the consumption of products and procedures aimed at pampering and indulging the body (pedicures, day spas, eyebrow shaping) promotes self-acceptance” (p. 109). Many of the non-shopping activities that the show uses to promote self-acceptance include the acquisition of public acceptance, like putting a picture of the woman on a billboard and asking strangers for their reactions, which are always positive. In summary, the irony with *How to Look Good Naked* is “that body image and body confidence for the women participants seem to acquire meaning through the eyes of others” (Tsaoui, 2017, p. 155). (Similarly, part of the Dove campaign involved comparing women’s own self-descriptions to the way other people described the participant, the strangers’ description always being more complimentary.) While it may be true that many women do feel more self-acceptance after partaking in beauty rituals, this so-called self-acceptance is clearly tied to *public* acceptance; essentially, the message is, “You’ll feel great about yourself once you meet the standards for acceptable femininity!” (This concept will be further critiqued in my analysis of the *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* makeover song “Put Yourself First.”) While I acknowledge that applying makeup and getting one’s hair done can genuinely be a source of pleasure for many, myself included, I

contend that these rituals should not be tied to one's feelings of self-worth and acceptance. At the point where women feel like they cannot leave the house without a full face of makeup or with stubbly legs or with untweezed eyebrows, beauty rituals cease to become a source of joy, pleasure, and pampering, and instead become unpleasant chores upon which our self-worth hinges. (One of the things that inspired this project was my attitude towards body hair removal. Doing it was, and continues to be, a huge burden. It is time-consuming, painful, damaging to my sensitive skin—and yet I cannot imagine myself ever feeling confident going outside in the summer with unwaxed legs.)⁸ When beauty rituals are compulsory and essential to a woman's self-esteem, rather than a bonus source of pleasure, I begin to take issue with the ways they are advertised to women and girls. These rituals—some of which are relatively harmless and some of which are extremely costly and even dangerous—are rearticulated through the visual language of the makeover narrative as acts of self-care, regardless of what the actual woman in question prioritizes. This takes us back to *Clueless* 'Tai: she is not actually interested in beauty and fashion like her new Beverly Hills friends are. By the end of the film, Tai has reverted back to her pre-makeover self, as she is shown to be in a relationship with Travis Birkenstock, a slacker who Cher had previously discouraged Tai from dating because of his image. For Tai, getting a makeover temporarily excited her, but in the long-run, repressing who she really was did not make her happy. The one-size-fits-all approach to self-care (Lose weight, color your hair, tweeze your unibrow, and you'll be a different person!) that is being hawked by companies and backed up by movies and television is problematic for several reasons. First, it homogenizes women by suggesting that checking the same boxes when it comes to physical traits is necessary in order to

⁸ See Rebecca Herzig's *Plucked* for more on the oppressive history of hair removal.

be confident. Second, it saddles women with an extra cost (in terms of money as well as time and energy) with which men do not have to contend. Third, it misleads women into believing that changing themselves to fit patriarchal standards is actually an empowered act of feminism.

Another important aspect of beauty culture is that it is continuous; the labor required of makeover show contestants does not end after the cameras stop rolling. Rather, more labor, money, and time must go into the upkeep of one's new look. Toffoletti summarizes the never-ending nature of the makeover narrative: "the articulation of successful feminine subjectivities increasingly relies on continuous, labor-intensive practices of self-betterment, transformation, and management of the body via consumption" (p. 107). The labor and consumption required to maintain the newly made-over image, once acquired, is constant. The makeover narrative is also inherently classist as it suggests that a working-class image like Tai's in *Clueless* is automatically unacceptable; working-class femininity is *not* femininity done "right." (Cher even considers improving Tai's accent and vocabulary to be part of the makeover process, hearkening back to Eliza Doolittle's transformation in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, 1912's very own *Clueless*.) The makeover trope suggests that all women have the money, time, and ability to meet standards that are overwhelmingly dictated by an upper-middle-class sense of respectability, effectively leaving working-class women in the dust if they fail to keep up. This effort and cost is effectively masked by the rhetoric that beauty work is fun, self-caring, and a form of relaxation, when in fact for many women, it is not.

While Tai is white, her accent and working-class background mark her as "other" among her Beverly Hills classmates. Similarly to the way that "femininity done right" is out of reach for many working-class women, the femininity of women of color has historically been

contested and denied. Performing femininity “correctly,” for women of color, is essentially an impossible task due to historically-held social beliefs about their bodies. In trying to live up to the standards of the Eurocentric beauty preferences in the United States, women of color are attempting to play a role that was not written for them, that was written purposely to exclude them. Femininity is an exclusive (and elusive) club within which all of us must try to fit, with varying degrees of difficulty, and that’s the point: to keep us buying and trying. Circling back to Moseley quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the femininity of women of color is inherently aberrant, but it is still their responsibility to try to fix it; the only real “fix,” of course, is structural and social change that may not come thanks to the complacency engendered by the market.

A newer, less-researched method by which this narrative continues to proliferate is newly-emerged forms of social media which allow women to directly communicate with each other about beauty, without the mediation of magazine editors. Beauty influencers can be everywhere: YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and even the pages of magazines and the aisles of beauty retailers like Sephora and Ulta. The line between Internet celebrity and traditional celebrity continues to blur as influencers attend awards shows and the Met Gala. Their collaborations with beauty brands—in which the influencer partners with a brand to create a new makeup product—typically sell out in minutes. Beauty influencers do exactly what their job title suggests: they influence. Typically, they influence their viewers to *spend*. Advertisers and corporations have taken note of this, of course, and utilize the impact of influencers to the best of their ability. The rise of influencers coincided with the rise of sponsored content and affiliate codes, financial incentives for influencers to praise a particular brand’s products. Increasingly, influencers are realizing the power of their influence and become the brands themselves by launching their own companies instead of producing content for some other corporation.

KathleenLights has Lights Lacquer, MannyMUA launched Lunar Beauty, Jaclyn Hill started Jaclyn Cosmetics, and Tati Westbrook started two companies: Tati Beauty, for her cosmetics products, and Halo Beauty for her beauty supplements. Regardless of whether an influencer is shilling her own products or another company's, one thing remains constant: beauty content exists to encourage spending. YouTube videos often focus on reviews and ranking the best new products; Instagram posts often feature product flat-lays, in which the cosmetics are laid out in an aesthetically-pleasing way. The makeup one has used for a particular "look" is always tagged and linked, should a viewer be interested in purchasing the same product. These links are often affiliate links which provide the influencer with a small commission if the viewer makes a purchase. Although influencers often share intimate parts of their lives in their content, engage with viewers in the comments, and sign off their videos with a friendly "I love you guys," their main reason for existence is to make money for themselves by producing profits for the companies they mention. This pseudo-friendship, which is often referred to as a parasocial relationship, is particularly useful in illustrating the ways in which beauty habits and spending have been reframed and rearticulated in the age of social media to come to represent acts of self-care and empowerment. The viral video tag started in 2016 by YouTuber NikkieTutorials (real name Nikkie de Jager), the Power of Makeup, invited makeup users to make their own YouTube videos and Instagram posts expressing what makeup means to them and how it empowers them to be their best selves every day. NikkieTutorials, the creator of the video trend, kicked it off with her own video in which she left half her face bare to show the transformative qualities of makeup.⁹ She also took a stand against "makeup shaming," or judgment lobbied against women

