
Mask: The Plastic and the Visage

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Author Note:

Shruthi is a learner who has grounded herself in the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Literature, Anthropology, and Media Studies in exploring the contemporary world with her flair for writing.

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Abstract

This paper argues that societal pressures around beauty and facial cosmetics function as a pervasive, often unrecognised form of hegemony, shaping women's ideas regarding attractiveness and standards of presentability across diverse cultural settings. Specifically, the study intends to demonstrate that beauty product advertisements both mirror and intensify these pressures by shaping consumers' daily choices about appearance and self-presentation.

By focusing on patterns of beauty advertising and its impact, this research clarifies the mechanisms through which marketing strategies perpetuate and legitimise prevailing beauty ideals. (Pan et al., 2024)

The industry has proliferated and boomed after Third Wave Feminism, and there has also been increasing criticism of women who believe wearing make-up is an act of liberation. (Lazar, 2009, pp. 371-400)

Researchers across domains, especially Sociology and Anthropology, have conducted regression analyses and presented data to support their arguments about the lens through which consumers view beauty and face-product advertisements, and how they are often deceived for the sake of marketing. (Meng et al., 2014, pp. 163-171)

Several clichés revolve around the necessity of wearing make-up and adding artificial beauty for the glam of it, and in other contexts, it becomes a status symbol in certain communities and professions. (McCabe et al., 2020, pp. 656-674)

Keywords: Advertisements, Beauty, Facial cosmetics, Filters, Make-up, Social Media, and Visual Image.

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This research is motivated by the complexity of appearance norms and plastic body-type ideals, which simultaneously serve as sources of empowerment and instruments of social control. This motivation is directly reflected in the study's research questions, which seek to determine whether exposure to images depicting facial cosmetic enhancements increases the desire for cosmetic surgery among young women, and whether Instagram and Facebook filters contribute to low self-confidence in women.

The rudimentary aspect here is the role marketing strategies play in our daily lives, from discounts and birthday sales to the constant pressure to look good and have clear skin. Interestingly, this begins to affect an individual's self-esteem, triggering body consciousness. (Walker et al., 2019)

Articulating the roles the brands play in our lives is a never-ending analysis, simply because of the conditioning our brains go through. It almost becomes second nature for most of us to swear by a GRWM (Get Ready With Me) culture that is prominent on Instagram and TikTok.

The conditioning is so deep-rooted that, even from early childhood, we are unconsciously exposed to it. Fairy Tales surely have some red flags in them. They are heavily stereotyped and feature conventional thinking patterns that can affect your child's cognition. (Ramsey & Langlois, 2002, pp. 320-340) They mostly occur in the form of images, and children tend to copy them and act similarly in unfamiliar crowds.

The Damsel in Distress Debate is overdone in most fairy tales. They always portray a Prince who saves the Princess, who always gets into trouble and is more or less coy and cunning to protect herself. It is important to remember that learning has no age limit, and that talking about self-love matters.

Research Questions:

1. Whether exposure to images depicting facial cosmetic enhancements increases the desire for cosmetic surgery among young women.
2. Do Instagram and Facebook Filters cause low self-confidence in women?

Research Objectives:

1. To identify and construct meanings of how brands like Maybelline, Lakmé, L'Oréal, and other popular beauty brand segments market advertisements. How are their products advertised?
2. To analyse the role of social media and filters on teens and their understanding of the perfect body.

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Overview of Literature

A review of the literature shows that appearance ideals and cosmetic advertising arise at the crossroads of cultural, social, and economic forces; however, major theoretical perspectives differ in how they account for these processes. For instance, Bignell (1997, 2002) and Barthes (1964) use semiotic analysis to show how print advertisements not only encode but also circulate mythic meanings of femininity by linking visual and linguistic elements to desirability and idealisation. In contrast, Bordo (1991) and Corson (1972) adopt a more critical-cultural perspective, contending that media and advertising industries play an active role in institutionalizing and legitimizing these ideals, thereby making them appear natural and indisputable. While the semiotic approach highlights how meaning is constructed through signs and symbols, the critical-cultural perspective stresses the structural forces that perpetuate hegemonic beauty norms. Together, these approaches reveal both the representational strategies ads employ and the broader operations of media power, delivering complementary yet distinct views on how advertising both constructs and enforces standards of femininity.

