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# Advertising in the beauty industry: digital media and conceptions of beauty

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**ADVERTISING  
IN THE  
BEAUTY INDUSTRY**

**Digital Media  
and  
Conceptions of Beauty**

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**HANNAH CHO ♦ APRIL 2018**  
**VASSAR COLLEGE MEDIA STUDIES PROGRAM**





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# INTRODUCTION

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This Senior Thesis evolved from my passion for beauty, academic study of media, and professional experience in the industry. This thesis is a culmination of my interests and experiences throughout the past four years both inside and outside of Vassar. My coursework as a Media Studies major provided me with the tools to critically examine the digital and social media that I am entrenched in. I used these skills to reflect upon my own consumption of media in the beauty industry, and to analyze how others like me do the same. I was fortunate enough to work as an intern in the beauty industry at Lippe Taylor, a public relations and digital marketing agency in New York City, where I learned to negotiate my Vassar studies with the practical demands of working in the industry. While I found that my Media Studies degree was useful, Lippe Taylor also taught me the value of real-world experience, which academic knowledge and prestige cannot always match. In navigating the lives of both student and intern, I was able to combine those diverse experiences into this project. Not to mention my love for all beauty products, which has been a passion of mine for as long as I can remember! This thesis is just the beginning of my research and analysis of the beauty industry, which I hope to continue throughout my professional career and personal life. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Hannah Cho



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# Dove Real Beauty and Commodity Activism



**DOVE REAL BEAUTY.** There are few advertising campaigns in the beauty industry that compare to Dove's Real Beauty Campaign. In 2004, Dove, a subsidiary company of Unilever, worked with advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather to create one of the industry's most famous and radical advertising campaigns to date. The campaign became a sort of movement, a call to action, emphasizing the word "real" with regard to the beauty industry's tendency to only represent unrealistic, idealistic definitions of "beauty."

The Dove team at Unilever states on their website, "we featured images of real women in our advertising that represented a broader image of beauty. Together with generations of women, Dove has helped widen the definition of beauty" (Unilever). It is clear that Dove's main objective was to challenge stereotypical representations of beauty that have been reinforced for decades in the advertising industry – tall, thin, white, heterosexual women. Dove claimed that they renewed their commitment to women with the launch of the "Dove Real Beauty Pledge" consisting of the following vows:

1. *We always feature women, never models.*
2. *We portray women as they are in real life. We do not digitally distort our images.*
3. *We are helping 40 million girls build self-esteem and positive body confidence. (Unilever)*

Such promises were quite shocking and revolutionary for the advertising and beauty industries at the time. No other beauty company had openly acknowledged such gaping flaws in the industry's advertising tendencies, so the campaign was a

refreshing, hopeful glance at the industry's potential for change.

The Dove Real Beauty Campaign pushed a central message through various social and digital channels. At the level of traditional print media, Dove featured advertisements in magazines and on billboards – the most iconic advertisement displayed a group of women posed together against a blank backdrop, wearing only plain white bras and underwear.



*Dove ad (2004)*

The ad attempts to portray a clear image of diversity – about half of the women are white, and the other half are black, Latina, of mixed race, etc. The decision to use a blank background and dress the women in all-white undergarments was purposeful, emphasizing their varying skin tones against a common, blank slate. According to Dove's pledge, they do not digitally distort their images, so the women's curves and "imperfections" remain untouched. The woman second from the left even has a large tattoo and mole, both of which are prominent and add to this sentiment of "realness."

Another element of the Real Beauty Campaign was the Dove Self-Esteem Project, which "delivers self-esteem education to young people through lessons in schools, workshops for youth groups, and

online resources for parents” (Unilever). Dove performed a global study that analyzed the self-esteem levels of girls and women, and found that although awareness and conversations surrounding the issue existed, women are more self-conscious about their bodies and appearance than ever before. These statistical findings led to the creation of the Self-Esteem Project, committed to driving conversations “around the pressures women and girls face, and advocate for change in how appearances are portrayed in the media” (Unilever). This project was an ingenious idea given its potential emotional impact and its regard for social activism. Dove took their advertising campaign a step further – instead of simply expanding representations in advertising, Dove also incorporated youth workshops and educational lessons that appear to exist outside of their capitalist aims.

Since its inception, the Dove Real Beauty Campaign has added new layers and elements to push their feminist and social activist-centered agenda. In 2006, Dove released a viral video titled “Daughters,” which explores the relationship between mother and daughter, illuminating the importance of discussions of self-esteem and beauty. In 2013, Dove released *Dove Real Beauty Sketches*, created by advertising creative Hugo Viega, which was a series of videos depicting women behind a curtain describing themselves to a forensic sketch artist. The artist then drew what they imagined the women to look like based on their own descriptions. Upon comparing these sketches to second copies he drew after the curtain had been removed, it is evident that the women were extremely self-deprecating and negative with regard to describing their physical appearance. The cliché moral at the end of the video is clear: women are far more

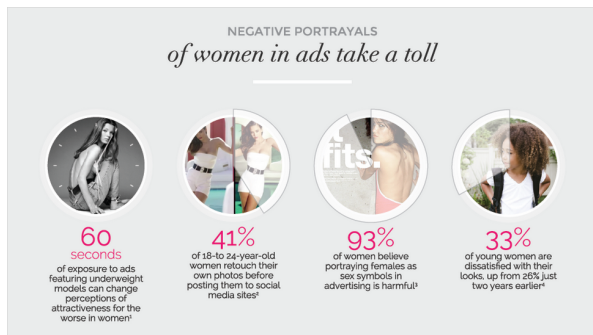
beautiful than they think they are. While the *Beauty Sketches* may be wrought with platitudes, Dove presents a creative way to think about self-esteem and self perception, in a very visual medium.



*Dove ad (2013)*

Not only did Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign change the brand’s reputation forever, but it also drove sales. After the launch of the campaign, Dove’s sales jumped from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion, a hefty \$1.5 billion increase (Ciambriello). Clearly their female consumers responded well to Dove’s cry for “realness” in an industry that appears disingenuous. This type of advertising that refutes traditional beauty narratives has been termed “fem-vertising,” which involves “marketing campaigns that empower women and girls rather than perpetuating stereotypes” (Ciambriello). While there is undoubtedly merit in these “fem-vertising” efforts, it is crucial to examine the financial incentives of campaigns that are so successful in driving revenue and increasing profits. How genuine are these campaigns in the beauty industry that claim to empower women, if their end goal is to drive sales? Are advertising campaigns the proper medium with which to push feminist values, particularly in the beauty industry, which promotes unrealistic, detrimental standards of beauty? Finally, what are the

answers to these questions in the era of digital media, where social media has completely taken over the advertising industry? Can “fem-vertising” truly be empowering with the use of social media platforms as direct methods of communication between the brand and the consumer?



*Ad Week (2014)*

**COMMODITY ACTIVISM.** Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign presents an interesting case study within the beauty industry, as it is not only an example of complicated “fem-vertising,” but also a clear example of *commodity activism*. Commodity activism is defined as “a practice that merges consumption behavior—buying and consuming products—with political or social goals,” which in this case involves “challenging the highly unattainable beauty norms produced by media and other industries” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 40). Categorizing Dove’s campaign as commodity activism allows for a deeper analysis of its complex intersections with feminism, along with a deeper understanding of the role it has played within the advertising world. It was a unique campaign that intimately connected consumers with the brand – foreshadowing the type of advertising and brand culture that is currently developing through digital media.

How do brands like Dove implement commodity activism, and how does it function as a form of cultural resistance in neoliberal times? Dove’s campaign was radical for its time because it took a realm of culture and society “once considered ‘outside’ the official economy” and then harnessed and reshaped it in a manner “made legible in economic terms” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 1). The realm of culture and society at stake was activism itself, which in this case involved pushing feminist ideology to support the growth of girls and women. In order to make this daunting task (actively participating in feminist activism) “legible” so to speak, Dove offered its consumers a solution “in economic terms,” which was essentially the act of buying Dove products. Dove spoke to consumers in a language they could easily understand: the language of consumerism, encouraging them to buy more, in the name of social justice and the welfare of women globally.