⁹ Nikkie de Jager came out as a transgender woman in 2020, which further complicates her arguments about the power of makeup.

for the amount of makeup they wear. By taking a stand against makeup shamers—implied to be small-minded, judgmental, and oppressive—wearing makeup is positioned as an empowered act. Many other influencers followed Nikkie’s lead, creating their own videos about how makeup has empowered them and enabled them to be confident in themselves. The Power of Makeup videos garnered such popularity that mainstream celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Doutzen Kroes collaborated on their own videos with Nikkie, whose channel has 13.8 million followers at the time of writing. With such a massive reach, the idea of makeup as a tool for empowerment—as opposed to oppression—became more embraced among makeup users. Beyond NikkieTutorials, many other beauty influencers have incorporated ideas about self-care, confidence, empowerment, and self-expression into their video content. Smaller influencers like Jamie Paige (476K followers), Allie Glines (744K), and Mei Pang (213K), have also created videos specifically highlighting makeup products and looks that make them “feel confident,” a key phrase in the titles of the videos in question. Another makeup influencer with a smaller following is Angelica Nyqvist, a content creator who has 103K subscribers. She begins each of her videos by introducing herself as a “lover of fashion and makeup, especially colorful things,” and calls her fanbase the Happy Clown Squad as a result of some of the backlash she has received for her makeup looks, which often do not fall into the traditional expectations of femininity: she often wears several bright colors on her face all at once. She is unapologetic about this aspect of herself, and has mentioned multiple times that she does not wear makeup to be pretty and enhance her features, but rather to express herself artistically. Michele White would identify Nyqvist’s makeup philosophy as an example of the ways in which “cosmetics enable pleasurable iterations of the self rather than improvement” (p. 144). The idea of doing one’s own makeup as an accepted form of artistry has also permeated into the mainstream, thus providing another

reason for women to claim they wear makeup and partake in other beauty practices just for themselves—and another way for the beauty industry to avoid criticism for the damage it does to the self-images of countless women and girls. While White identifies the ways in which makeup and makeup videos can be read as “means of interrogating gender norms and oppression” (p. 139), she also warns, as I do, that “such texts risk reinscribing postfeminist celebrations of ‘choice ’because they do not fully interrogate the cultural mandates that make it difficult for women to opt out of beauty culture” (p. 145).

Influencers have become intrinsic to the beauty industry, and companies are well aware. Sponsored content is common on YouTube and Instagram: brands will pay influencers to feature particular products in their posts.¹⁰ Sponsored videos are perfect examples of the ways in which companies continually steer the beauty narrative away from its roots in patriarchy and oppression and towards positive feelings of self-care. Beauty YouTuber Samantha March (109K subscribers) was sponsored by the cosmetics company Sigma Brushes in January 2021 in a video titled “Self-Care with Me” in which she used their new skincare products and shared skincare tips with her viewers. Lifestyle influencer Danielle Mansutti (1.6 million subscribers) posted a self-care video in October 2019 sponsored by Kiss imPRESS Manicure. In the video, she makes coffee, stresses the importance of drinking water, and suggests that showering is good for self-care before proceeding to do her nails using the sponsored product. Even non-sponsored content promotes consumption as a method of self-care by supplying viewers with affiliate links to products they can buy to build their own self-care routines, like Isimeme Edeko’s (827K

¹⁰ A few years back, influencers escaped criticism from viewers by not disclosing their sponsorships—essentially paid advertisements—and instead passed off sponsored content as their own unbiased opinions. Now, thanks to tighter guidelines on the part of the FTC and social media platforms, influencers must mark their sponsored posts as such.

subscribers), featuring body washes, scrubs, and several different body lotions and oils. In this way, self-care under capitalism has come to mean care for the external self, the body, rather than mental and emotional self-care.

I do not mean to undermine the feelings of pleasure and confidence which makeup and other beauty rituals can provide; I've experienced these feelings firsthand. I began enjoying makeup when I was on my high school debate team, and realized that speaking to a room full of strangers felt a lot easier when I had some eyeliner and mascara on. I genuinely enjoy picking out my makeup for the day and applying it, and while I can and do go without it quite often, I feel more prepared for an important event with my war paint on. When I need a moment to myself to unwind, I often choose to paint my nails. It is important, however, to note that influencers make money when they push products: their livelihood depends on their ability to sell beauty to consumers, in the same way that magazines do. Though their messages may be genuine and resonate with viewers, it is imperative that influencers be critiqued as an extension of the beauty industry. Much of their monetized content has served to solidify the perception that unnecessary consumption constitutes a form of caring for oneself.

Influencers circulate the same empowerment narrative that brands do, except the parasocial relationship they have with their audiences leads viewers to trust influencers—viewers are far more receptive to an influencer's messages than a corporation's. Women are further indoctrinated into this world where beauty routines are continuously separated from their sexist roots. Through influencers, though it may not be their intent, we forget that beauty was first invented to oppress us; we forget about the beauty myth that Wolf identified in the 90s, because the magazines and advertisements are finally telling us something different from the self-hating rhetoric we got used to, and our influencer "friends" are echoing those sentiments. There has

been limited research done on the ways in which beauty influencers' content shapes their viewers' understanding of what constitutes self-care and empowerment. The examples mentioned above, however, point to a trend in the ways in which beauty rituals and spending are portrayed by influencers.

Influencer culture is also where the problem advances past abuse of postfeminist rhetoric to promote consumption and moves ahead to *overconsumption*. Influencer culture has encouraged and normalized the practice of purchasing several new items on a weekly, even daily, basis. Of course, it is not possible for one person to actually use such a volume of cosmetics products, but that does not matter to the companies who profit off of such overconsumption. But these shopping habits do more than hurt women's wallets (which are already suffering badly enough from the wage gap); they also harm the planet by generating higher demand for consumer products, many of which end up in landfills. The production of these products has a carbon footprint from the manufacturing and shipping processes involved, as well.

The social world in which we live trains us to constantly want to improve ourselves and maintain our appearances through makeover narratives. Then, new forms of social media ensnare us in a never-ending web of spending through the constant promise of showing us the next better, shinier product that will *finally* fix our wrinkles or under-eye circles or sparse eyelashes. One makeover is not enough, in the real world; women need to continuously invest money, labor, and time into keeping up with her enhanced looks. If you already have a foundation you like, that's fine—but *this* one might be better. Manicures chip after a week. Hair grows back on a waxed bikini line. Highlights need to be touched up. Plus, what's on trend today might be pitifully dated tomorrow. Consuming influencer content, while entertaining, ensures

that we are always up to date on what's hot and what's not, and it can change in the blink of an eye in the fast-paced digital world in which influencers live, a world where trends come and go much faster than the magazine-dictated trend cycles of the past. In trying to keep up, so that we can be the best versions of our (physical) selves, we are also spending more on cosmetics and procedures than we ever have before, more deeply entrenching ourselves in and benefitting the capitalist patriarchal systems which oppress us.