Historically, the extensive adoption and commercialisation of cosmetics, as described by Peiss (1998), coincided with major shifts in gender roles and the rise of consumer culture. Female entrepreneurs originally led the cosmetics industry, but mass media campaigns and corporate competition soon shifted control to male-operated companies, greatly expanding the industry's reach (Peiss, 1998). Advertising has substantially influenced social grooming habits, with beauty products and their marketing often shaping women's participation in public and professional fields (Vinikas, 1992; McNeil, 1998).

Contemporary literature also examines the globalisation of beauty ideals and the emergence of 'beauty economies,' particularly in non-Western contexts. For instance, Xu and Feiner (2007) analyse how cosmetic surgeries, media representations, and financial imperatives intersect in China, while global campaigns like #UnfairandLovely critique exclusive practices in the beauty industry (Rankin, 2016). The relationship between brands, advertising, and consumer perception is mediated not only through traditional media but also by the rise of social media, where 'likes,' filters, and influencer culture help shape beauty norms (Walker et al., 2019; Shifman, 2014).

The literature further synthesises how Critical Discourse Analysis (van Leeuwen, 2005) and semiotic frameworks (Ogilvie & Mizerski, 2011) provide tools to examine advertisers' ideologically laden choices. However, research also notes gaps: while extensive consumer research exists on fashion and beauty, focused semiotic evaluation of facial cosmetics and self-presentation on social media warrants additional exploration (Mick et al., 1999). Moreover, studies regularly show that beauty practices are informed by intersectional factors—such as gender, race, class, and age—that both reflect and reproduce systems of social organisation (Beausoleil, 1994).

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Overall, the literature substantiates that beauty advertising and cosmetic practices operate within and perpetuate broader systems of meaning and power. By synthesising historical, semiotic, and critical analyses, this review stresses the ongoing need for intensive inquiry concerning how these industries form individual and collective understandings of femininity, beauty, and self-worth.

(Bignell, 1997: 78). Believes that "when scanning the print ads, the qualities that bring it together and set it apart from other media could be labelled, 'article', the range of colour; the magazine is just a collection of signs. These signs may include paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements such as the title of the magazine, the fonts used, the layout, the colours, the texture of the paper, the language adopted, the content of the articles and so on. Each of these signs has been chosen to generate a meaning (ibid.), according to Bignell (2002).

Because a sign has these positive connotations, it can work as the signifier for the mythic signified 'feminine'. This concept belongs to our society's stock of positive myths concerning the attributes of a sexually desirable woman.

The ad presents a sign (the photographed model) that signifies the concept of 'feminine beauty'. This concept of feminine beauty is what Barthes (1964) describes. It would be described as having a mythic meaning. The mythic meaning of the ad connected the watch, feminine beauty, and exotic sexual pleasure.

As in the case of Barthes' black soldier saluting the flag, it does not matter who the model is, who the photographer was, where the picture was taken, etc. The only significant attribute of the photographed model is that she exhibits the physical qualities that enable her to function as a signifier for the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty'.

By the twentieth century, cosmetics were once again in vogue and used freely and openly in society, with no moral stigma attached to their use. Attitudes to make-up were varied, with many embracing it, others firmly opposed to it, and yet others who felt it was all right as long as it was not visible (Bordo, 1991; Corson, 1972).

Cosmetics became a big business as early American entrepreneurial women set up beauty parlours and manufactured the first commercial cosmetics. Between 1890 and 1920, the parlour set industry was almost entirely dominated by women, who produced, advertised, and sold products. (Peiss, 1998, pp. 343-357)

Nennu literally means "tender" younger women and feminine youth, and shunu refers to "ripe" older women and feminine maturity. The two terms appear in advertisements, fashion magazines, television shopping channels, beauty and healthcare services, and everyday discourse.

This course constitutes and legitimates China's so-called beauty economy (meinu j gji), referring to everything from beauty pageants and modelling competitions to advertisements, cosmetics, plastic surgery, beauty and modelling services, and television and cinema, which link women's beauty to the economy (Xu and Feiner 2007).