Consumerism as a form of “activism” definitely seems counterintuitive. Why should consumers spend their hard-earned money in the name of “activism,” only to support an industry that stereotypes and objectifies women? This idea seems irrational, and paints commodity activism in an extremely negative light. However, must social activism and cultural resistance always exist outside the framework of capitalism? Capitalist practices are so deeply entrenched in American society that they are difficult to separate from other social spheres, such as activism. The propagation of commodity activism “serves as a trenchant reminder that there is no ‘outside’ to the logics of contemporary capitalism, that resistance, to indulge the popular cultural refrain, has, perhaps, become futile” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 2). While it is unfortunate that activism efforts outside of “the logics of contemporary



capitalism” tend to be futile, it emphasizes the necessity to study commodity activism and understand how it can be galvanized in various, innovative ways. Working within the system of contemporary capitalism may not be the ideal environment to foster social change, but it is the system that exists and that modern society operates within. To simply villainize commodity activism is to disregard its potential for social change within the advertising industry.

*We may, on one hand, characterize these forms of commodity activism as corporate appropriations, elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice intended to fool the consumer, sophisticated strategies aimed at securing even-larger profits. On the other hand, commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes. (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 3)*

This idea that there exists a “nettled promise of innovative creative forms” is crucial, and is certainly a cultural intervention that illuminates the power of the consumer within the capitalist structure, with regard to changing power dynamics (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 13). Once the consumer acknowledges that they cannot critique the system while standing outside of it, they are able to synthesize how commodity activism might actually present them with modes of resistance. A shift from such binary thinking is necessary, to avoid the assumption that consumption practices are entirely separate from political struggles – that it is simply *impossible* for Dove to advocate for women’s empowerment through the consumption of their beauty products. The goal “is neither simply to ‘expose’ commodity activism as a

clever hoax intended to bring in greater profits for corporations nor to celebrate commodity activism as an ideal form of social action for 21<sup>st</sup>-century consumers” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 13). Commodity activism’s goal exists somewhere in between this binary, where consumers will not only understand how commodity activism works within contemporary capitalism, but also use this economic and social structure to their advantage.

One of the first videos that Dove unveiled at the beginning of their Real Beauty Campaign was titled, “Evolution.” Again, Ogilvy & Mather was behind this advertising masterpiece, a video sequence that follows a billboard advertisement from its beginning as a photo shoot to its end product, a billboard. After the initial photo of the model is taken, her picture is frozen on the screen. The viewer is then placed in the perspective of the photo editor, a spectacular cinematographic choice, and the mouse on the screen vigorously edits the image on Photoshop. Within seconds her skin is brighter, eyes bigger, lips fuller, and makeup intensified. In comparison to the original photo, she is an entirely different person. The final scene of the video states, “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshops for Girls.”

“Evolution” is unlike any beauty advertisement the industry had seen prior to Dove’s campaign in 2004. The video makes a jarring statement about the beauty industry that Dove itself is part of, adding further confusion. The viewer feels as though they are watching an empowering public service announcement, only to realize that it is in fact an effort to advocate for the Dove brand.

*Harnessing the politicized rhetoric of commodity feminism, the ‘Evolution’ video is clearly a product of a postfeminist environment, making a plea to consumers to act politically but through consumer behavior—in this case, by establishing brand loyalty to Dove products. (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 39)*



*Dove ad (2004)*

**SOCIAL ACTIVISM?** The viewer is then left to decide whether they support Dove’s efforts or not. While it is easy to pigeonhole commodity feminism as hypocritical, the last line of the video leaves a lasting impression on the viewer: “Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshops for Girls.” The video presents a widespread issue, unrealistic beauty standards, and offers the viewer a tangible solution: Dove Real Beauty Workshops. They insist that they are taking measurable steps to counter this societal issue. Dove also presents compelling statistics such as: “Globally 8 out of 10 girls opt out of key life activities when they don’t feel good about the way they look,” and “For over 10 years the Dove Self-Esteem Project has educated over 20 million young people” (Unilever). Dove may have a vested interest in their Real Beauty Campaign because of its financial benefits, however, the Self-Esteem Project and Workshops are overall altruistic programs. Consumers, particularly female consumers,

cannot deny that all companies should support feminist causes that aim to better the lives of women globally.



*Dove Self-Esteem Project (2016)*

Given the charitable work that Dove does, is it really “futile” to establish brand loyalty to Dove? Supporting a beauty brand in order to fight unrealistic beauty standards does seem contradictory, but to state that it is completely futile is to disregard all of the positive work that Dove *has* done. To call this effort futile is also to make the assumption that consumers cannot possibly feel that they are contributing to a social cause while making a purchase.

The act of spending money holds great value both literally and figuratively. For many, to act as a socially conscious citizen is to give money to a cause. Although buying Dove soap is not analogous to sending money directly to a charitable organization, the Real Beauty Campaign allows the consumer to take part in consumerism (which they likely would have done anyway) while simultaneously supporting a social cause. And, if Dove contributes a portion of their profits to self-esteem workshops for girls, aren’t they ultimately fulfilling their initial promise to consumers?

*How do specific political goals—raising the self-esteem of young girls, for example—become understandable within the*

*language of brands and the market? Related to this, how do brands become the most logical mechanism through which one can be active politically? How does brand culture utilize digital technologies and consumer labor, especially through the practice of consumer-generated content, as a way to help construct an activist citizen-consumer? (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 41)*

**BRAND IDENTITY.** This eventually comes back to brand loyalty and identity. It is simply a fact that consumers are going to spend their money. Furthermore, they are spending their money in an extremely competitive marketplace that pits companies against one another in the never-ending race for sales. In an effort to gain customers and drive sales, “specific brands are attached to political aims and goals, such as Starbucks coffee and fair trade, or a Product RED Gap T-Shirt and fighting AIDS in Africa” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 40).



Gap RED campaign (2006)

This overwhelming sense of choice that consumers face to decide not only which products to buy, but also which social causes to support, greatly influences the identity of the consumer. In connecting the Dove brand with social causes such as self-esteem and self-image, Dove allows the consumer to merge their own identity with

Dove’s brand identity. Put more literally, when the consumer walks down the soap aisle, and are presented with a variety of soap brands, the consumer will subconsciously think, *I am going to buy Dove soap. I like using their soap, and I identify with their brand’s values.*

In a capitalist society, consumers develop their identities through specific brands and companies. Some like to shop for clothing at Macy’s, while others prefer Nordstrom. Whether it be food, electronics, or in this case beauty products, the act of selecting a branded item to purchase becomes extremely personal. The competitive marketplace helps shape complex consumer identity politics given the myriad of choices that customers have. This sense of choice that the growing marketplace offers allows brand loyalty to develop, as the consumer incorporates specific brands into their personal identity. Furthermore, neoliberalism “privileges this type of ‘brand strategy’ in its production of goods, services, and resources that manages, contains, and actually designs identities, difference, and diversity as particular kinds of brands” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 42). This is further proof that brand identity is developed by advertising and public relations consultants far before the brand identity merges with that of the consumer. How the initial “target” brand identity actually merges with each consumer’s personal identity is where brand identity becomes more complex.

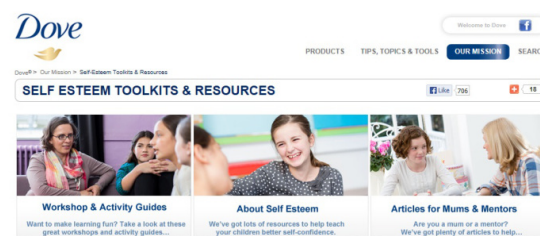
**BRAND CULTURE.** Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser argue that given the amount of advertising and branded content people see on a daily basis, it is “no longer possible to analyze brand and branding as separate from culture; rather, they are an integral element of contemporary neoliberal culture in the US” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser,

43). Rather than study how many advertisements people see daily, it is more pertinent to investigate when people *do not* see them, and its effects. This is how deeply ingrained branded content is in American society. As a result, brand identity extends far beyond the consumer and ultimately is better described as brand culture, in which branding practices become a culture of capitalist exchanges, “but also as a vehicle through and within which individuals create particular kinds of political and cultural identities” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 43). Brand culture extends beyond the particular goods one purchases – it also involves “something one is or does or makes,” which becomes intertwined with the brands one associates themselves with.

In contemporary brand culture, the relationship between producer and consumer is so intimate that the divide between the two parties is extremely blurred. The current capitalist moment can be characterized as “a kind of compromise between the previous historical moment of mass consumption and that of niche marketing” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 44). The internet and social media are able to reach beyond most geographic barriers, advertising to the masses. At the same time, consumer data analytics are able to customize users’ personal preferences to create the ultimate type of niche marketing that is eerily precise.