The message is the same; only the words have changed. In 1985, *The Breakfast Club's* message was, "If you don't fit the standards of proper femininity, boys won't like you and you'll never be happy, but you can easily fix that with some blush," without any sugar-coating. Now, the message is, "If you love and respect yourself and you want to empower yourself to be the best you can, you will take care of your corporeal form to make it look its best. And look, it's fun, so treat yourself!" Though the message may have stung more in 1985, at least it was direct and did not attempt to hide its patriarchal roots. The new beauty philosophy is particularly pernicious because it attempts to muddle its origin in patriarchy by connecting itself to empowerment and flimsy faux-feminist rhetoric. Not only are we engaging in beauty practices and spending more money on beautification than ever before, but we have also been convinced—or convinced ourselves—that these consumer actions are actually empowered and empowering. The story they are trying to tell us, that we have full agency over these beauty actions, is flawed because the concept of agency is inherently flawed, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Media texts work together to imbue the social knowledge that encourages us to self-surveil and self-police. Furthermore, they work to keep us consuming. Traditional makeover media teaches us that there is an acceptable way to look, and that achieving this acceptability is done through consumption. They simultaneously tell us that adhering to acceptability by

maintaining one's appearance (through consumption) is an act of empowerment and self-care.

Social media then steps in to normalize and encourage obscene amounts of overconsumption by constantly pumping out new content about the latest and greatest products and services; it ensures we are never happy with what we have. Social media texts, too, reiterate the idea that consumption is self-care, something a woman does for herself. These texts are problematic because they obscure the cost and labor that goes into disciplining the body, and suggest that said discipline is comprised of acts of empowerment, distracting from the very real need for political and social change. In actuality, the disciplining of the body serves to uphold patriarchal capitalist structures that profit off of women's mental and physical pain.

Chapter 4: Resistant Texts

While there are countless examples of media texts that perpetuate the idea that a woman's worth is directly tied to her appearance, there also exist feminist media texts that critique and parody this cultural belief, specifically targeting the commodity feminism that is often used to sell the modern, "liberated" woman on the idea that her looks are the best way to be empowered. Two such texts that I will analyze in this chapter are Anna Biller's film *The Love Witch* (2016), and the musical-comedy television program *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which aired on the CW between 2015-2019.

Sulamit Reinharz (1992) notes that feminist content analysis research should note the ways in which the content is produced—it asks the question, by whom and for whom was the content created? Both media texts were helmed by women—Biller served as director, writer, producer, and designer of the film, her second feature after *Viva* (2007), while *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* was co-created and produced by Aline Brosh McKenna (best known for screenwriting *The Devil Wears Prada* and *27 Dresses*) and Rachel Bloom (previously known for her comedic YouTube videos), all of whom have spoken publicly on their feminist beliefs in interviews, which will be explored more later in this chapter. Furthermore, the target audiences for both projects seem to be young women. *The Love Witch's* Technicolor aesthetic, impeccable makeup, elaborate costume and set design, and its central themes of magic and love create a lush aesthetic to which women are beckoned. The film's attention to glamour lures in female audiences. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is positioned as a musical rom-com, genres that tend to be favored by women, and aired on the CW, a network that is geared towards teenagers and young adults, as it is also the home of shows like *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) and *Riverdale* (2017-present). The idea that beauty

is empowerment is an explicit theme of *The Love Witch*, and it makes an appearance over the course of several musical numbers in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. I will first trace the ways in which *The Love Witch* rebukes the societal idea that women access “power” through their beauty and sexuality and shows how the promotion of this idea serves to further oppress women using the oft-misunderstood figure of the witch. Then, I will highlight several scenes from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* which utilize the show’s musical parody format to illustrate the absurdity of the same concepts.

The Love Witch

Witches and witchcraft have historically been linked to a distrust of women’s sexuality and deviancy from heteronormative, patriarchal norms. However, Marion Gibson notes that in the 1960s, a cultural shift identifying the figure of the witch as both “liberal and liberated” (2006, p. 94) took place with the popularity of the television show *Bewitched*, helping to usher in the modern image of the witch as an empowered woman. In *The Love Witch*, styled in the aesthetics of 1960s Technicolor films, characters expressly discuss the ways in which witchcraft and misogyny are linked: the main character, Elaine, is told by her mentor and high priestess, Barbara, “The whole history of witchcraft is interwoven with the fear of female sexuality. They burned us at the stake because of the erotic feelings we elicited in them. Later, they used marriage to hold us in bondage, and turned us into servants, whores and fantasy dolls, never asking us what we wanted.” Indeed, contemporary discourses have identified the witch as a cultural figure reappropriated from its once-demonized position to one of empowerment; deviancy from patriarchal norms and sexual freedom are now things to celebrate. As Barbara speaks, the camera turns its focus to the stage behind her, where a woman dances and removes articles of clothing as the (primarily male) audience hoots and hollers their encouragement. They

are at a burlesque bar, a place which is noted by the witches in the film as a location where women can be empowered through the owning of their sexualities. The juxtaposition of Barbara's words and the male audience's reaction to the dancer reveals a tension in this seemingly-feminist philosophy. Towards the end of the film, when Elaine's lover, Griff, outs her as a witch to the patrons of the burlesque bar, they begin chanting "Burn the witch!" as the camera focuses on many of the men closing in on Elaine as they unbutton their pants and hold her to the ground. Griff is able to fight off the angry mob and whisk Elaine to safety, but the connection between witchcraft, eroticism, and misogyny is made abundantly clear. However, *The Love Witch's* feminism is not quite so cut and dry. In fact, the movie can be read as a critique of postfeminist discourses in three ways: first, through the equating of empowerment with conventional femininity; second, through the coven's ardent belief in upholding traditional gender roles; and finally, through the claim that the path to women's empowerment is through sexual means.

Throughout the film, witchcraft is presented as the path through which women can access empowerment. At the same time, the witchcraft practiced by Elaine's coven is closely linked with traditional femininity. Coven leaders Gahan and Barbara are very clear that only through the utilization of their appearances will women be taken seriously. Elaine parrots these beliefs throughout the film. Another scene provides a flashback of Elaine's life with Jerry, her deceased husband, whose death is heavily implied to have been at the hands of Elaine. In the flashback, Jerry chastises Elaine for not taking care of herself or the house. He reminds her that he loves her before chiding her about dinner being late three times that week, and never remembering to brush her hair. He laughingly complains about finding an old hot dog behind their bed. Clearly,

though, Jerry was describing the old Elaine, pre-witchcraft initiation. When we see her as a witch, Elaine cooks elaborate dinners for her various love interests, and her hair, makeup, and outfits are always flawless—she is, somehow, all at once the domestic goddess of the 1950s and the glamorous working woman of the 1970s. It was seemingly her initiation into witchcraft that transformed her from a bad housewife into a domestic goddess. Furthermore, Elaine’s practice of witchcraft conforms to traditionally feminine spheres: she makes potions, communes with nature, and often spends her days painting colorful art around her apartment. She gets Wayne and Richard to ingest her love potions by cooking elaborate dinners for them, sneaking the potions into the food and wine. In this way, she works through patriarchal norms via the domestic realm to attempt to access agency for herself.

Rachel Moseley (2002) identifies action within the domestic sphere as one of the signifiers of a “good witch” in movies such as *Practical Magic* (1998), *The Craft* (1996), *Teen Witch* (1989), and Hallmark Channel’s film and TV series *Good Witch* (2015-2021). Elaine certainly fits Moseley’s analysis of young witches in film and television using glamour as a way to both understand and interrogate the connection between femininity and magic. She argues that the popular witch media of the 1990’s and 2000’s banished the second wave’s reclaimed image of the unruly and powerful witch in favor of postfeminist depictions of witches seen in shows like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006).¹¹ Gibson, too, argues that

¹¹ Both shows have recently been rebooted. *Charmed* was rebooted in 2018 and currently airs on The CW at the time of writing. Netflix brought the Sabrina character back in 2018 for the much darker *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020). Both shows are more overtly feminist than their originals. For example, in the first season of *Sabrina*, the main character starts the WICCA (Women’s Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association) club. Mel, one of the three sisters in *Charmed*, is a women’s studies graduate student and often voices her feminist opinions.