In March 2016, a new hashtag surfaced: **#UnfairandLovely**, an anti-colourism movement that aims to unite dark-skinned women worldwide. Pax Jones, a Black student at the

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University of Texas, created # UnfairandLovely, featuring her classmates of South Asian descent (Rankin, 2016).

At the time of this literature survey, there were 4,772 selfies using the #unfairandlovely hashtag on Instagram, and that number can be tracked at any time by performing a simple search for the hashtag. The hashtag's name is derived from "Fair & Lovely," a skin-whitening cream (Rankin, 2016).

In December 2004, China hosted its first Miss Plastic Surgery Pageant in Beijing, sponsored by other cosmetic surgery hospitals and private beauty clinics. Nineteen finalists aged 17–62 vied to become the country's best "artificial beauty" (renzao meinu).

One requirement is presenting certificates from medical professionals confirming that the participant underwent cosmetic alteration. Representing the pillars of consumerism—personal liberty and freedom of choice—the Miss Plastic Surgery Pageant celebrates the freedom, right, and "natural" desire to pursue beauty by any means.

Peiss argues that the 21st century saw a shift in beauty culture. Consumer culture gained momentum from the mass media's constant communication, and at the same time, male-operated companies began to set up and manufacture cosmetics. These organisations were hugely successful and displaced many of the earlier female entrepreneurs.

In 1952, Revlon launched one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history with the introduction of a new lipstick and nail polish called 'Fire and Ice'. This seductive advertisement had remarkable reach and was targeted to reach every cosmetics user throughout the United States.

Facial make-up has been used extensively to enhance the wearer's value and beauty within society. The face itself is considered an important component in measuring attractiveness and provides a window from which people derive all sorts of information about a person and their role and status within society (Fabricant & Gould, 1993; McNeil, 1998).

Further, the reasons women use makeup range from stigma about young women wearing it to look older to older women wearing it to look younger (Fabricant & Gould, 1993).

Many globally established cosmetic companies include The L'Oréal Group, The Procter & Gamble Company, Unilever, Shiseido Company Ltd., and Estée Lauder Companies Inc.

Cosmetic products have modernised and brought a change not only in foreign countries but also in India, thereby changing the minds of Indian customers, especially youth and adults who have now started purchasing various cosmetic brands, viz.

Lakmé, L'Oréal, Av, MAC, Chambor, Pond's, Fair & Lovely, Maybelline, Colour Bar, Dove, Elle 18, Revlon, Clinique, and Garnier. Consumers look for several factors before buying a cosmetic product: Brand, Quality, labelling, Price, and Advertising. (Safitri & Syarif, 2021)

According to van Leeuwen (2005: 8), "a global point for studying aspects of visual communication is to consider that there are two verbal and visual modes of communication in print advertising with detailed interaction between them". It can be argued that the linguistic and

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visual choices made by ad producers are not accidental. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can uncover the ideologically laden choices in this discussion.

As the application of make-up is an everyday ritual for so many women within Western Australian society, further study of this vehicle and the messages it communicates within our culture is important. (Ogilvie & Mizerski, 2011, pp. 651-668)

Semiotics provides a useful method for exploring the meanings behind this consumption ritual and the significance of the 'sign' of make-up for women. Whilst a plethora of work has been conducted on individual topics in consumer research on fashion, beauty, and the self, research expressly focusing on the semiotics of face makeup does not exist.

Indeed, Mick et al. (1999) discuss the need for more face-to-face work on the intentions discussed in fashion communication, notably about the personal and intimate meanings of fashion.

As the historical perspective of cosmetics demonstrates, makeup has been heavily influenced by the changing social landscape. A time of particular note was the 1900s, when the role of women in American society and society's perception of it changed as women adopted a more public identity than they had in the past (Vinikas, 1992).

Women were more commonly in the workforce, and during the First World War, their contribution outside the home increased significantly. Women also gained the vote and, in line with these structural social changes, moved away from the traditional role of mother and homemaker (Vinikas, 1992).

The massive rise in cosmetic use and sales in the 1920s can be linked to this social realignment of gender roles. It was also motivated by the growing use of advertising messages targeted directly at women.