**CONSUMER-PRODUCER.** While advertisers’ ability to accurately reach large populations can be viewed as a loss of agency for consumers, the digital sphere also levels the playing field in other ways. In 2004, Dove recognized how intimate their relationship was becoming with their consumers, and capitalized on it. They gave audiences the impression that the wellbeing of their consumers, mainly

women worldwide, mattered dearly to them. Dove encouraged consumers to participate in self-esteem workshops, “download free self-esteem tools,” and educate young girls in order to develop a more wholesome society (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 49). The implication was that Dove consumers were just as integral in the movement as the corporation itself. This was only further augmented by growing media technologies that encouraged consumer involvement.



*Dove toolkits and resources (2013)*

The Dove Real Beauty Campaign arrived at the perfect time, when social media were on the horizon. Twitter came out in 2005, followed soon after by Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook, and then a flurry of other social media websites and apps (Hale). This culture that social media had created led seamlessly to the rise of the “consumer-producer,” who not only consumes digital content, but also participates in its creation. Dove capitalized on this new manifestation of their citizen-consumer, encouraging them to “participate in a critique of the norms of beauty culture, even while supporting and expanding the brand boundaries of a company firmly entrenched within this culture” (Roopali & Banet-Weiser, 49). Dove knew that this new kind of consumer is highly skeptical of advertising and the unrealistic beauty standards that it promotes, and therefore invited them to participate in the creation of a new (admittedly still corporate) narrative.

The impression is that Dove wants consumers to be part of their brand. This is the epitome of “brand culture” that so many brands hope to establish between their corporation and their consumers. In order to achieve an inclusive and intimate brand culture, the consumer-producer should have a say, even if it is small, in corporate culture – or at least *feel* as though they have a say. This relationship between corporation and consumer has been amplified through social media, where large corporations like Dove can connect with consumers instantaneously.

### **CONTEMPORARY BRAND CULTURE.**

Where does the consumer-producer stand in brand culture today? Consumers and corporations have merged closer together, as corporations have become more receptive to the needs of their consumers. The rise of the social media “influencer” has given certain individuals immense social capital based on follower count – they serve as spokespeople for consumers, trust their judgment, and view them as a connection to the corporate world. The modern media landscape in beauty and other industries of “partnerships” and “collaborations” between influencers and brands is proof of this unification of consumer and corporate identities.

How valid is this sense of unification? While both parties continue to merge, consumers remain skeptical of any corporate endeavor, given that money is ultimately what drives all corporations, companies, and brands. Consumers negotiate this capitalist reality with their own participation in brand culture, particularly through social media. They want to contribute to corporate decisions that their favorite brands make, but must also acknowledge the capitalist structure they exist within. Although they are cynical, they still choose to participate

in brand culture, whether that be following the accounts of their favorite brands, liking and commenting on brands’ posts, etc. Consumer-producers are beginning to realize their power and act on it before the brands themselves do, and the brands will have to follow their lead.



**2**

**Part 1**  
**YouTube:**  
**From Vlogger to Celebrity**



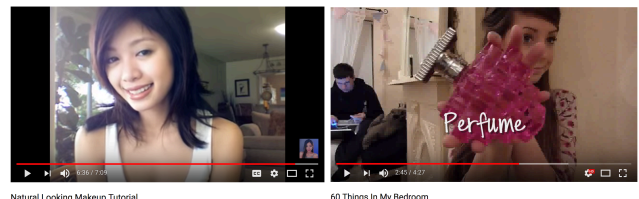
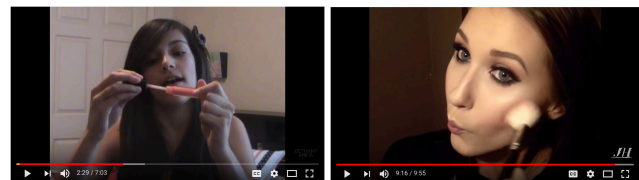
## YOUTUBE & THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY.

YouTube, the largest video-sharing platform to date, was founded in 2005 by former PayPal employees Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim (Burgess & Green, 1). The website is simple and easy to use – users can upload videos that are easily shared with a link. Viewers can even watch videos without being a YouTube user. YouTube became an instant hit, boasting 700 million views per week by the end of 2006 (Fitzpatrick). That same year, one year after its inception, Google acquired YouTube in a \$1.65 billion deal (Cloud). Since 2005, YouTube has established itself as a social media giant, and has permeated all areas of mainstream media – television, film, music, and more.

One area of YouTube in particular that has garnered extreme popularity is the “vlog,” a blog in the form of a video. Vlogs have existed since the early days of YouTube, however contemporary vloggers have perfected the art of vlogging, opening a whole new world of video content on YouTube. Beauty YouTubers, vloggers who make videos about makeup and other beauty products, are hugely popular and one of YouTube’s predominant niche categories. Forbes ranked the top beauty influencers of 2017, all of whom began on YouTube. Combined, these 10 YouTubers have 50,000 subscribers and a total reach on all social media of 135,000,000 people (Forbes).

How did this beauty community on YouTube begin? Many of these famous beauty YouTubers come from humble beginnings. Some were professional makeup artists, and others simply wanted to channel their love of beauty into an easily shareable medium. YouTube as a social media platform was unique for its time in that it

encouraged users to create their own content, promoting creativity and a sense of digital autonomy. Other social media networks that surfaced at the time such as Myspace and Facebook offered a similar online community, but did not focus as heavily on pure content development. Myspace and Facebook fostered information and photo sharing, along with relationship building through online messaging. YouTube focused primarily on video creation and sharing, shaping an entirely different media landscape. Video as a medium lends itself well to beauty vlogging, which is very visual – beauty products are colorful, pigmented, textured, and made to look aesthetically pleasing. In addition to showing viewers what these products look like, beauty YouTubers can also create “beauty tutorials,” that carefully instruct the viewer how to apply makeup in order to achieve a desired look. Additionally, many of these YouTubers who come from creative fields such as makeup artistry are well primed to enter into the world of digital content creation. These people like to show rather than tell, and YouTube provides them the perfect platform to do so.



*The first videos of four famous YouTubers (Bethany Mota, Jaclyn Hill, Michelle Phan, and Zoella)*

**PARTICIPATORY CULTURE.** The surge of social media platforms in the early 2000s created a new participatory culture that the mass media landscape had never seen before. Before this surge, traditional media such as radio, film, and television familiarized society with a one-way stream of information: the media outlet sends information, and the masses receive it. The advent of social media gave viewers their own voices, creating two-way dialogue, and eventually a multi-faceted dialogue between other users and media outlets themselves.

Amidst the advent of Facebook, Twitter, and other young platforms, YouTube emerged. While platforms such as Facebook focused on digital relationship building and communication, YouTube had a singular focus: video content creation. This added another layer to the emerging participatory culture that social media began to foster at the time, taking digital communication a step further and utilizing users' creative talents. This sort of amateur content creation was a new addition to the existing media landscape – people had the technology to create videos (cameras, computers, cell phones), but did not have the ability to broadcast their videos to the masses. The founders of YouTube seized upon the opportunity to broaden this participatory culture, and instead put video sharing at the forefront of their agenda.

*Consumer co-creation is fundamental to YouTube's value proposition as well as to its disruptive influence on established media business models. When we think in this way, we can begin to think about how YouTube matters in terms of culture. For YouTube, participatory culture is not a gimmick or a sideshow, it is absolutely core business. (Burgess & Green, 5-6)*

Co-creation and participatory culture are at the core of YouTube's identity. Although the homemade videos that first appeared on its site in 2005 seem trivial and horribly amateur, they help explain YouTube's original framework and initial purpose. In order to understand the digital empire that it is today, we must also understand its basic framework as a medium.

Unlike traditional media, YouTube attempted to even its playing field so that every user was an equal participant. Anyone can create an account and upload, comment, like, and share videos with ease. Average people can gain popularity online if their video "goes viral" and is viewed millions of times across the world. Their video need not look like a Hollywood feature film – instead, the most popular videos include stories or themes that others relate to and connect with because of their "everydayness" that is both endearing and personal. Many viral videos involve funny footage of babies or children, people doing all sorts of insane tricks, and even "fail" videos of people hurting or embarrassing themselves. YouTube content is not judged on the same scale as films or television are – YouTube videos are held to a different standard simply because of the new media landscape they are part of. Many find this new landscape exciting and promising, because of the opportunity it provides to average people who would otherwise have little say in the media they consume and/or create.



