Makeup Through Time: Social Status, Expression, & Gender Roles

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In 1950s Australia, women often resorted to hiding their beauty routines from their husbands, a testament to the anxieties surrounding cosmetics and deception during that era (Hutchings, 2000). The societal pressure to use cosmetics in secret to appear 'naturally beautiful' is just one example of how makeup's purpose has changed throughout history. Many scholars offer insight into the societal norms and practices surrounding the use of makeup or cosmetics. These practices, particularly in ancient cultures, suggest ritualistic elements. These ritualistic elements help explain the application and social significance of cosmetics and makeup. For example, in Ancient Egypt, women were buried in their tombs with at least two pots of lip paint, which shows one of the roles cosmetics played in funeral rituals (Schaffer, 2007). Across various historical periods, cosmetic practices became intertwined with concepts of racialization, particularly in Victorian England, where the ideal of pale skin was promoted as a symbol of purity, social status, and even racial superiority (Giannotta, 2023). This paper will examine the changing purpose of makeup for women throughout history,

analyzing how it has functioned as a tool for social status, personal expression, and the negotiation of gender roles, all while trying to navigate anxieties surrounding its potential for deception. Makeup has roots and an interesting history in many places in the world, but for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome, the Victorian Era in England, the 1950s across North America, and a more modern view of makeup. By examining the historical context and societal norms, this paper will help the reader to understand and appreciate makeup's complex and multifaceted role across time and human societies.

Makeup played a big role in Ancient Egyptian society as they used makeup and other types of cosmetics for their eyes, face, skin, and hair. Lucas (1930) goes into detail about the different types of materials used for these cosmetics. For example, the author notes that the two most common eye paint ingredients were malachite (a green ore or copper) and galena, which was a dark grey ore of lead. The paper discusses how malachite was used earlier, but was replaced by galena. When mixed with ingredients like the carbonate of lead, it created the widely used eye paint Kohl. Lucas discusses how the common idea that Kohl always had antimony in it is wrong. The author explains that while samples might have had traces of antimony in them, these traces could be considered impurities. He instead

thinks that the misconception may come from the Roman practice of using antimony in eye cosmetics, which led to an association with Egyptian Kohl. In addition to the use of eye paint, the source discusses how ancient Egyptian women also coloured their cheeks with red pigment (red ochre), and this is based on red pigment being found in graves and associated with palettes or grinding stones.

Parry and Eaton (1991) further elaborate on the use of Kohl in their article, stating that this traditional eye makeup held potential health risks due to its lead content. Lead is a consistent theme in makeup products across history. The authors discuss Kohl in the context of the health risks anyone who uses Kohl may experience, and the article highlights traditional uses of Kohl such as beautification, warding off the evil eye, and medical benefits for the eyes. Parry and Eaton give a more modern context to Lucas's historical exploration of Egyptian cosmetics. Their research notes that while the cultural and aesthetic significance of Kohl has endured time, its potential health risks have also evolved and become more well-known. Another author focuses on lipstick in Ancient Egypt, highlighting how it was a symbol of social status used by both men and women (Schaffer, 2007). Schaffer explains that both genders would boldly apply makeup during their daily routine, and while eyes held the most cultural significance, lips were also

attention-gaining with the use of red ochre. It is explained that there was no regulation of these cosmetics, and popular colours included orange, magenta, blue-black, and, of course, red. Figures like Queen Cleopatra VII made carmine (red dye/pigment) a popular choice for lipstick, and it was so prominent in life that women who could afford to would also bring lip paint into their tombs after death (Schaffer, 2007). This author shines light on the social significance of cosmetics like lipstick in Ancient Egypt.

Makeup held cultural and social significance in Ancient Rome. Cosmetics could be used to enhance natural beauty, but some also thought of makeup as deceptive if too much was used. Olson (2009) discusses how accessing cosmetics wasn't just for the wealthy, "the use and prestige of cosmetics crossed economic boundaries" (p. 291), meaning that makeup and perfume were not just put in expensive containers, for example, but also came in cheaper materials like wood or blown glass. The author notes that the availability of different price points suggests that the idea of beautification and its social advantages were considered for not only the elite but also the lower classes. It is important to note that ingredients may have also differed across classes. Olson brings up how a smooth, pale complexion was sought after in Ancient Rome. The author explains that the paleness showed that a person was not part of the

working/labour class and rather had time for leisure. The desire for a pale complexion can also be seen in the Victorian era, which will be touched on later in the paper. It's important to note that while there was an ideal beauty standard in Ancient Rome, this ideal came with its own anxieties. The author explains that some women used chalk dust or cerussa (essentially a type of lead) to lighten their skin, but because of the type of material, it is at risk of becoming streaky due to sweat or water. So, there was a fear that makeup could cause a false or fake version of a woman's natural beauty, and this would also reflect poorly on her character. Similar themes of secrecy and preserving natural beauty can also be seen in the Victorian era. It's noted that some people considered cosmetic use to be a waste of time and un-Roman; it may have even repelled men because women would have been considered dishonest and sexually promiscuous.