Bewitched's Samantha mostly operated within the domestic realm, only using her powers in small and benevolent ways that did not challenge the "heavily gendered ideals of American family life" (p. 95). The power of these witches, Moseley notes, is "glamorous, not excessive and bodily; it is respectable (they are sexy but their bodies are under control and their powers in check), and it is domesticated" (p. 419). This is often presented in contrast to power-hungry, non-domesticated witches. For example, in *The Craft*, one of the witches, Nancy, who dresses in alternative/goth clothing, becomes too powerful, and must battle against the "good" witch Sarah, who is traditionally feminine, glamorous, and domesticated. (The girls' styles parallel Allison's aberrant femininity and Claire's acceptable femininity in *The Breakfast Club*, as mentioned in Chapter 3.) Kristen J. Sollee (2017) notes that Nancy is shown to have an abusive home life, and has suffered from slut-shaming rumors at school. Instead of taking a nuanced approach to the character, given her background, the film wholly vilifies her, positioning her as a "villainous psychopath," with whom we are "not meant to sympathize" (p. 114). As a result, the good girl/bad girl dichotomy, or the virgin/whore dichotomy, is reinforced. Moseley notes that in many popular representations of the glamorous witch, glamour and conventional femininity is equated with "goodness," while outward appearances that deviate from traditional norms are often representative of "badness." This can be traced back to *The Wizard of Oz's* (1939) construction of Good Witches dressed in sparkly dresses and Bad Witches dressed in black pointy hats. In contemporary film, these appearances take a different form—the sparkly dress becomes feminine clothing and non-feminine style choices stand in for the pointy hat—but hold similar meanings.

Billar seems to challenge this dichotomy in *The Love Witch*, which takes a more nuanced approach. Elaine is conventionally attractive; in fact, her appearance is the textbook definition of traditional femininity. She is always impeccably made-up, even when she is alone in her apartment; her wardrobe consists of skirts and blouses; and she wears a hairpiece to further enhance her naturally long, shiny black hair. She certainly looks and acts the part of the glamorized and domesticated witch. Though viewers are meant to empathize with Elaine, it is clear that she is not a traditionally “good” witch: she murders several men after she decides they are not the men of her dreams, and does not seem to have much remorse afterwards. However, her glamour remains intact throughout the film, thus complicating ideas about what a “bad” witch should look like. Gone is the idea that only non-conforming, non-traditionally feminine witches are capable of atrocious deeds when we see the glamorous Elaine stab her lover Griff, leaving her with actual blood on her hands.

Trish, Elaine’s non-witch, non-glamorous neighbor, is Elaine’s opposite in appearance and opinion. While Elaine dresses in uber-feminine clothing, lots of makeup and accessories, and hair pieces, Trish presents herself much more plainly, wearing pantsuits and very little makeup or jewelry. Both women are conventionally attractive, but Trish, unlike Elaine, does not embrace glamour, and seems to embody the “modern woman,” seeing as she also has a successful career as an interior designer. She scolds Elaine for her sexist, patriarchal views when Elaine tells Trish that women should “give men their fantasy,” telling Elaine, “you just seem brainwashed by the patriarchy!” Trish feels sorry for Elaine and her backwards view, as do audiences. As the movie continues, though, viewers begin to feel sorry for Trish, whose husband has committed suicide after having an affair (with Elaine, unbeknownst to Trish). Elaine meets Trish for tea, where Trish begins to doubt her own views on feminism, wondering aloud if perhaps she had presented

herself more like Elaine does, she would still have her husband. In the next scene, Trish goes to Elaine's house to drop off a ring which Elaine left in the tearoom. After setting the ring on Elaine's dresser, she decides to try on Elaine's style, donning Elaine's makeup, wig, and lingerie. By rifling through Elaine's things, she discovers proof that Elaine was Richard's mistress. It is only when she is sporting Elaine's glamorous look that Trish seemingly goes against her own professed feminist views, calling Elaine a "skank." This can be read as a critique of the ways in which postfeminist views like the ones Elaine espouses can be harmful to women.

As witchcraft is viewed as the only manner by which women can attain true empowerment, and as witchcraft is just a glamorized version of traditional femininity, then the high priest's argument (which Elaine subsequently parrots) is that the only path to achieving power within a patriarchal society is to capitulate to normative gender roles and expectations. Indeed, Elaine seems to have real-life confirmation of these values: Jerry, her ex-husband, leaves her (and she presumably kills him using witchcraft afterwards). She did not live up to the expectations for an ideal woman, and as a result she lost the man she loved. The movie, then, sees her try her hand at love again, this time conforming to those standards.

Moseley concludes her essay by stating, "The glamour of the teen witch may well be both a sequined [sic] corset and a glittering prison" (p. 422). This is true of *The Love Witch*, too—until it isn't. In a final scene which Biller has stated is influenced by the end of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, Elaine suddenly murders Griff by stabbing him in the heart. This sudden death is the first murder Elaine directly commits, and it is not through magic but with a good old fashioned dagger. She sits on her bed next to Griff's body, smiling at a self-portrait painting hung on the wall. Perhaps she has realized that she does not need the approval of a man,

or that her search for a fantasy version of love is futile. Either way, the moment she kills Griff is apparently the first time she acts in a way that defies traditional femininity and patriarchy. By killing the man who refuses to allow her even the slightest bit of control she can gain through magic, she breaks free from the cycle of repeatedly trying to be a man's fantasy and chasing a male approval.

Elaine is strongly attached not only to conventional femininity, but to stereotypical masculinity. Coven leaders Barbara and Gahan emphasize the need for "polarity" between men and women. After crafting herself into the perfect Stepford wife, she longs for a perfect man to fulfill her masculine expectations. Once men fail to be what she had fantasized, she loses interest (ironic, considering that she is angry with her ex-husband for doing the same to her). For example, when her first paramour, Wayne, begins unleashing his post-coitus emotions, she rapidly becomes disgusted by him, although she had been actively seducing him right before. Seemingly a result of a psychedelic potion she gave to him, he begins to cry and moan about his feelings for Elaine immediately after sex. He complains about how women want men to make commitments to them as soon as he has slept with them, before doing the exact same thing to Elaine. She promises she will always be there for him, but this is a lie: his neediness leads Elaine to sleep on the couch, away from him. In an inner monologue, she complains about Wayne: "What a pussy. What a baby. I thought I'd found a real man, but he's just like a little girl. No one was ever there for me when I was crying my heart out. No one ever comforted me. No one." She dumps her second fling, her friend Trish's husband Richard, when he begins to have an outpouring of emotions as well, later telling Barbara that she had to dump Richard because "there was no polarity." She has crafted herself into a fantasy woman, and will not settle for anything less than the fantasy man, and when Wayne and Richard "act like women" by having emotional

breakdowns, she no longer wants anything to do with them. She wants a “real man” who will not engage in such girlish acts such as crying. She wants real love and devotion, but not if it comes from someone who breaks the mold of traditional masculinity in any way. This reveals Elaine’s harmful devotion to traditional gender roles, which at the same time serves as a reversal of the stereotypical one night stand in which women are shown to be the emotional ones who become quickly attached to an indifferent man. Elaine spends the majority of the film with one goal in mind: find a “real” man who is the masculine to her feminine. Most of the men do not cut it and die in the courting process, but Griff is different, and with his quintessentially masculine traits, wins Elaine over. They even act out a fantasy medieval wedding when they run into Elaine’s coven having a gathering in the woods. The “polarity” between Elaine’s femininity and Griff’s masculinity are perfectly balanced, at least in Elaine’s mind, suggesting that Griff himself can be viewed as symbolic of masculinity, dominance, and patriarchy. Therefore, when Elaine kills Griff she is not only murdering her lover, but symbolically overthrowing the patriarchy; this is what finally makes her happy and fulfills her and makes her free. Her fanatic laughter can be read as relief and joy brought on by her escape from the patriarchal norms in which she had previously entrapped herself in hopes of finding fulfillment within an oppressive system. Instead, she finds that freeing herself from that system is the only way she can regain some of the power practicing witchcraft promised.