*"Charlie bit my finger!" one of the first viral videos (2007)*



## **AMATEURISM & THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE.**

Amateurism is at the heart of YouTube's humble beginnings. To understand YouTube's culture, "it is not helpful to draw sharp distinctions between professional and amateur production, or between commercial and community practices. These distinctions are based in industrial logics more at home in the context of the broadcast media rather than an understanding of how people use media in their everyday lives, or a knowledge of how YouTube actually works as a cultural system." Instead of thinking about media in terms of production, distribution, and consumption, it is more helpful to think about YouTube in terms of "a continuum of cultural participation" (Burgess & Green, 57). Making the distinction between amateur and professional media is helpful when understanding traditional media, however in the case of YouTube, its continuum is far more nuanced and complex. While some users may have access to better technology, YouTube is overall a diverse spectrum of content creators using the same platform, with access to the same audiences. The new media landscape that digital and social media has created gives users a sense of liberation from old media that privileged the same narratives of the powerful elite. What is so attractive about YouTube is the notion that almost anyone can achieve digital and social capital, with little resources or power. YouTube "requires us to understand all those who upload, view, comment on, or create content for YouTube, whether they are businesses, organizations, or private individuals, as *participants*" (Burgess & Green, 57).

However, viewing YouTube as completely democratic would be an overstatement. While it is undoubtedly a site of cultural and economic disruption, "these moments of

media transition should not be understood as radical historical breaks, but rather as periods of increased turbulence, becoming visible as various established practices, influences, and ideas compete with emerging ones as part of the long history of culture, media, and society" (Burgess & Green, 14). This liberating, democratic view of YouTube was most apparent at its beginning, but is slowly faltering and starting to mirror the same power structures of traditional media. YouTube offers users the potential to receive recognition, fame, and even money, however they are not completely liberated from the mass media entirely, as they still exist within its structure and power hierarchy.

*Ordinary people as potential or temporary celebrities in the mass media represents the 'demoticization' rather than the 'democratization' of the media. Even when ordinary people become celebrities through their own creative efforts, there is no necessary transfer of media power: they remain within the system of celebrity native to, and controlled by, the mass media.* (Burgess & Green, 23)

Burgess and Green argue that YouTube has created the illusion that anyone can become a celebrity. While YouTube offers a creative platform where ordinary people can gain popularity and even celebrity-status, a YouTuber's fame ultimately exists within the mass media that YouTube is assumed to exist "outside of." YouTube does not exist outside of the power structure of the mass media – although it is certainly a platform that appears to be, and may very well be, more democratic than traditional media. "YouTube proves that in practice the economic and cultural rearrangements that 'participatory culture' stands for are as disruptive and

uncomfortable as they might be potentially liberating” (Burgess & Green, 10).

**BEDROOM CULTURE TO ONLINE CELEBRITY.** The transition that YouTube vlogs have made in the past decade is further proof of this illusion of the transfer of media power. Vlogging on YouTube began as a “witty and self-aware celebration of the mediatized ‘bedroom cultures’ of young people, particularly girls. Productive play, media consumption, and cultural performance have always been part of the repertoire of these semi-private spaces of cultural participation, but increasingly [were] ‘publicized’ via webcams, social networking site profiles, and YouTube itself” (Burgess & Green, 26). This vlogging “bedroom culture” refers to intimate, fun activities that bloggers would share in their YouTube videos: talking with friends or directly to the camera about popular culture gossip, love life drama, making a hairstyle tutorial, showcasing new fashion styles, etc.

What started as “bedroom culture” quickly morphed into full-time gigs for many YouTubers, particularly in the beauty industry. Beauty “how-to’s” and tutorials started as candid home videos that were low-quality with little editing, resulting in a charming, amateur feel that viewers easily connected with. Today, this “bedroom culture” has evolved significantly, given the plethora of beauty and lifestyle YouTubers, along with rapidly innovating technologies. Yes, there are still young YouTubers posting blurry videos with their webcams, but there also exists an elite class of YouTubers that reigns supreme, who use high quality cameras, professional lighting and backdrops – some even have their own camera crews. Many beauty YouTubers make videos that have the same quality (or better) as a television show or movie. The audiovisual clarity that is fairly accessible,

albeit expensive, is truly amazing. As a result, this “bedroom culture” that Burgess and Green describe is becoming increasingly distant – the most recent iPhone released (iPhone X) has 4K video recording capabilities, a notch above 1080p HD quality, which is common for most home televisions. This puts into perspective the capabilities of the video recording device that people carry with them on a daily basis.



*Jaclyn Hill's beauty/filming room (2015)*

The rise of the “famous YouTuber” has shifted the platform’s initial purpose and focus in many ways, moving away from the cute home video and closer to traditional mass media, such as television and film. New technological capabilities combined with increasing creative talent have completely transformed the contemporary standard of the YouTube video. Popular YouTubers have millions of subscribers (the beauty YouTuber with the most subscribers is “Yuya,” who has 20 million) who watch their videos because they know the YouTubers will consistently deliver great content. Successful YouTubers use the nicest cameras, design their homes to be aesthetically pleasing for filming purposes, and will buy expensive editing software that gives the product a nice final touch. This is proof that vlogging has transformed into a profession, instead of a hobby or side-gig. Beauty YouTubers who have garnered enough success and fame on the platform eventually quit their day jobs and make a

full-time career out of it. Once a YouTuber reaches 1,000 subscribers or more, they can begin monetizing their content through advertisements: “advertisers will pay YouTube to be featured before popular videos. Famous YouTubers attract millions of views and their popularity earns them advertisement money. It is estimated that they get 55% of what the advertisers originally pay” (Facchetti).

### **SPONSORSHIPS AND BRANDING.**

However, monetization does not end there for most YouTubers. Many brands and companies seek to capitalize on the expansive reach and influence that YouTubers have, hoping to advertise their products through promotions, sponsorships, and collaborations. For example, Morphe, a popular online makeup brand, has partnered with over five famous beauty YouTubers. Morphe has given each YouTuber their own, custom discount code that their subscribers and fans can use when making a purchase on the Morphe website. These discount codes are typically around ten percent and include the YouTuber’s username in the code. A percentage of sales made with that code is given to the YouTuber, as payment for advertising Morphe’s brand. YouTube and social media generally are the perfect platforms for this sort of collaboration because they reach a wide yet tailored audience. Subscribers are likely to engage with the brands that YouTubers partner with because subscribers are already invested in the YouTubers they follow.

While the digital world is vast and more expansive than ever before, users are also given far more autonomy to select and deselect the media that they consume, based on their interests and passions. Therefore, someone who subscribes to beauty YouTubers has consciously chosen

to participate in that niche market and consume beauty-related media. The niche could even be so specific as “skin care” or “lip products,” etc., which will further increase the likelihood that the subscriber will take part in the sponsorships or promotions that the YouTuber advertises.

Another form of partnership that is extremely common in YouTube’s beauty world is the press package, also known as “PR package.” Beauty corporations and brands typically hire public relations agencies to create and send these packages, along with doing other creative work for them. The agency works directly with the brand to develop strategies and campaigns that will best advertise their products and ultimately drive awareness and sales. PR packages are core to successful media outreach – they are packages sent to beauty YouTubers (along with celebrities and other influential people) that contain free beauty products presented in glamorous, ornate packaging. Brands hope that YouTubers will use their free products, review them, and ultimately advocate for the products on their YouTube channel and other social media platforms.

A successful PR package will target the right YouTuber, leading them to rave about the product in their videos, which will then attract their viewers to the product. Famous beauty YouTubers who have millions of subscribers will receive an inordinate amount of PR packages on a monthly basis. Beauty brands constantly release new campaigns, lines, and products, which are all sent to these YouTubers. Oftentimes the PR package will also include a personal note to the YouTuber, addressing them by name with a short explanation about why this product is perfect for them. Essentially the package lures the YouTuber in, *forcing*

them to fall in love with the brand and their products. Who doesn't love a free gift?



*Lippe Taylor PR packages (2017)*

**TRUSTWORTHINESS.** However, the overabundance of PR packages in the world of YouTube beauty has gotten out of control. For the top beauty YouTubers, PR packages are so common that they are no longer special – they receive so many that they may not even mention the package or products in their videos. When a famous YouTuber takes the time to discuss the product in detail, subscribers know that the product must be good, or that the YouTuber is receiving a lot of money to advertise it. This is where issues of trust come into play between the YouTuber and their loyal subscribers. Subscribers are aware that famous YouTubers may receive compensation for advertising or advocating for certain products. If money is the driving factor behind what these YouTubers say, how can they be trusted to give honest advice? While it's important for YouTubers to make money like anyone else, subscribers wonder if fame and wealth end up getting the best of them. Subscribers worry that YouTubers who become famous lose sight of their humble beginnings. This cliché story of success is present in other media as well, such as television, film, and music – the celebrity started with nothing, then rose to fame and forgot about the people who had helped them along the way. YouTube is unique in that the “close friends

and family” are instead subscribers, strangers from across the globe who digitally cheer their favorite YouTuber on, eventually contributing to their rise to fame and fortune.