The impact of advertising on grooming habits during the early 20th Century was enormous and has been compared to similar agents of socialisation such as religion and education (Vinikas, 1991).

According to Beausoleil, socialisation is "women's everyday make-up and appearance practices are indeed an art of the social organisation of gender, race, class, femininity, sexuality, and the social construction" (p 33). To this end, Beausoleil (1994) proposes that, in understanding 42 women's use of visible face make-up, it is more than adopting normalised images depicted by mass media and increasingly about how women experience and present their appearance in everyday life, which provides interesting dimensions for consumer behaviour.

Assessments and Measures

The conceptual framework of this research uses the concept of masks as both a metaphor and interpretive lens, enabling an in-depth study of how self-presentation practices—such as applying makeup, wearing face masks, or using social media filters—not only construct idealised selves but also manifest deeper negotiations with prevailing beauty ideals. From this perspective, the framework interrogates how masking operates as a response to, and reinforcement of, social beauty pressures by prompting individuals to reconcile personal authenticity with external

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expectations of beauty and identity. By highlighting the dual nature of masks as both concealing and revealing agents, the framework moves beyond mere description. It critically addresses how masking practices complicate notions of authenticity in cosmetic culture, expose the internalization of hegemonic beauty standards, and facilitate both adherence to and resistance to dominant narratives of self-presentation in digital environments.

The Kardashian and the Jenner effects are also widely discussed in this analysis, as the trajectory of artificiality is best understood under the term “Plastic”. (Jones, 2024, pp. 100-117)

The wider theory that this research will be looking into is the theory of the Hypodermic needle, which sprouted out of the infamous study of behaviourists, where, in the meat of this theory, as understood by Nazi’s was that what the protagonist is trying to explain has to be consumed by the masses all at once instead of individual consumption. (Cachero, 2007, pp. 151-176)

The target audience is exposed to a particular advertisement with visual imagery, and their views and ideas are influenced and, to some extent, manipulated. The "magic bullet" and "hypodermic needle" models originate from Harold Lasswell's 1927 book, Propaganda Technique in the World War.

To make inferences in the field of advertising, this study analyses Kim Kardashian's current communication environment with her fans on Facebook. The theory of Parasocial Interaction provides a useful basis for studying this phenomenon because it frames communication between celebrities and fans as an imitation of nearness and friendship, which makes loyal fandom with high market value possible.

Because a female celebrity endorser is the focal point, this study further examines the special relationship between female endorsers and female audiences in terms of parasocial interaction.

Cosmetic surgery presents another powerful example of the impact celebrities have on our health. Research tells us that many of the aesthetic norms that shape the industry are established and reinforced by celebrity culture. (Wen, 2017)

Kate Middleton’s nose (9); Michelle Obama’s arms.(20) Hugh Jackman’s jawline. (21) And Kim Kardashian’s gluteus maximus. (22) These are the features that are often requested by people seeking to modify their bodies through surgery. The last example is of particular interest. Butt enlargement was, until recently, a relatively rare procedure. Now it is one of the fastest-growing forms of cosmetic surgery. (Buttock Augmentation Market To Reach \$11.72 Billion By 2030, 2024)

Shifman (2014) asserts the notion that contemporary society is based on an “attention economy.” Social media platforms make attention quantifiable via “likes.” Likes are a feedback mechanism on social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook.

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Image sharing platforms allow users to send and receive feedback on content through likes, loves, comments, and/or re-shares.

Feedback indicating “likes,” “loves,” and “reshares” is shown by clicking the corresponding indicator button for the photo. Making and posting selfies on social media provides currency in the sense of “likes”, which currently equate to social status (Savage, 2014). It is asserted that the “American Dream” is the realisation of self-made celebrity.

The self-made individual generates celebrity and social value from their self-made image (Savage, 2014). This concept traces the lineage from the origin of the “photographic self-portrait” to its evolution into the ubiquitous “selfie” that drives social media culture in 2017.

Regardless of public opinion or moral compass, the term “Kardashian” has become a staple of popular culture, especially millennial popular culture. In 2017, the Kardashian family personified the ultimate self-made celebrity, thus realising the American Dream. This statement is no exaggeration.