Perhaps the most important way Biller communicates her critiques of contemporary feminism is the coven’s emphasis on sexuality as the source of a witch’s power. Although many of the characters espouse what seem to be feminist beliefs, they act in ways that are contrary to their words. For example, Elaine’s coven’s high priest, Gahan, espouses rhetoric that sounds like

feminist beliefs, but goes on to use them as justification for exploiting young women. Her coven initiation required her to submit herself sexually to the high priest in a cult-like ceremony, even though we can clearly see from her face both on the altar and in every subsequent interaction with Gahan that she is in fact disgusted by him. Therefore, when we see Elaine on the altar claiming to be becoming “empowered” through a magical initiation, what we are really witnessing is assault. He claims that the ritual will provide Elaine, and any other young woman who wants to become a witch, with her freedom. In reality, this scene serves to re-articulate classic female submission.

Billier is critical of this particular brand of empowerment discourse which encourages women to take pleasure in their own sexualization. This invitation to take active part in one’s own sexual objectification has been critiqued by feminists, including Gill, who identifies the media’s encouragement for women to take control and project their own sexualized images as “subjectification.” As previously noted, through her analysis of advertisements aimed at women in the early 2000s, Gill (2009) identifies a shift in media representation from one in which women are passively sexualized to one in which the women in the ads are “presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.” *The Love Witch*’s Elaine and other prospective witches are also encouraged to “gain control through the commodification of their appearance” and are led to believe by coven leadership “that by acquiring a particular look they can obtain power” (Gill, 2009).

Indeed, Billier herself noted in an interview with *The Guardian*, “Maybe there is a little of that in *The Love Witch*: the sense that you take the woman, the objectified sex symbol, and

you ask what's inside her mind. The queasy thing about it is how the left has appropriated that kind of free sexual politics in a way that's not really that good for women. So that if you complain about some of the problems for women in the sexual revolution, you're looked at as a rightwing prude. The sexual revolution promised all kinds of freedom to women, and none of it was accomplished – at least, not for women.”¹² *The Love Witch* seems to argue that sexual liberation should not necessarily be equated with women's liberation.

Elaine is told by her coven to take pleasure in her own appearance, and she takes this advice to heart. When she is not seducing a love interest or concocting potions and spells, she can be seen painting large canvases with images of herself. She is presented in the same way Gill describes women in advertisements—taking pleasure in her own conventionally feminine appearance. Though Elaine's pleasure in her appearance comes across as narcissistic, self-absorbed, and deranged, it is true that postfeminist sensibility encourage women to take pleasure in their appearances — provided they perform femininity correctly, of course. The problem with the idea of taking pleasure in one's self, according to Gill, is that often, women are encouraged to take pleasure in looking, and therefore feeling, conventionally sexy, which is often equated with self-pleasure and arousal.¹³ Indeed, the film shows Elaine moaning as she lounges in white lingerie and thinks about her ex-husband telling her, “You've lost so much weight! You have such a hot body now.” In this way, sexual pleasure is tied to one's own acceptably feminine

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography>

¹³ It is also my contention that keeping women in front of the mirror prevents them from seeing the patriarchal structures that surround it, thereby keeping women out of activism and preventing the structural work from being done. This is exactly the phenomenon Wolf describes in *The Beauty Myth*.

appearance, suggesting two damaging ideas: first, that sexual pleasure is inaccessible to those whose bodies fall outside of the realm of acceptability, and second, that a woman's ability to experience sexual pleasure is dependent on her own ability to look a certain way. This view of women's sexual pleasure is not about self-pleasure at all, but rather about pleasing men.

As Gill (2009), Wolf, and Bordo all point out, the desire to have a hairless body, perky breasts, a flat stomach and toned thighs does not exist in a vacuum, and is rather the influence of a patriarchal culture which have caused and encouraged women to internalize men's desires and capitulate to them while claiming to be doing so for oneself. As Gill (2009) says, "the way that the application of boiling wax to the genital region and then its use to pull out hairs by their roots can be discursively (re)constructed as 'pampering'" would probably not have taken place if not for the desire to conform to certain standards of beauty. As someone who takes part in this particular "pampering" process, I can say with certainty that if not for the societal expectation that a woman's legs be smooth and hairless, I would absolutely not subject myself to the pain. Gill (2009) notes that the reconstruction of these processes as "pampering" done for oneself rather than for others serves to erase the pain and "labour involved in making the body beautiful" by utilizing "a discourse of fun, pleasure and power."

In *The Love Witch*, witchcraft is similarly spoken about using ideas of fun, pleasure and power, when in reality, it requires that its members partake in certain activities, whether they want to or not. The terms through which the coven leaders describe these activities—as empowering and pleasurable—serve to erase the actual violence and pain associated with them. As mentioned earlier, Elaine's initiation to the coven required her to publicly submit to sex on an altar with the high priest, who so very clearly disgusts her. Additionally, two young women who

are interested in witchcraft and joining the coven, twins named Star and Moon, are encouraged by Gahan to dance at the town's burlesque club in order to become comfortable with their sexual power. He tells them, "Dancing is a powerful thing for women and girls...All witches need to figure out where their power lies, and we feel that a woman's greatest power lies in her sexuality. We don't view this power as anti-feminist, but a celebration of woman as a natural creature."¹⁹ Barbara expresses her agreement. Making women into "fantasy dolls," it seems, is deplorable when it is done by men; when women become fantasy dolls as a "choice" encouraged by men, though, it is empowering. Gahan goes on to encourage the girls to wear makeup and perfume, do their hair attractively, wear high heels, and "expose flesh artfully." Barbara chimes in encouraging them to use sex magic so that men might begin to develop feelings. "Only then," she says, "will he begin to see you as a human being, with all of your inner beauty." As she speaks, the dancer on stage waves her nipple tassels around for the laughing men in the front row. Another scene depicts Star and Moon dancing at the burlesque club, and as the men in the audience hoot and holler at the twins, it becomes unclear as to who is actually being empowered in this scene, and once again suggests

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend

On the surface, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* does not seem like it would contain resistant messages of any kind. From the name itself to the plot (an unhappy woman uproots her life to be closer to her high school boyfriend, without his knowledge), the show seems like it would transmit toxic messages about relationships and women in general. But the concept and title of the show are subversive in and of themselves: the term "crazy ex-girlfriend" is a sexist cliché, and a plot following a successful female lawyer who sacrifices her career to chase a man she

dated when she was 16 seems like standard, uninspired rom-com fodder. Watch for a few minutes, though, and you'll discover that "the situation is a lot more nuanced than that," as the main character Rebecca says. In the opening credits theme song, the rest of the cast cheerily sings, "She's the crazy ex-girlfriend!" Meanwhile, a disgruntled Rebecca argues, "That's a sexist term!" Rebecca is a Harvard-educated lawyer who constantly references feminism and empowerment. But the show's messaging goes deeper than that by parodying the kinds of beauty images and expectations with which women must constantly contend. In this way, the show pushes back against marketing that wants to sell women on its commodified version of empowerment.