The relationship between subscriber and YouTuber is special, unlike anything the contemporary media ecology has seen before. YouTubers often refer to their subscribers as “family,” whom they feel personally connected and indebted to. Particularly loyal subscribers will have followed the YouTuber on their YouTube journey since the beginning, learning intimate details about their life experiences. Comically, most subscribers have never met their favorite YouTuber, so the relationship feels “close,” but is quite literally far away. This illuminates the power of YouTube as a medium, with the capability to form relationships digitally between people who might live thousands of miles away from each other. Unlike Facebook where users might never meet but can chat with each other privately, everything on YouTube is public. When YouTubers upload content, they make it available for anyone to view, like, and comment. When fans comment on YouTube videos, everyone else can see. While this medium may not be as private, it fosters a sense of community between subscribers and YouTubers that is unparalleled. It is common to see fans leaving comments such as “I love you!” or “Please keep making videos!” under the videos of their favorite YouTubers, which will often garner responses from YouTubers themselves. Although PR packages and collaborations with large companies have led subscribers to question the intentions of YouTubers, there still exists an underlying level of trust that YouTubers always have the wellbeing of their subscribers in mind.

*All contributors of content to YouTube are potential participants in a common space; one that supports a diverse range of uses and motivations, but that has a coherent cultural logic – what we refer to as the YouTubeness of YouTube. Likewise, this model asks us to understand the activities of not only content creators but also audiences as practices of participation, because the practices of audiencehood – quoting, favoriting, commenting, responding, sharing, and viewing – all leave traces, and therefore they all have effects on the common culture of YouTube as it evolves. (Burgess & Green, 57)*

**AUDIENCE.** The subscriber-centered culture that YouTube promotes is still at the core of its identity, despite its changing uses and users. While YouTubers have produced digital celebrities, moving toward more traditional media models, the platform is still focused on the importance of audience. YouTube is still more democratic than other media in that the audience holds a great deal of power and authority, particularly with the ability to directly connect with their favorite YouTube celebrities, advising them about what their next video should be, giving them content feedback, and even constructive criticism.

*Even though uploaders use their vlogs and YouTube pages to advertise their expertise, they are also active participants in the YouTube community. Their online success is as much due to their grounded knowledge of and effective participation within YouTube’s communicative ecology as it is the savvy with which they produce content, and they are virtuosic in their mastery of YouTube’s home-grown forms and practices. (Burgess & Green, 56-57)*

It should also be noted that subscribers are not *just* subscribers – in this participatory

culture that social media has created, they are consumers *and* producers of media, who have the ability to create their own content, which may be influenced by other prominent YouTubers. YouTube is a source of inspiration for many, providing ideas and possibilities for people to begin creating content on the same platform that originally inspired them.

YouTube content is meant to be “valued and engaged with in specific ways according to its genre and its uses within the website as well as its relevance to the everyday lives of other users, rather than according to whether or not it was uploaded by a Hollywood studio, a web TV company or an amateur videoblogger” (Burgess & Green, 57). This is one way to view YouTube in its most democratic form, where the relevance and quality of the video matters more than its creator. In viewing YouTube as a platform for opportunity, users are excited and inspired by its potential to connect with others, to share their stories, and even to build an empire. Furthermore, YouTubers are constantly innovating, discovering new ways to manipulate the platform and make it their own – some use it to mimic a weekly television series, others use it to record music; the possibilities appear to be endless.

# 2

## Part 2

# Beyond the World of YouTube Beauty



## CONSUMER AND CORPORATE IDENTITIES.

Beauty YouTubers are not only reinventing the ways in which YouTube is used, but they are also reimagining corporate structures in the beauty industry. Success does not end with YouTube for most beauty YouTubers. Instead, YouTube acts as the foundation for their corporate empire to grow tremendously through the skillful use of social media and their dedicated subscriber base.

Breaking into corporate beauty is a logical next move for famous beauty YouTubers, who arguably have more influence over certain consumer markets than certain companies might. Given the trust that subscribers have in their favorite YouTubers, subscribers are likely to purchase beauty products that YouTubers have collaborated with brands to make. Such collaborations are mutually beneficial to the YouTuber and the brand – the YouTuber gains further exposure in the beauty industry, and the brand attracts consumers outside of their typical target audience.

Outside of YouTube, how do YouTubers function in the corporate beauty world? They have prominently defined themselves within the world of YouTube, and have now entered a traditional capitalist structure. Although YouTubers may try to act as a fellow corporation, they obviously are not one – instead, they resemble a “free agent” or “freelancer” prototype – they act as their own boss, managing their own public relations and finances. Typically, brands will reach out to them and ask to collaborate, welcoming the YouTuber as a fellow creator. However, the YouTuber is not treated like a fellow employee, they are in some ways put on a pedestal given their immense social media capital.

YouTubers tend to engage in two major types of collaborations:

1. YouTuber acts as the brand’s “special guest” – the YouTuber and the brand work in tandem to create a product that fits with the brand’s identity, but adds the YouTuber’s unique twist

Example: BECCA Cosmetics is famous for their Shimmering Skin Perfector Pressed Highlighter, a powder used to highlight certain parts of the face. In 2015, BECCA partnered with Jaclyn Hill, a beauty YouTuber, to create a new shade of their Shimmering Skin Perfector, titled “Champagne Pop.” The highlighter was an instant hit, selling 25,000 units at Sephora in 20 minutes. This propelled Jaclyn to corporate beauty fame, and drastically increased BECCA’s visibility in the industry (Wischhover).

2. YouTuber has complete creative control over the product, making it their own – the brand is simply the foundation and platform through which the product will be made, stamped with the brand’s logo, symbolizing their official seal of approval



*Champagne Pop (left), BECCA highlighters (right)*

Example: Jaclyn Hill’s most recent collaboration was with Morphe, famous for their affordable brush sets and palettes. Hill

has been a longtime fan and ambassador for the brand, so when she decided to create her own eye shadow palette from scratch, Morphe was the obvious choice. In her YouTube video announcing the release of the palette, Hill describes the sweat and tears that went into creating her palette. She worked directly with Morphe owner and creative director, Linda Tawil, to create each shade and perfect the formulation of each shadow. Hill took full control over the process, which took over two years. It clearly paid off, as she sold one million palettes in 2017 (Simmons).



*Jaclyn Hill with her palette and the Linda Tawil, founder of Morphe (2017)*

**BRAND IDENTITY.** How does brand identity factor into major collaborations like these? This melding of corporate and influencer identities presents the beauty industry with a new phenomenon brought on by social media, altering the course of corporate brand identity. The inclusion of social media influencers into large beauty corporations has certainly changed the way they run their business, particularly in the realm of marketing, brand management, and public relations. Before the existence of social media, brand identity was more one-sided, meaning that internally (or with a creative agency) brands developed marketing and branding strategies that fit what they believed their target consumer to be. Data from consumer sales has always been a driving force, statistically proving what sells, but brands also projected their

own branding ideas and desires onto consumers, hoping they would succeed.

Now, brands are presented with the unique opportunity to morph their brand into something new, in conjunction with a YouTuber or social media influencer. Companies must ask: *How can our branding align with that of a famous influencer? Which similarities and strengths can we combine to create a product and campaign that this new target audience will love?* In giving a decent amount of autonomy to the influencer, brands relinquish some of their creative power and thus their control of brand identity. While this may seem like a huge risk, the potential payoff is immense – Hill's collaboration with Morphe is proof.

**CONSUMER IDENTITY.** Where does the average consumer factor into this shift in corporate identity? Clearly social media influencers did not achieve fame alone; their dedicated subscriber base supported them long before a large company did. The inclusion of subscribers and followers, also known as consumers, adds another twist to the restructuring of corporate and consumer identities that have shifted as a result of digital and social media. Particularly in the beauty industry, subscribers on YouTube feel closely connected with the beauty gurus they follow, and become invested in the collaborations they do and the products they make. Subscribers have the ability to connect with YouTubers in the comments section of their videos, and on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. Most YouTubers feel indebted to their subscribers, and as a result, actively engage with them to prove to that they are part of their journey as well. In this sense, consumers have a voice, albeit indirect, with regard to corporate identity. While



Youtubers cannot meet all of their subscribers' needs, they certainly take their ideas and suggestions into account when meeting with corporate executives, designing products, etc. In essence, the YouTuber's "target audience" is their subscriber base, and then, the mainstream beauty market.