In 2015, Forbes reported that Kim Kardashian earned \$53 million, doubling her 2014 earnings. This family has been paid millions of dollars to promote images of “flawless” beauty through body augmentation, makeup application, and frequent selfie posts. That same year, Kardashian also jumped from #80 to #33 for the World’s Highest Paid Celebrities with 33 million Twitter followers, 37 million Instagram followers, two reality shows, and a mobile application that lets players create their own “celebrity” (Robehmed, 2016).

Selfie culture is “driving patients toward cosmetic surgery due to their ability to share their images at any given moment. They are finding it more and more important to put their best versions of themselves forward (PR Newswire, 2014).”

This phenomenon illustrates a paradigm shift in which the idealised self promoted by beauty and social media increasingly differs from one’s authentic appearance. The proliferation of technology is only one factor among many that influences how society defines perfection and sets unrealistic standards; multiple influences not only shape but likewise perpetuate these norms through instantaneous signal mechanisms. (Global Trends in Research on Social Media and Cosmetic Surgery Consideration: A Bibliometric Analysis, 2026, pp. 1-9) Critically, the expansion of selfie culture illustrates not only the amplification of physical attractiveness pressures, but also how individuals internalise and perform beauty standards for both broad and intimate audiences, fading the boundary between external validation and self-surveillance. This persistent cycle of image production and feedback can produce heightened self-objectification, with people increasingly evaluating their self-worth based on curated online identities. Through examining these developments in relation to the research questions—specifically, whether exposure to images of facial cosmetic enhancements increases the desire for cosmetic surgery

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among young women, and the extent to which Instagram and Facebook filters contribute to low self-confidence—the study shows that selfie culture both reflects and intensifies systemic beauty hegemony. The resulting conformity to digitally constructed ideals diminishes opportunities for authentic self-representation and contributes to pervasive societal expectations. Thus, these outcomes support the central argument that beauty advertising and social media practices play a key role in both shaping and sustaining dominant beauty norms across individual and collective experiences of identity formation.

These dynamics can strongly influence individuals' perceptions of beauty, their sense of self-worth, and their growing reliance on social media platforms for external validation and identity formation. Potential consequences include greater vulnerability to idealised beauty standards and body dissatisfaction, as well as increased pressure to conform to carefully curated online personas. This study aligns with the emerging view that selfie motivations are varied, extending beyond narcissism or attention-seeking behaviour and intersecting with self-expression, social communication, and identity negotiation within cyberspaces. As a result, the phenomenon has become embedded in broader aspects of the millennial female experience, moulding both personal agency and the ways women engage with and interpret contemporary norms of beauty and self-presentation.

For example, the 2017 Brigham Young study (Christensen, 2017) concludes that there are three types of selfie-takers and that most are not narcissists. Per the study (Christensen, 2017), those types are communicators, autobiographers, and self-publicists. This study is consistent with the researcher's assertion that although factors such as narcissism and attention-seeking behaviour contribute to the experience, they are not the most dominant.

Additional factors, such as communication, interpersonal relationship management, collaboration, and self-expression, were identified with no significant negative connotations.

Recent work in the history of communication studies has documented how the two models may have served as a straw man theory or a fallacy, or even a "myth". Others have documented the possible medical origins of the magic bullet metaphor (Lasswell, 1927).

The relevance of this theory in the present research lies in its ability to explain how mass media messages in beauty advertising, as posited by the hypodermic needle model, can directly shape individual responses to dominant beauty ideals. However, this model presumes a relatively unmediated and uniform effect, which may overlook the complex, negotiated ways individuals engage with media messages.

By applying this theoretical framework, the research critically examines not only how persuasive beauty campaigns can promote the internalisation of idealised images and the concealment of authentic features, but also acknowledges the possibility of differential reception and resistance among audiences. This nuanced application seeks to balance the explanatory strengths and limitations of the hypodermic needle model by considering how exposure to such campaigns may both foster self-criticism and trigger forms of self-acceptance or agency in response to beauty norms.

The Magic Bullet theory, however, has its own flaws. The bigger picture is that its effect was prominent, and it still is when we consider the business and marketing techniques the beauty industry uses to advertise; Maybelline New York is a classic example of the Magic Bullet theory.

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