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<u>Role of Pop Culture in Popularizing Gender-Bending Fashion and Ideals of Beauty and Makeup</u>

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Abstract

The concepts of makeup, fashion and outward beauty has, for generations, been linked to femininity, with an implication of vanity. With the start of the 21st century, there was an increased reach of newspapers, magazines, shows, movies and a wider reach of popular music, owing to the spread of the Internet and similar technology. These media outlets were the direct link between celebrities and inspirational icons who comprised pop culture, and their enthusiastic audiences. This led to a greater following of popular celebrity culture, thereby leading to fashion and makeup permeating the mainstream lives of the common persons. However, since these concepts (of makeup and fashion) were restrictively associated with women, men and those belonging to other genders were prejudiced against for their involvement in the ideals of makeup and fashion. Through this paper, the authors explore the impact that pop culture and social media have had in introducing the themes of beauty, makeup and fashion in the mainstream, understanding the same as explorations of gender and self-identity.

Key Terms: *Makeup, beauty, fashion, gender, pop culture, social media, expression*

1.0 Introduction

Time immemorial, popular culture (pop culture) in the form of movies, songs, magazines, soap operas and more, has played a definitive role in how humans view the world around them. Before media-influenced pop culture, mass media in the form of books, live plays and written transcripts curated a sense of unity in terms of ideas and thought processes. Influenced largely by pop culture and social media, beauty and makeup have become concepts no longer restricted to a particular gender, especially in the 21st century.

For generations, makeup has been associated with only cis-women and it wasn't until the mid-1800s that makeup was relegated to one end of the gender spectrum. During the Victorian era, makeup was deemed 'vulgar' and improper by both the crown and the church, leading to makeup being linked to vanity and femininity, especially as the purview of masculinity and masculine traits became more restrictive and narrow (Montell, 2020). For a large part of human history, there have been clear distinctions between masculine and feminine traits. Nearly all human characteristics and concepts - from emotional roles and expressions to fashion, clothing and professions - have been assigned binary gender conformations.

These distinctions in human traits as per the binary are socio-culturally produced to signify the socially accepted differences between men and women. A significant result of this distinction being - beauty has been accepted as a majorly feminine concept.

It was only with the advent of pop culture, especially Hollywood movies, around the 1930s, that makeup for men gained traction as well. Although initially used by movie stars concentrating on basic grooming and a 'polished' look, makeup and male beauty products soon diversified.

By the '70s and '80s, the usage of men's makeup and cosmetics were primarily reserved for radical artists like Prince, David Bowie, Freddie Mercury and more. By the early 2000s, male 'punk' pop-cultural artists like Pete Wentz and Adam Lambert popularized the usage of makeup and also introduced the cultural concept of 'metrosexuality' (Montell, 2020) whereby restrictive masculine expectations were challenged by men who spent time, money and effort on their appearance and grooming; the emergence of this new term ('metrosexual') implied that such efforts towards men's beauty were earlier unheard of.

With a wider reach of pop culture in the 21st century, and with more male celebrities exploring gender-bending fashion and makeup concepts- like actor Jaden Smith, singer Harry Styles, beauty guru Jeffrey Star and more- the boundaries between masculine and feminine in terms of fashion and beauty are blurring; these ideals of makeup, beauty and fashion are becoming more gender non-conforming and androgynous. As a corresponding result, the male grooming industry is on track to grow by $20.9 billion from 2017 to 2023, including cosmetics like foundations, concealers and more (Jacobs, 2019).

This research paper attempts to explore how this unifying sense of pop culture has influenced beauty, makeup and gender-bending fashion in today's society. Through the ongoing influence of media in pop culture, such as that of movies, songs and - in recent times - of TV series, YouTube videos and social media content, celebrities have a closer reach to their audiences; this implies a greater influence of concepts like fashion, beauty and makeup - as adopted by celebrities and popular personalities - on common viewers.

2.0 Gender Norms and Social Interaction

2.1 Understanding Sex and Gender

The terms sex and gender were archaically used interchangeably, but in reality, they are two vastly different concepts. Understanding the distinction between these two terms helps establish the basis for this research paper.