Hill's palette collaboration with Morphe is proof of this deep connection between her product and her subscribers. In the YouTube video in which she reveals the final palette to her subscribers, she shows the text detailing on the inside cover of the palette that reads:

*This palette is dedicated to all my loving  
subscribers  
xo Jaclyn*

In discussing why she decided to include this heartfelt message she said, "[it] was very important to me that this was on the inside of the palette... because every single day, I want you guys to open this up, and just remember how much you've done for me in my life [starts crying] ...you know, I am unable to thank every single one of you in person, for everything that you've done for me, the way I wish I could, but this is my gift to you guys."

**GENDER POLITICS IN YOUTUBE AND CORPORATE BEAUTY.** YouTube is also revolutionizing another realm of mainstream beauty: gender politics and identity. Many beauty YouTubers are part of the LGBTQ community and as a result are redefining mainstream beauty's definition of who is "allowed" to wear makeup. YouTube saw the growth of "men in makeup" as gay men interested in drag began posting drag makeup tutorials online. Eventually, as certain men realized their artistic talent and knack for beauty,

they began posting more "mainstream" makeup videos that catered to everyday makeup looks for both men and women.

Jeffree Star, a famous LGBTQ YouTuber, boasts almost seven million subscribers and his own makeup brand. He began his YouTube career as a "performer," posting music videos of himself singing and dancing while in drag attire and makeup. His channel quickly turned into a slew of beauty-focused videos, showcasing daring and intensely colorful makeup looks. Some of his first makeup videos included "The Joker' Makeup Tutorial," "Extreme Holiday Glam," and "Purple Smokey Eye Makeup Tutorial." He loves to use bright pink, purple, and blue tones, with bold lip colors and neon pink wigs. While he mainly identifies as male, he typically wears women's wigs, clothing, and accessories in his videos. He uses masculine pronouns (he, him, his) but occasionally uses and responds to feminine pronouns (she, her, hers). While Jeffree rarely discusses his gender identity in depth, it appears to be very fluid and non-conforming. His makeup brand, Jeffree Star Cosmetics, released an eye shadow palette in February 2017, which he named "Androgyny," a testament to his personal identity and attitude towards beauty. In an interview with *Glamour* about the launch of his palette, Jeffree discussed the meaning behind the name of his palette and why it was so personal to him.

*I think androgyny is a good example of being you, being completely fearless and really not letting anyone tell you what to do. It's very masculine and feminine at the same time. That word means a lot to me. People see men in makeup and have so many different opinions, so I wanted to shed light on the subject. When we were doing the shoot, I really wanted different people, so we have a straight male in the*

*ad, we have a transgender women, we have a drag queen, and we have me. I wanted an eclectic mix of beautiful individuals who celebrate the word androgyny.* (Reimel)



*Jeffree Star and the Androgyny palette (2017)*

Jeffree sees makeup as a method of transformation, a form of art that allows people to feel different and powerful, but that can still be taken off at the end of the day. His bold colors and daring makeup looks are a testament to his passion for transformation and uniqueness. This dynamic personal aesthetic has become common among beauty YouTubers – while they have their own classic “look,” they also like to experiment with different looks that are in some ways, forms of art. Jeffree’s passion for beauty and progressive attitude towards gender identity were crucial to his rise to fame and large fan base. He also set an example of success for other men in beauty to follow.

**MEN IN CORPORATE BEAUTY.** A recent example of the inclusion of men in mainstream and corporate beauty is 20-year-old James Charles. In 2016, CoverGirl named him the first ever “Cover Boy,” alongside a slew of past Cover Girls including the likes of Drew Barrymore, Queen Latifah, and Katy Perry. While Jeffree Star is proof that men in beauty have existed long before James, his crowning as

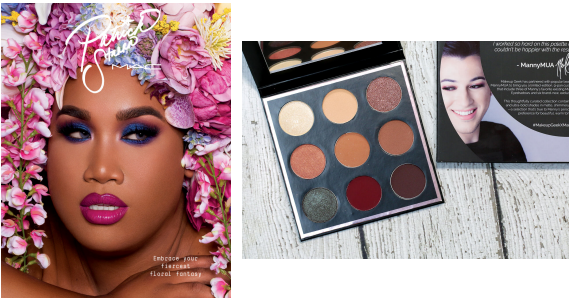
“Cover Boy” proved how much YouTube beauty trends are merging with corporate beauty. James believes that the beauty industry is “becoming genderless,” and that his role as “Cover Boy” is “a huge steppingstone for such a big and iconic company” (Safronova).



*James Charles’ collaboration with CoverGirl (2016)*

Other men in beauty who have found extreme success, wealth, and fame through YouTube are Patrick Starr (Patrick Simondac) and Manny MUA (Manny Gutierrez) who each have a subscriber base of four million, in addition to various collaborations with major beauty brands. Both men began their careers as makeup artists at MAC before beginning their YouTube channels. Coincidentally, they are both children of immigrants and also share the same publicist – similarities that led to their incredibly close friendship. They also share a similar attitude towards “haters,” people online who don’t approve of men wearing makeup, and who actively post hateful comments on their videos. At the beginning of Manny’s YouTube videos, he always says, “If you don’t like this video, if you don’t like me, please don’t fucking watch it! You know the drill.” Both Manny and Patrick tend not to engage with haters, but instead ask that they simply stay away from their YouTube channels. While they admit that there is constant negativity coming from people who disagree with men in makeup, they seem to maintain a

positive, confident attitude. Not only do influencers like Patrick and Manny advocate for diversity in the beauty industry, but they have also become icons in mainstream beauty, given that established beauty companies like MAC have collaborated with them. With more mainstream representation of different genders and races, these images slowly become normalized and therefore more widely accepted. YouTube provides the perfect platform for these marginalized people to show their love of makeup and advocate for diversity in the beauty industry.



Patrick Starr x MAC (2017), Manny MUA x Makeup Geek (2016)

**RACE IN MAINSTREAM AND YOUTUBE BEAUTY.** Intertwined with changing

representations of gender are discussions of race and skin color within the beauty industry. While ideals of beauty have traditionally been represented as female, *whiteness* is another crucial aspect of mainstream beauty. Women of color, and people of color in general, have typically not been represented in beauty, especially prior to the digital and social media era. Before social media’s development of the consumer-producer, beauty corporations held most of the power in terms of racial representation. Beauty advertisements from the 1990s and early 2000s showcase Barbie-esque white women with large eyes and tiny noses. The standard of beauty was extremely consistent and predictable. With the rise of third-wave feminism’s push for intersectionality, which emphasized the experiences of women of color, along with the rise of social media, beauty was at a crossroads. More open dialogue regarding women of color in media facilitated mainstream discussions of race, along with discussions on a smaller scale via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. While racial diversity in the beauty industry has always been an issue, people of color (and their allies) finally had a platform to voice their opinions to the masses and receive feedback not only from other people, but also from powerful companies and corporations.

YouTube provides a dynamic platform for addressing these issues, as users can speak to their camera and “rant,” as many YouTubers call it. Allowing viewers to see the person behind the argument is also significant, as it adds a dynamic visual element. YouTubers often add outside images or video to their own YouTube videos, utilizing the multimedia nature of the platform. Oftentimes YouTube “rants” are comical, given that they are as much of

a performance as they are a legitimate argument. Animated, emotional, and expressive people fare best on the YouTube screen.

**SKIN TONE AND SHADES.** While YouTubers and beauty influencers alike have discussed the failure to represent diversity in beauty advertising, many point directly to beauty products, which act as physical manifestations of this lack of diversity. Currently, beauty influencers are calling attention to makeup brands that do not offer a wide range of shades and skin tones. Makeup products for the skin such as foundation, concealer, and bronzer are typically offered in a limited number of shades – some brands are worse than others, but it is clear that certain skin tones are prioritized over others.