The pilot episode features "The Sexy Getting Ready Song," which chronicles Rebecca's process of preparing herself to go to a party when she first arrives in West Covina, hoping to run into Josh. The show juxtaposes Rebecca with her makeup and hair done as she writhes around a beautiful bathroom in heels with actual footage of her getting-ready process, showing her in a dimly-lit bathroom as she plucks her nose hairs, cries while trying to adorn her Spanx, and waxes her backside to a bloody result. This continuous contrast between the sexy expectation in the music video world and the grotesque reality in the story world reveals the true pain involved with beauty routines that have been rebranded as "empowering" by postfeminist rhetoric and the commodity feminism which uses it. Gill (2009) adds that these kinds of media messages promote the "idea that women can gain control through the commodification of their appearance...[to] obtain power." Gill goes on to note that empowerment is represented as something that can only be accessed through a certain appearance, one that caters to patriarchal standards and the male gaze. This is problematic because this kind of rhetoric not only re-

oppresses women, it also does so under the guise of feminism, rendering it more difficult to critique. It also suggests that women who do not fit a particular set of standards—young, thin, able-bodied, white—are inherently unable to attain empowerment. Gill suggests that these kinds of advertisements and media texts reshape the social perception of beauty routines: “the work associated with disciplining the feminine body to approximate to standards that are normatively required is made knowable in new ways that systematically erase pain, anxiety, expense and low self esteem” as a result of postfeminist messaging. Instead, they are spun as “fun” and a form of “self-care.” Women are expected to show off the shiny, finished product, but hide the violent reality that accompanies the getting-ready process for many women who attempt to meet patriarchal standards of beauty. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* defies this expectation by showing both, revealing the stark contrast.

Halfway through the musical number, audiences get a glimpse at “how the guys get ready,” as Rebecca’s new friend and party plus-one Greg is shown snoring on his couch. Then, rapper Nipsey Hussle appears in Rebecca’s bathroom. He begins a degrading verse about sex and women until he spots the scene before him: Rebecca’s used wax strips, hair curler, tweezers and other beauty items are sprawled across the bathroom counter. “This is horrifying, like a scary movie,” he says to Rebecca in disgust. “Some nasty ass patriarchal bullshit,” he continues. He exits the bathroom, talking about how he has to go “apologize to some bitches.” (Later in the episode, as the credits roll, Hussle is shown going through the women in his contact list and calling them to apologize for what they have had to endure as a result of patriarchal standards of beauty.) While the parody is clever, it is also heavy-handed enough that viewers will not confuse the show’s capitulation to patriarchal standards for approval.

Another postfeminist critique comes in the form of “Put Yourself First,” another musical number featured in the middle of the show’s first season. In the episode, Rebecca is supposed to give a speech on feminism and empowerment to a group of teenage girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. They heckle her until she finally breaks down in tears in front of them, admitting that she is not the right person to talk to them about feminism because she is in the midst of chasing a man who will never love her back. She laments: “I’m the one who needs to be empowered.” The teenage girls approach the stage to comfort her; feminism did not create a bond between them and Rebecca, but her boy problems finally helped them relate. “Don’t worry,” one of the girls says. “We’ll empower you up.”

Rebecca assumes they will suggest reading Gloria Steinem, taking a ceramics class, and growing out her armpit hair, but instead the girls whip out their makeup bags to give Rebecca a makeover. During the makeover montage, the five teenage girls are simultaneously shown as a girl band on a photoshoot set in a parody of Fifth Harmony’s “Worth It” called “Put Yourself First.” These music video world versions of the girls are dressed in heels and tight, revealing clothing. Within the first verse, the song’s true message is revealed: “Make yourself sexy, just for yourself, so when dudes see you put yourself first, they’ll be like ‘Damn, you’re hot, wanna make out?’” As the girls dance on their music video set and sing about the joys of “push[ing] them boobs up, just for yourself,” a photographer wearing a sweatshirt labeled “MALE GAZE” snaps pictures, in case the irony of the song’s message was not already clear. Halfway through the number, Rebecca protests at the girls’ suggestion to wear heels just for herself: “If it’s just for myself, shouldn’t I be comfortable?” to which the answer is a resounding

“No! Put yourself first in a sexy way.” Later, Rebecca similarly objects when the lyrics change to “put yourself first for him.” She argues that if she is putting herself first for a man, then she is by definition putting herself second. The girls smile and respond by singing that she shouldn’t think about it too hard —similarly to the way in which dominant media messaging encourages women not to think too hard about whether their beauty routines are truly empowering or just a repackaged product of patriarchal norms. Rebecca, however, takes their advice, and by the end of the song she genuinely thanks the girls for teaching her the “true” way to get what she wants. She looks ridiculous and not at all like herself, as the girls have made her over using their own high-school beauty standards. As a result, Rebecca is sporting eyeliner, hoop earrings, and a leather hat given to her by the young girls that look out of place on an adult woman. “Thank you, sisters,” she says, overly sentimental; her silly appearance and reaction to the makeover signify to the audience that we should not take her gratitude seriously.

This song critiques the post-feminist notion that takes patriarchal constructs and repackages them within empowerment rhetoric. Gill notes that postfeminist rhetoric encourages women to think of the labor and violence associated with forcing one’s body into meeting patriarchal standards as “pampering” that one does for herself. Indeed, Rebecca’s insistence that she is doing things “for herself” and not for a man (even though her actions are continually the result of her desire for male attention and validation) is a common concept that appears throughout the show. Gill critiques the ways in which advertising has embraced and engulfed feminist messages in order to sell products that at best have nothing to do with feminist goals and at worst are inherently in opposition to them. This kind of advertising and “Put Yourself First” both put forth the notion that capitulating to the male gaze is empowering by reframing the

actions as being done for oneself. According to Gill, this “notion of choice has become a postfeminist mantra; the idea that women are 'pleasing themselves' is heard everywhere: 'women choose to model for men's magazines', 'women choose to have cosmetic surgery to enhance the size of their breasts '... Of course, at one level, such claims have some truth: some women do make 'choices 'like this. However, they do not do so in conditions of their own making, and to account for such decisions using only a discourse of free choice is to oversimplify both in terms of analysis and political response.” In other words, women still face the pressure to present themselves in a way that caters to the male gaze, but must also deny that they are doing so and instead reframe their actions as “pleasing themselves” in order to live up to the rhetoric of empowerment they are served via postfeminist media and advertisements.