An individual's **sex** is primarily linked to their physical and physiological features including chromosomes, hormone levels and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male, but there may be variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and 'gender diverse' people. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and impacts the distribution of power and resources in society.

Gender identity is neither confined to a binary (male and female) nor is it static; it can change over time. There is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience and express gender through the roles they adopt, and through their socio-cultural interaction with their surroundings (Government of Canada, 2020).

2.2 Gender Stereotyping and Deviating from the Assumed Binary Genders

Gender roles are adopted in response to an individual's socio-cultural environment - family and peer interaction, media, education and self-awareness. Gender roles in society deem how individuals are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct themselves, primarily based upon their assigned biological sex (Planned Parenthood, n.d.). Socially influenced ideas of gender roles are indirectly communicated by families, authority figures and mass media (such as news outlets, magazines, pop culture and social media). For example, girls and women are generally expected to dress in traditionally feminine clothing and to be polite, accommodating, and nurturing, while men in society are expected to be strong, aggressive, and bold.

Expected adherence to traditional gender roles leads to **gender stereotyping** - a generalised preconception in society regarding attributes and roles that ought to be possessed and portrayed by women and men in society. Any deviation of individuals from these

assigned binary restrictions of gender is met with prejudice and bigotry

Children are encouraged to conform to the gender corresponding to their biological sex from a young age, through subtle coercion towards traits that are 'acceptable' for their gender; parents often supply male children with trucks, toy guns, and superhero paraphernalia, which are active toys that promote motor skills, aggression, and solitary play, while female children are mostly given dolls and dress-up apparel that foster nurturing, social proximity, and role play. Subconscious positive reinforcement by parents and guardians (in the form of praise and involvement), guides children towards adopting "gender appropriate" actions and activities, in line with the restrictive binary gender (Lumen, n.d.).

In this capacity, binary gender roles dictate how each gender should behave and also give rise to penalties for people who don't conform to the binary. Even within the binary, it is socially more acceptable for persons to adopt masculine characteristics (such as dressing in male clothing and hairstyles), than female characteristics. Men who adopt female traits such as wearing feminine clothing or applying makeup, risk facing harassment and even violence. This threat to existence due to gender expression is especially true for those who are fluid in gender, transgender or gender non-conforming.

2.3 Gender Identity and Gender Expression

The gender spectrum was formed as an extension of the otherwise limiting gender binary that viewed man and woman as the only two gender options. The gender spectrum is a linear model, ranging from 100% man to 100% woman with various states in between. The gender continuum is an extension of this gender spectrum that includes additional gender identities, allowing a third gender, agender, or genderless options, as well as many other possibilities; it is thus a more accurate reflection of the true diversity of human genders. The continuum approach to gender identity provides individuals with more personal freedom with which to express themselves (Lumen, n.d.).

Gender expression is how a person outwardly expresses their gender identity. It includes physical expressions in the form of the person's clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and social

expressions such as name and pronoun choice. Some examples of gender identity are masculine, feminine, and androgynous (neither entirely masculine nor inherently feminine) (Smart Sex Resource, n.d.).

Fashion is the most commonly acknowledged portrayal of self-identity and expression. As overt physical expressions of the self, clothing and makeup represent a person's individuality, thought process, culture and self-identity which they otherwise may be unable to express openly in society through their words or other actions. It is then understood that both clothing and makeup serve as an important socializing influence and as a mode of indirect communication of self-expression (Kodžoman, 2019).

Hence, it is only logical to link an individual's visible fashion and clothing as a form of gender expression. Current fashion and beauty trends - such as donning the clothing of the 'opposite sex', styling garments stereotypical to both sexes together (skirts with coats, for example) - are conforming less to the fashion trends of either sex (male or female) in particular, and instead adopting a 'gender-neutral' approach, to deconstruct the archaic belief of the binary gender system, moving towards an inclusive spectrum of gender.

Many fashion brands prepare their collections reflecting the concept of 'gender fluidity'. These representations of gender fluidity through fashion and fashion icons inspire gender-fluid individuals to express their identities by enhancing their appearance (Akdemir, 2018). Whether it involves male celebrities applying makeup, famous persons styling skirts and gowns with beards and masculine hairstyles, or popular agender personalities donning gender-neutral attires and makeup, fashion and beauty as represented through pop culture influences how the layperson interprets and expresses their own gender identity.