Another point Olson (2009) makes to highlight how women would try to achieve flawless skin was the attempts they made to hide imperfections like blemishes or scars by using small leather patches called alutae or splenium. The focus on a woman's pale, flawless complexion shows societal beauty expectations for women in society. Ideal beauty expectations are something that have stuck around over centuries, and it doesn't appear as though these types of societal expectations will leave anytime soon. The author continues to discuss cosmetics in

terms of lining the eyes and colouring lashes. Eyelashes could be dyed daily by women, and eyelashes may have even fallen out because of the overuse. The author also mentions Kohl as a substance used to outline and enhance the eyes. Kohl sticks would be used for application, which can be tied to the common day practice of using a rod or applicator to apply eyeliner. Olson argues that having a beautiful complexion was very important to the Roman definition of being feminine and sexually attractive. This idea of using makeup to be more 'beautiful' and appear more 'attractive' is still used today. These points help highlight how makeup was tied to feminine identity and reinforced societal gender norms of ideal beauty standards. Schaffer (2007), however, brings up the fact that men also participated in the use of lip paint, and much like in Ancient Egypt, this was a mark of social standing/rank.

In the Victorian era in England, it's clear that many of these themes from Ancient Rome tie together. Makeup was significant as it also represented beauty standards, social rankings/class, and anxieties, as well as racial hierarchies. Giannotta (2023) goes into detail about how a pale complexion was considered desirable in this time period as well. Attaining a pale complexion became a popular beauty standard in the 19th century (Giannotta, 2023). The author explains that pale skin accentuates rosy cheeks and lips, therefore enhancing the

feminine look. It became so popular that women would even attempt to get diseases or pretend to have symptoms to imitate the effects/look of consumption, which was a very dangerous practice. The author notes that the fascination with the appearance of illness shows how deeply influenced people in the Victorian era were by ideal concepts of femininity, fragility, and perceptions of health. Much like the Ancient Romans, Giannotta explains that the desire for a pale complexion was tied to social standing and class. Again, the paleness was often associated with the upper class because they didn't have to work, and this meant their skin stayed out of the sun's glare. Poorer women would have to try to achieve this look through their use of makeup, and the desire to look more upper-class created popularity for skin-lightening products. The author goes on to discuss the shift from homemade beauty products to commercial products, which created more availability of mass-produced items. This was also impacted by the rise of advertisements.

Giannotta (2023) uses the example of Dr. Mackenzie's Arsenical Complexion Wafers, which promoted achieving a pale complexion through the use of their product but held what we now know to be harmful ingredients like arsenic. It's mentioned that near the end of the 19th century, natural beauty became more popular, and soap was marketed as a pure product that would help people look healthy and youthful. Soap

advertisements showed young women as having the 'purest' white skin, and older women appeared duller. The paper explains that the 'aging' reader should not resort to face paints as they are vain and deceitful. It is noted that articles warned men not to pick a bride who used large amounts of makeup as it made them artificial so therefore, soap became more popular to improve a woman's natural beauty. An interesting point that Giannotta brings up is the racialization of beauty and how the obsession with a white or pale complexion reinforced the idea that whiteness was the benchmark for beauty, purity, and civilization. Whiteness was a show of status and also showed how pure a woman was, both morally and sexually. Throughout her paper, Giannotta shows the evolution of makeup through the Victorian era and how it was used to look fashionable, show off class status, and how it adapted to promote more 'natural' products while still being able to achieve the desired white or pale complexion.

When it came to the 1950s across North America and other developed nations, it's clear that advertising and mass media started to play a larger role in shaping beauty standards and promoting femininity, sexual allure, and youthfulness. There is a constant emphasis on keeping up with an idealized image of oneself in order to be feminine and hold worth as a woman. Howard (2000) focuses on how makeup, fashion, personal

expression, and company culture encourage both the connection between women (bonding over beauty culture) and reinforce traditional gender roles. Maidenform (a lingerie company), promoted a narrow view of what was feminine in the 1940s and 50s. The author explains that this company advertised the idea that a successful woman was an attractive woman. The author then talks about the "I Dreamed" campaign, which was built on the idea of women taking on new feminine identities in their branded bra, and rather than these identities being a repeat of the traditional stereotype of a suburban housewife, it pushed for images of pin-ups or Hollywood sex icons. This campaign showed women in aspirational roles, but these roles still focused on being attractive. The company also held beauty contests that reinforced the significance of being physically attractive and keeping up with beauty standards.