Jackie Aina is the most popular African American beauty YouTuber, known for her crude humor and videos that call out makeup brands that do not offer a diverse range of shades. Not only are her videos spot-on when discussing issues of race and skin tone in the beauty industry, but she also has over two million YouTube subscribers, proving just how many people her videos reach. One of her most-watched videos has two million views and is titled, “The Worst Beauty Brands EVER for POC!” where she discusses how specific brands make it difficult for people with darker skin to find a makeup shade that matches. She discusses the brand Almay, which is notorious for having very light shades that essentially only cater to white people. On camera, she shows Almay’s darkest shade of liquid foundation, which is called “Deep,” and wipes some across the back of her hand for reference. The shade is far too light for her skin, and Aina exclaims, “Deep

for WHO, Almay?! Deep for who?” Aina’s criticism of Almay follows criticism the brand has received in the past, particularly in 2015 when they released their “Simply American” campaign featuring country singer Carrie Underwood as the face of the campaign. Almay faced backlash because not all of their products are made in the United States, so the slogan was misleading, and also because of their narrow representation of what they see as “All American.” Based on their limited color selection, it is unsurprising that they chose Underwood, a blonde singer from Oklahoma to be the poster child for American beauty. Throughout Aina’s YouTube channel, she “roasts” other brands that are not inclusive to people of color, mocking and criticizing them for disregarding a large group of people because of their skin tone.



*“The Worst Beauty Brands EVER for POC!” (2016)*

**SOCIAL MEDIA, COLLABORATIONS & MORE SHADES.** Social media platforms like YouTube give influencers the opportunity to voice their opinion about racism in the beauty industry, and they also allow influencers to connect with brands that would have otherwise ignored their pleas for equality. This new relationship between consumer and corporation has elevated the discussion about racism, from conversation to action. Outspoken influencers like Aina have voiced their

opinions and gained large followings from it, furthering their momentum and social capital. This rise in power has led to collaborations with brands and creations of new product lines that actually listen to their consumers' feedback and needs.

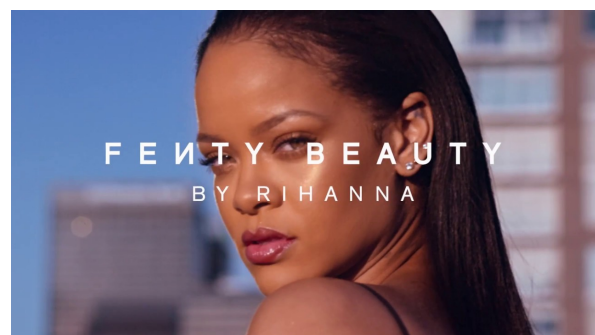
Most recently, Aina has partnered with Too Faced cosmetics, an established makeup brand whose foundation shades for people of color is quite limited. Of their 24 foundation shades, only 4 are "dark" shades, which is typical of most mainstream foundation brands. In her YouTube videos, Aina has continually emphasized her struggle to find a foundation that matches her skin tone well. She notes that even when brands offer shades with names such as "deep" or "dark," the shades often do not match her skin's undertone. She emphasizes that everyone's skin has undertones, which can be anything from grey, to pink, to olive or yellow. Many foundations offer a wide range of shade and undertone combinations for white and fair-skinned people, but rarely offer an adequate selection of dark shades with various undertones. She has always had to mix her own foundation concoction to achieve the proper shade and undertone that matches her skin well. In August of 2017, she announced her collaboration with Too Faced, with the spirit of inclusivity at the forefront of her product campaign.

*I'm so glad that all of the awareness we've created about INCLUSIVENESS is finally being heard and I get to curate these new shades from the FORMULA all the way to the shade names... This is what happens when you stand your ground and believe in your message and keep your supporters number one at all costs. (Jackie Aina, Instagram)*



Instagram post & Too Faced collaboration (2017-18)

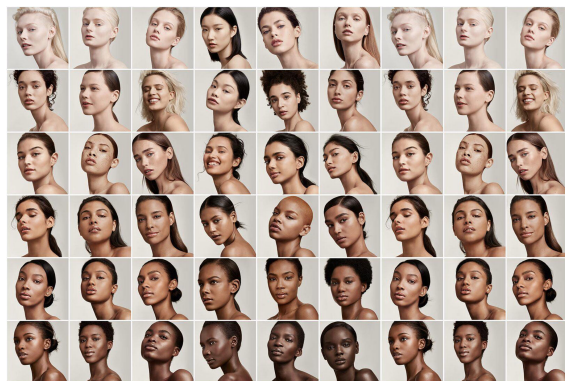
**FENTY BEAUTY.** Another makeup brand that has caused a social media frenzy is Barbadian singer Rihanna's brand, Fenty Beauty. With the slogan "Beauty for All," Rihanna's brand is another response to the lack of inclusivity in the beauty industry. In September of 2017, Rihanna unveiled her new line, featuring 40 different shades of foundation, a number practically unheard of in the beauty world. The shades range from extremely fair to extremely dark, in an attempt to accommodate all skin tones. The brand launch was such a feat that Time Magazine named Fenty "one of the most important inventions of 2017" for its quality, affordability, and emphasis on inclusivity in an industry dominated by exclusivity (Tsao).



Fenty Beauty ad (2017)

Critics of the brand argue that the driving force behind the campaign is Rihanna's fame, and that makeup brands for people of color have existed long before Fenty,

such as Zuri, Black Opal, Black Radiance and IMAN Cosmetics (Nittle). Creating more inclusive brands is also extremely profitable, given that “black women alone spend \$7.5 billion on beauty products” (Tsao). While Fenty is not necessarily original, it does not claim to be – instead, it acts as a response to the fact that the beauty industry is *still* failing in 2018 with regard to inclusivity. Fenty also appeared at the perfect time, when influencers and consumers alike took to social media to lament this reoccurring problem. Given Rihanna’s high-profile social media presence (60 million followers) and Fenty’s effective social media campaign, Fenty Beauty as a whole was the perfect storm. Fenty’s Instagram feed is aesthetically pleasing and incorporates consumers of the brand. Their feed consists almost entirely of pictures of influencers and consumers using their products, with a wide array of gender and racial representations. Fenty’s digital campaign is the perfect combination of celebrity and consumer-producer, an effective mixture of professional and amateur content that is exactly at the crux of social media itself.



*Fenty Beauty shade range (2017)*

Fenty is still in its beginning stages as a brand, slowly adding more products to its repertoire that extends beyond foundation

and skin products. While it may not be alone in the realm of beauty brands for people of color, it is certainly making waves in traditional and digital media spheres. It has also set a successful example of a digital marketing campaign for an inclusive beauty brand, that teaches future brands how to include people of color not only in their target audience, but also in their digital and social media. Fenty products are sold in Sephora retail stores, but has also had major success in the e-commerce space, which is a quickly growing trend in beauty. It seems that Rihanna hopes that her brand will serve as a model for existing brands, or for rising inclusivity-centered brands to follow. Fenty’s story is certainly proof of the power of the beauty social media community to mobilize, and the power of the consumer-producer in the digital age.

## **THE FUTURE OF REPRESENTATION.**

Key influencers like Patrick, Manny, James, and Jackie have risen to beauty industry stardom in a historical moment of protests for equality and social media dominance. Prior to this moment, no medium has existed that has allowed “ordinary” people to speak so candidly to the masses, and for the masses to listen. In an era where society is calling for change, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and more have provided modern avenues for resistance. So, where does representation in the beauty industry go from here? While some beauty YouTubers fade, there appears to be a class of YouTubers that dominate the social media space and will continue to do so. The influencers who have effectively utilized YouTube and social media to their advantage have clinched partnerships and collaborations with multimillion dollar companies, a testament to their social capital and sheer persistence to remain

relevant. As the beauty space within social media grows, it appears that subscribers, followers, and consumers are asking for more representation – which can begin with influencers of color, LGBTQ YouTubers, and more. If these “ordinary” people have the creative talent and are willing to work, consumers will definitely begin to see wider representation in social media, and therefore reflected in corporate beauty interests.

3

# The Beauty Myth





**THE BEAUTY MYTH.** Feminist scholar and author Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* in 1991, during what is widely considered the period of third-wave feminism. Seventy years after the women's suffrage movement, and thirty years after the Equal Pay Act, our patriarchal society continues to oppress women. How have generations of strong, successful women fought for equality, only to be subject to further subjugation? Wolf points to a specific culprit, one not often acknowledged in the 1990s: the beauty myth. She states that women are "in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement," which she calls "the beauty myth" (Wolf, 10). Although women of today hold more power than they ever have historically, Wolf believes they "may actually be worse off than [their] unliberated grandmothers" (Wolf, 10). Particularly women of the First World, who enjoy the freedoms of legal and reproductive rights, are proof that women are still not "free" from the shackles of the beauty myth.