Rebecca’s makeover montage in “Put Yourself First” is not her last. A parody of Toni Basil’s “Mickey” music video sees a heartbroken and rejected Rebecca decide that the only possible course of action to get revenge on Josh and get her life back on track is to transform herself through a “Makey Makeover.” A stylist dyes her hair, gives her a spray tan, and selects a brand new wardrobe for Rebecca. During the makeover montage, Rebecca sings, “Old you was a diaper, new you is a diamond,” conveying the idea that Rebecca was unacceptable the way she was “before” the makeover. Rebecca’s old look allowed Josh to reject her; in Rebecca’s mind, “fixing” her appearance to meet conventional standards of beauty is the key to fixing the problems in her life. Interspersed with clips of her makeover are shots of Rebecca in a cheerleading outfit similar to Basil’s. Her eyes are wide and her voice is squeaky with enthusiasm, to the point of absurdity. By the end of the song, Rebecca is no longer chanting

lyrics but instead repeating, “I had a stroke” with the same wide-eyed enthusiasm. While story-world Rebecca is fully onboard with the makeover process, her inner voice represented by the music video scenes undermines her excitement and suggests to viewers what they should already know: this makeover will not provide Rebecca the fulfillment and empowerment she seeks.

Yet another jab at the ways in which empowerment rhetoric is used to further reinforce patriarchal norms is the song “Women Gotta Stick Together,” performed by Valencia, Josh’s girlfriend at the beginning of the show. Valencia is a fit and glamorous yoga instructor who does not have any female friends due to her insecurity and trust issues. She suspects that Rebecca has feelings for Josh but shockingly invites Rebecca on a group excursion to the beach. She tells Josh and his friends that she just wants to help another woman in need before launching into the faux-feminist anthem, “Women Gotta Stick Together.” She uses empowering lyrics and tantalizes the women around town with her message of unity while simultaneously undercutting them with lyrics about their weight, appearance, and sexual behavior. Each verse gives the viewer a sense of whiplash as it quickly traverses between empowering and insulting lyrics: Together we can clear these hurdles/Except Marissa 'cause she’s four-foot-eight/We can climb every mountain/If the rope can support Haley’s weight.” Valencia does not truly care about helping fellow women or “sisterhood” as she claims in her song; instead, her motivations are self-centered, as she wants Rebecca to come to the beach in order to prove to Josh and their friends that Rebecca does not have good intentions. Similarly, postfeminist messages are often used in consumer culture contexts (also known as commodity feminism). Brands will often use “feminist” messages and images in their marketing campaigns, but these efforts only benefit the companies’ bottom lines rather than women’s empowerment. Empowerment rhetoric is used to

sell everything from cosmetics to weight loss products to clothing to lingerie and more. These advertising efforts will spout inspiring messages while simultaneously reinforce patriarchal notions of beauty—similarly to the way in which Valencia attracts listeners with her empowering lyrics before ridiculing them for not meeting those standards. Advertisements that utilize commodity feminism similarly draw women in with uplifting messages, presented by a conventionally attractive model who makes them feel like they need to measure up.

Though extremely different in tone and aesthetic, *The Love Witch* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* set out to critique the same idea. Though the pulpy, 1960s-style horror of *The Love Witch* could not be further from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s sunny musical rom-com genre, the postfeminist idea that a woman's appearance and overt sexuality is her ticket to agency and empowerment is so ubiquitous that it made its way into both. In radically different ways, these two media texts, created by women, unravel the myth surrounding beauty: it will not, actually, set you free.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I have shown that postfeminist rhetoric has been adopted by corporations and marketers hoping to encourage women to spend their money achieving and maintaining beauty by suggesting that doing so is an act of empowerment. This is problematic because it obscures the very real feminist issues that have yet to be addressed at a societal, structural, and political level.

As I have stated over the course of this thesis, my project was not to discourage women from partaking in beauty rituals. That would surely be hypocritical considering the drawer full of makeup and skincare products in my home. I cannot imagine showing up makeup-free to a date or special occasion. I will probably never stop removing my leg hair, though I wish I could. The purpose of this project was to encourage *critical* consumption instead of the blind overconsumption being pushed on us as consumers in a capitalist society, as well as present an alternate point of view to the one shown in most mainstream media texts. As a result of social norms and self-surveillance being ingrained into our psyches, many women and girls believe beauty rituals to be the norm or default. In reality, these are choices we make that go against the grain of the natural states of our bodies.

My aim for this project was to bring a critical perspective to common beauty narratives, and highlight some examples of that same critical perspective in the media. While the creators of *The Love Witch* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* present audiences with nuanced critique through symbolism and satire, many social media creators, themselves the young women and girls at whom these messages are targeted, also offer interesting critiques of beauty culture themselves.

Beauty influencers have begun to incorporate critical messages about beauty standards into their videos. Michele White's analysis of beauty tutorials from the 2010s which featured

aspects of feminist critique and humor show that beauty videos can indeed be spaces of negotiation. Since the publication of White's article, influencers have even more explicitly included feminist ideas in their content. Jackie Aina, for example, is a famous Black beauty influencer who is known for speaking out on racism and colorism in the industry. Kelly Gooch, a YouTuber who often stresses the importance of being a conscious consumer, uploaded a video titled "We Need To Talk About Unrealistic Beauty Standards & Photoshop" in June 2021. In the video, she calls out specific advertisements and brands that perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards, the perfect skin and hair achieved not with makeup products but with digital alterations. She also praises initiatives to end digital alterations and include more diversity among beauty models. Whitney Hedrick, a beauty influencer who has experience as a working makeup artist, also uploaded a video in June 2021 titled "Khloe Kardashian, Beauty Standards, And Accountability," in which she discusses her thoughts on a scandal regarding Khloe Kardashian's edited Instagram photos. In between her detailed tutorials and makeup reviews, Hedrick often uploads videos discussing non-product related topics, like eating healthily, journaling, and self confidence. Some of her other titles include "Why You Can't Actually BUY Self Care," "The Ugly Truth about Being Beautiful," and "Life Changing High Maintenance Mindset Shifts." In these videos, Hedrick criticizes the capitalism-fueled desire to consume; addresses beauty standards and the backlash women face when they try to meet them, whether they fail or succeed; and provides advice to her viewers on ways to feel more confident without using beauty products at all. Alexandra Anele, another beauty influencer, has an entirely separate YouTube channel for her commentary-based videos, called Alx Talx. Titles include

“Consumerism in the beauty industry is insane,” “Where does our confidence come from?”

“We’re talkin body positivity,” and the very broadly titled “Women + Society.”

While many YouTubers earn most (sometimes all) of their income from their videos, there are still those who upload videos for fun. In 2019, one such user, makeup and comedy YouTuber nisipisa, uploaded a video called “weird makeup advertising” in which she criticized the strategies used by brands to push products. The thumbnail of her video reads “Wow I can’t believe this corporation wants 2 b my friend,” poking fun at the ways in which brands (especially those with a social media presence) have adopted the “girlfriend address” defined by Gill and Elias (2018) earlier in this thesis. Perhaps because she does not want to make YouTube her main source of income, as she has told her viewers, she feels more at liberty to directly criticize brands. Emily Hanhan, who refers to herself as a “cute fat babe” and identifies as queer and Audra at Home, a Black woman who openly discusses her neurodivergency, are both smaller hobby BeauTubers. In between their makeup reviews, they do weekly Live Chats, during which they discuss different topics together and respond to comments from their viewers. Though both influencers have fewer than 20K subscribers combined, their discussion topics are worth noting: “We Don’t Do This for YOU! Why Getting Pretty is a Self-Serving Act,” “The Problem with Parasocial Brands,” and “Body Hair and Why We’re Rebuking the Razor.” Separately, each creator also regularly uploads commentary videos that are often explicitly feminist and critical of capitalism, including Audra at Home’s “Why are corporations like this?” and Emily Hanhan’s “The Intersection of Fat Liberation and Asexuality.” Many of these commentary videos feature the creator applying makeup while discussing the topic at hand, but the makeup takes a backseat. In this way, YouTube can be a space for negotiating one’s feelings about beauty rituals. All of

the creators mentioned above have professed their love for makeup and cosmetics, yet they all simultaneously air their grievances with the industry. Because of influencers' position as friend-like figures, their criticism of the industry likely falls on receptive ears. Though these creators represent very small pockets in the much larger world of beauty influencers, their work is still significant because it encourages consumers to be critical of the ways in which beauty messages are delivered to them by those who have the most to gain: corporations. At the end of the day, the very criticism these influencers are beginning to introduce into their content is the reason I embarked on this project.