Hutchings (2000) discusses the impacts of advertising and media on beauty culture, arguing that advertising promotes the feeling of female inadequacy and often pushes women towards unattainable standards. Similar themes that Howard (2000) discussed can be seen here, such as a woman's youthfulness and attractiveness being tied to her worth. Hutchings explains that the pressure to conform to beauty standards reinforces traditional gender roles and limits women's opportunities. Advertisements are often made to seem more

legitimate and important by including statements like ‘Beauty experts agree’ and the paper explains that these statements help constantly reinforce the idea that beauty should be a woman’s life's work, regardless of how old they are or if they are married or not. This means that it should be on their minds at all times and be something they strive towards no matter what. The author mentions Nan Hutton, a Woman’s Day columnist, who wrote an article that critiques all of the different and conflicting advice women get from ‘experts’ on how to stay attractive while meeting their husbands' needs. The advertisement uses phrases like “Never let him see you in curlers,” “Relax and be yourself,” and “Take an interest in his work” (Hutchings, 2000, p. 52). Nan then says that it’s impossible to do everything at once, so take your pick. Hutchings explains that postwar women did exactly that as they negotiated what it meant to be female and feminine. The author then discusses the separation of men’s and women’s public and private spheres; the domestic or private sphere is considered to be the woman's world, and the public sphere to be the man’s world. Hutchings explains how all the work and products that go into creating the female allure are too shocking for men or husbands to witness, therefore, new wives are advised to start their beauty routines earlier, behind closed doors, or while the husbands are away in order to keep their husbands' illusions alive. The author discusses how the ideal of beauty was

a part of the separate sphere concept, and women who don't keep these spheres separate were criticized for losing modesty and pride. The author shows how difficult it can be for women to navigate the conflicting expectations of beauty and seem effortless no matter what. The heavy expectations placed on women to stay essentially perfect while keeping all the work behind doors in their private sphere is a way traditional gender roles were maintained.

Rudd (1997) discusses how makeup is a tool for creation, empowerment, and women's agency in terms of how each woman wants to present herself. The author argues that makeup is a ritualized activity that helps women to construct and transform themselves. This is a more modern idea of makeup that challenges the idea that makeup is only used to conform to beauty standards and please men. Rudd explains that the study of ritual consumer behaviour is focused on the symbolic meaning of actions involved with the use of products and the process that takes place. The relationships of the people who participate in these rituals are also relevant. The author notes that private ritualistic activities can become public through conversations with other people who also participate in these private rituals. The example used is women who use cosmetics in private space/ritual may create bonds with other women who are also participating in the same activities, therefore, the acts of

applying cosmetics may be seen as a collective strategy for building social identities and creating a sense of power in an industry that has stifled women. Badaró (2015) looks at women in the Argentine army and elaborates on how makeup's appropriateness and meaning shift depending on situational context. This source highlights the pull between traditional femininity and professional identity. The author explains that women in the army may choose to embrace makeup in their personal lives in an effort to express their femininity. While Rudd focuses on the agency of women through makeup use and constructing a sense of self, both Rudd and Badaró show how the function and meaning of makeup can be altered depending on the situation. Rudd notes makeup routines women use for work, social events, and personal time, and Badaró notes how makeup can remain a significant part of a woman's personal life even if it doesn't fit into her professional setting.

Some of the biggest changes in the makeup industry over time have been in terms of the safety and regulation of products. Termini and Tressler (2008) focus on how consumer awareness of ingredient safety and the health risks that may come from using particular ingredients has grown. The authors emphasize how labelling products to inform consumers of what ingredients are actually in the products they are purchasing, and noting any potential hazards, shows a modern trend of product

transparency. The authors also note that consumer activism has led to calls for stricter regulations, and this shows a shift from a passive consumer attitude to a more informed kind of consumer that wants to see changes in industry practices. There is, of course, still room for improvement. The authors explain that the European Union has more ingredients banned than the US has, and this means that there's potential to expand upon what is and isn't safe for consumers and what the average citizen is okay with using to express themselves.

Throughout history, makeup has been used for a multitude of reasons, including personal expression, promoting one's social status, negotiating traditional gender roles, and reflecting on societal beauty standards. From ancient to modern times, makeup has played a role in people's ideas of beauty and femininity. Not only do makeup and the beauty industry play a large role in enforcing beauty standards, but they can also aid in squashing anxieties about the 'deception' of users. It can also be used by women to construct and transform their personal identities. Makeup remains a complex and ever-changing industry in our lives and reflects changing societal norms and gender roles.

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