Naomi Wolf (2012)

Wolf notes that growing female power in the contemporary era naturally presents a threat to patriarchal society and masculinity. She believes that another barrier must inevitably be put in place to

regulate this destabilization of power brought on by modernization and social change. The beauty myth presents a perfect remedy for growing female empowerment that men fear. "Beauty" itself is like a currency system in its own economy, "assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves" (Wolf, 12). Cultural definitions of beauty are socially constructed and therefore adhere to the patriarchy's systematic oppression.

Both feminist critics and female consumers are aware of this idea of "the beauty myth," even if they are unaware of the exact terminology – depictions of women in popular culture have stereotyped and reduced women to homogenous, sexualized objects who are considered "beautiful" but lack autonomy and depth. The beauty industry (among other consumer goods industries) has historically upheld such stereotypes, showcasing thin, white, young women in their advertisements while marginalizing other women who fail to fit the industry archetype. We acknowledge that these practices are problematic, but the notion that *the beauty industry markets an antifeminist ideal* has become so commonplace that it now seems clichéd, outdated. So, where does the beauty myth stand today in the beauty industry? We must ask, does today's beauty industry work more to enslave women, or to liberate them?

**ENSLAVEMENT OR LIBERATION?** At its core, beauty is the ideal one hopes to achieve with regard to their physical appearance and internal confidence. While beauty has been a means through which women are stereotyped and categorized,

the beauty industry itself has also undoubtedly presented the opportunity for change.

*Beauty has been a force for the democratization of personal aesthetics. It enabled a growing number of people, for the first time in human history, to make choices about how they looked and smelled and to participate in social definitions of taste, fashion, and style. What was once the sole power of the sovereign became the right of every individual—to make choices about personal appearance and standards of beauty. And it granted to every man and woman new powers of self-reinvention: to change the color of one’s hair, the redness of one’s lips, and the scent of one’s body. Ordinary people living everywhere were encouraged to imagine that they were the kinds and queens of the modern world.* (Jones, 275)

Beauty as *the democratization of personal aesthetics* acknowledges the level of agency and conscious choice that comes with physical appearance. Of course women face societal pressure to conform to mainstream beauty norms, but it is unfair to say that they are completely confined. There is certainly power in making decisions to change one’s hair color or makeup style. To assume that *all* of these decisions are negatively influenced by the beauty industry’s societal pressures is to disregard the capabilities of beauty products – they can completely transform a person’s appearance, positively influencing their mental and emotional wellbeing.

**FEMINIST MOVEMENTS & SELF-EXPRESSION.** Radical feminist movements of the third wave have vehemently pushed back against unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards that the beauty industry promotes. In Western

countries, many educated young women have expressed resistance by “no longer wearing make-up or plucking and shaving body hair, and instead proudly displaying hairy legs and armpits. Even so, most women continued to see the beauty industry as offering them possibilities of self-expression, even if the choices were circumscribed by society’s perceptions of what was expected and allowed” (Jones, 292). While these women hoped to expose the hypocrisy and double standard of mainstream beauty ideals, many also acknowledged the value of self-expression. Radical feminists who refused to support any aspect of the beauty industry found themselves battling the critique that beauty products themselves are means of self-expression, and also act as a form of self empowerment. Choosing to use certain beauty products and to look a certain way is very personal and individualized based on tastes and preferences. This sense of individuality inherent in developing one’s appearance may actually combat the homogeneity associated with conforming to the norm.



Women’s March on Washington (2017)

The radical feminist critique of the beauty industry made little to no headway “in convincing the great majority of female consumers that the use of beauty products was so exploitative that they should stop buying them,” or women realized that they

felt too closely tied to the industry and its products (Jones, 294). It's nearly impossible to boycott everyday products such as shampoo or soap, especially if the consumer is loyal to a specific product and enjoys using it. Additionally, those who are not radical feminists find it difficult to elevate social causes above functionality and practicality, particularly with regard to simple personal care products.

**THE BEAUTY MYTH?** To simply state that the beauty myth exists today with no further analysis is a disservice to an industry founded by powerful women such as Helena Rubenstein, Elizabeth Arden, and Estée Lauder. In the midst of the extremely patriarchal society in which they lived, these women recognized the desire to better oneself through products as simple as cream or perfume. Of course they were rooted in capitalism, but their aspirations for change in the feminine sphere were certainly revolutionary in pre-feminist eras.

Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, a “natural” beauty company concerned with ethical consumerism, states: “We have an entire industry that in order to justify its own spurious existence, must believe that the world is filled with women desperate to cling to their fading youth, eager to believe nonsense dreamed up by cynical advertising copywriters and willing to pay ever bigger prices for ever smaller portions of lotions not much more effective than any old grease you care to think about” (Jones, 291). Advertisers in the industry manipulate consumers into believing that they lack something, and selling it back to them in the form of a product. The businessmen running these companies “betray little grasp of the fact that the notions they are trading in—age, beauty, self-esteem—are more often than not an emotional powder keg for their customers” (Jones, 291).

While Roddick appears cynical in her view of the industry and its images, she recognizes that “it is unlikely that generations of female consumers believed in some simplistic way assertions that they would look like film stars overnight by using such brands. Helen Landsdowne Resor, Elly Heuss-Knapp, and Shirley Polykoff were strong-willed female writers of advertising copy for the advertising industry, who cannot plausibly be regarded as drones of a patriarchal conspiracy against their gender” (Jones, 364).



*Anita Roddick (1989)*

While the beauty industry worked to enslave women through its unrealistic standards, the industry was also modernizing as “women gained agency and autonomy as consumers, transforming them from dependents on men to independent persons who made their own choices on what to buy and how to appear. As Western beauty products reached developing countries, they were frequently received as modernizers and progressive forces for women. Arguably, as women entered the workforce, they did better in the job market by using beauty products, such was the apparent strength of the ‘beauty premium’” (Jones, 364). Although men now ironically run the beauty industry in terms of executive leadership, women have revolutionized the industry since its

inception and continue to influence its future. We must also remember that the industry's target demographic is female, which bestows a great deal of authority onto female consumers to control the market that centers on them. The notion of the beauty myth has the potential to undermine the power of the consumer and their role in the evolving beauty industry.

*The beauty industry remains primarily and industry based on aspiration. It continues to spend lavishly on advertising and packaging. The use of attractive young models rather than typically bodied people in advertising remains the norm, despite the spreading acknowledgment that a face and body of someone aged over 40 can still be considered attractive. Yet the growing recognition of the diversity of beauty suggests also a new level of maturity. Insofar as companies have sought to provide more 'real stories' and to sell products of "real quality," there has been a gain in legitimacy. (Jones, 365)*

**CHOICE FEMINISM.** Wolf herself castigates "victim feminism," which criticizes the sexuality or appearance of another woman. Instead, she advocates for "power feminism," which is "pro-sex, pro-money, and whose core tenets include that women have the right to determine their lives" (Ferguson, 4). Wolf alludes to a kind of *choice feminism*, where personal choices are freely chosen without fear of judgment from other women. We must acknowledge that fully embodying feminism presents challenges when political principals and personal lives clash. While women ideally want to condemn the beauty industry for the weak female image it has painted, many of us feel deeply tied to this female-dominated industry and its products. With regard to the beauty myth, choice feminism will continue to appeal to feminists. We

must acknowledge the difficulties of practically living a feminist life, provide space to voice these dilemmas, and support one another in *living* with them.

*Offering individuals a choice about their appearance and scent is, in the last resort, a positive activity. Enabling people to feel better about themselves when they apply a moisturizer in the morning, or making them feel sexy before a date by wearing a particular scent, or giving someone the **choice** whether to have blonde or black hair, enriches the daily lives of people. It gives each of us the opportunity to appreciate our own body as an aesthetic object, a work of art. It may even enable us to capture some of the 'beauty premium' awarded to attractive people. It certainly gives individuals the choice to look and feel different in a world which, if remaining spiky, has decidedly flat and homogenous features. Insofar as the beauty industry can devote fewer resources to telling us what to do and limiting our choices, and be more open to exploring the rich diversity of human beings in the choices and options which it offers, its legitimacy will be assured. (Jones, 365)*

**THE BEAUTY MYTH TODAY.** Where does the beauty myth stand today? "If one can draw one firm conclusion, it is that ten years later [2000], women have a bit more breathing space to do what I urged them to do at the end of *The Beauty Myth*—to make the beauty myth their own" (Wolf, 8).



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