I have established that the topics I explore in this thesis are important because they directly affect women's everyday lives. They impact women's mindsets, their attitudes about beauty, and their spending, which ultimately upholds the capitalist structures that oppress them, all while convincing them that their spending constitutes an empowered choice. Consumer decisions are positioned to replace actual participation in activism. It was also important to point out the potential for resistant media texts, which will hopefully continue to proliferate, both online and in traditional forms of media. But because this resistance and criticism is growing, it is all the more important that women remain vigilant as consumers of media texts and beauty products alike. All beauty consumers need to see the shifts in beauty rhetoric so we can understand it as it evolves. Marketers will not stop even once we become privy to it, just like they did not give up when they came under fire from feminists originally. Just as marketers and media adapted to earlier feminist critiques, they will do the same as criticism becomes more widespread. They will adapt, and beauty consumers have to be on the lookout because this involves our bodies, our money, our mental states when it comes to how we view ourselves and the beauty industry in general. For this reason, it is imperative that women continuously

interrogate their own relationship to their beauty routine to better understand when they are making a choice that will benefit their lives and when they are being influenced to over-consume in an unhealthy way.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned a Reddit community called r/MakeupRehab, a space dedicated to helping makeup users make these discernments. The very existence of that group speaks to the necessity of this thesis but also represents a beacon of hope. 105K users are active in this online space dedicated to talking others out of making unnecessary purchases, critiquing advertising methods and influencer culture, and providing support for one another in a world that constantly preys upon women. Indeed, every post and comment with the r/MakeupRehab subreddit may be counted as resistant participatory media. This is but one forum of many where users are conversing critically about their makeup routines, shopping habits, and marketing strategies at any given time.

This is not the first time that advertisers have co-opted feminist sensibilities to sell products, nor will it be the last. Though beauty is not the only thing sold using feminist rhetoric, beauty advertising is unique in this specific time period because of the online beauty community of users that did not exist during earlier iterations of this branding strategy. Now, people on the internet from different corners of the world can critique ads on a plethora of forums, working together to analyze makeup media and negotiate meanings. Anyone with internet access and a camera can upload videos discussing their criticisms on social media, and anyone else with internet access can chime in by commenting. Consumers can tweet complaints or compliments directly to brands themselves. In the past, this option did not exist in the same capacity. Furthermore, in the past there was a clear line between the marketer and the consumer; that line has been blurred by the advent of influencer culture, which certainly influences

consumers, but also influences companies themselves. Influencers stand at the midway point, because they themselves are consumers, often spending their own money to conduct reviews of new products. While they certainly encourage consumer spending like advertisements do, advertisements do not typically hold brands accountable for their missteps as influencers do. (For example, several influencers have publicly shamed and stopped promoting products from brands that do not produce products suitable for deeper skin tones.) In the past, the communication between company and consumer was a one-way conversation; now, it has become more of a two-way street. While traditional media creators like Rachel Bloom and Anna Biller certainly have a much larger platform than the average consumer, they aren't the only ones whose critiques can be heard.

Despite the postfeminist rhetoric that is continually pushed by capitalism, feminism is still an ongoing project, with much work left to be done. The resistant media texts and online discourses traced in this thesis show that that work is underway, despite the capitalist structures that discourage it.

Bibliography

- Baker, S. (2017). A glamorous feminism by design? *Cultural Studies (London, England)*, 31(1), 47–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1167928>
- Bordo, S., & Heywood, L. (2003). *Unbearable weight feminism, Western culture, and the body* (Tenth anniversary ed.). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520930711>
- Gibson, M. (2006). Retelling Salem stories: gender politics and witches in American culture. *European Journal of American Culture* 25(2), 85-107. doi: 10.1386/ejac. 25.2.85/1.
- Gill, R., Elias, A. S. (2014). “Awaken your incredible”: Love your body discourses and postfeminist contradictions. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 10(2), 179–188. https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.10.2.179_1
- Gill, R., Elias, A. S. (2018). Beauty surveillance: The digital self-monitoring cultures of neoliberalism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417705604>
- Gill, R. Supersexualize me!: Advertising and the ‘midriffs.’ In F. Attwood (Ed.), *Mainstreaming sex: The sexualization of Western culture*, (pp. 93-110). I.B. Tauris.
- Gill R., Scharff C. (2011) Introduction. In: Gill R., Scharff C. (eds) *New Femininities*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1057/9780230294523_1
- Goldman, R., Heath, D., & Smith, S. L. (1991). Commodity feminism. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8(3). doi: 10.1080/15295039109366801.
- Herzig, R. M. (2015). *Plucked A History of Hair Removal* . New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479830657>.
- Kilbourne, J., & Pipher, M. (2000). *Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*. Free Press.
- Lazar M.M. (2011) *The Right to Be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising*. In: Gill R., Scharff C. (Eds.) *New Femininities*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1057/9780230294523_3
- McCabe, M., de Waal Malefyt, T., & Fabri, A. (2020). Women, makeup, and authenticity: Negotiating embodiment and discourses of beauty. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 20(4), 656–677. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517736558>
- McRobbie, A. (2008). Young women and consumer culture. *Cultural Studies (London, England)*, 22(5), 531–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380802245803>

- McRobbie, A., (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change*. Sage.
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>
- Monteverde, G. (2014). Not all feminist ideas are equal: anti-capitalist feminism and female complicity. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(1), 62–75.
- Moseley, R. (2002). Glamorous witchcraft: gender and magic in teen film and television. *Screen*, 43(4), 403-422. <http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/screen/>.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. Oxford University Press.
- Rodrigues, S. (2012). Undressing homogeneity: Prescribing femininity and the transformation of self-esteem in *How to Look Good Naked*. *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 40(1), 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2011.595743>
- Rose, G. (2006). *Visual methodologies* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Sollie, K. J. (2017). *Witches, feminists, sluts*. Stone Bridge Press.
- Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2012). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(1), 98–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511424362>
- Toffoletti, K. (2014). Baudrillard, postfeminism, and the image makeover. *Cultural Politics (Biggleswade, England)*, 10(1), 105–119. <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-2397263>
- Tsaousi, C. (2017). How to organise your body 101: postfeminism and the (re)construction of the female body through *How to Look Good Naked*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(2), 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715608258>
- White, M. (2018). Beauty as an “act of political warfare”: Feminist makeup tutorials and masquerades on YouTube. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 46(1/2), 139–156.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth*. Harper Perennial.

Filmography

Biller, A. (Director). (2016). *The love witch* [Film]. Anna Biller Productions.

Bloom, R. & Brosh McKenna A. (Producers). (2015-2019). *Crazy ex-girlfriend* [Television series]. Warner Bros.