3.0 Pop-culture and Representation

3.1 Men in Pop-Culture from the 2000s

Movies and songs comprising pop culture released in the late 90s and early 2000s began reaching a wider global audience for the first time, owing to technological advancement in the space of the Internet, the popularity of pirating platforms for movies and MP3 downloads, sharing options via Bluetooth, and widespread use of YouTube - the most common video uploading platform. Hence the influence of pop culture was international,

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especially that of western pop culture - including movies, songs and other media.

Usage of makeup and fashion by non-females in the mainstream was still limited to pop icons like Pete Wentz and Adam Lambert who popularized the concept of a 'punk look' of men wearing eyeliner, in this period.

The concept of metrosexuality - of men grooming themselves, while retaining masculine traits- picked up at this time. In India specifically, this change in men's perception of appearances helped the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector to launch a range of beauty and grooming products specifically catered towards male use, in the early 2000s. Companies like Nivea, Vaseline and Emami that primarily catered towards women's cosmetic range, began launching grooming products specifically catered towards men.

However, while this range of grooming and cosmetic products for men began lining the Indian market, they were marketed to portray a stereotypically masculine 'macho' image. These products were segregated from similar ones catering to women, by reiterating that men's grooming practices must make them 'strong', desirable and different from women (Sisodiya, 2014).

Hence, in the late 90s and early 2000s, while there was an increasing emphasis on grooming and skincare for men, it reiterated stereotypical beliefs separating masculine and feminine traits. For example, in an advertisement for Fair and Handsome, - a fairness cream specifically for men - the brand ambassador, Shah Rukh Khan, was seen chiding a well-built male wrestler for using women's fairness cream, with the implied connotation that using feminine products was unacceptable, especially for a 'physically strong male'.

Further, the concept of men's grooming and cosmetics concentrated solely on men outwardly looking presentable, rather than physical appearance being a form of inner self-expression for men.

3.2 Normalization through Pop Cult icons, in Current Times

Male celebrities like Harry Styles, Todrick Hall and Lil Nas X as well as popular female singer Billie Eilish, are now becoming icons for adopting clothing styles as opposed to what specifically caters to their gender.

Famous male pop artists popular among Gen Z have attended numerous award ceremonies in gowns, skirts and ruffled clothing, which is otherwise considered women-specific clothing, such as Harry Styles at the 2021 Grammy's. Billie Eilish has become a teen idol with her adoption of androgynous, oversized clothing with vivid patterns, which is a considerable deviation from the traditionally feminine clothing styles of female artists. Harry Styles too, has served as a style inspiration who dresses in feminine clothing through his music, videos, and social media presence, especially to young audiences on TikTok and Instagram.

3.3 Technology and the Surge of Male Beauty Influencers

The evolution of technology and the rise of platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram have allowed men interested in makeup to share their interest with the world and showcase their creativity on a larger scale. Through Instagram Reels and short-span TikTok videos, creators and common users have a platform of a like-minded audience that encourages them to explore their preferred aesthetics while incorporating fashion and makeup in their videos, regardless of their gender or sex. With the concept of viral trends that experiment with certain beauty and clothing looks, users don't hesitate as much, to upload videos where non-female persons explore feminine or androgynous themes of clothing and beauty.

Male beauty vloggers have garnered huge popularity on online platforms by being able to share their content with a global audience, thereby allowing them to be a part of the mainstream makeup fray. The widespread popularity of beauty bloggers like Gary Thompson, James Charles and Patrick Starr has earned them attention from well-known cosmetics brands - the brands predominantly catering to women now want these influential non-femme faces to represent them. Gary Thompson being signed as a model for L'Oréal's 2016 ad campaign or James Charles being endorsed as the cover of CoverGirl and Patrick Starr being made the brand ambassador of M.A.C. are a few instances where the prominence of artists through social media was leveraged to further popularize notions of beauty and makeup among a larger audience.

Influential beauty vloggers, through their online content, have positively impacted many young boys and men to be confident and freely express themselves through makeup, while simultaneously making many viewers question traditional gender norms.

Through their content and social media presence, male makeup artists and beauty gurus have inspired audiences to express their gender and self-identity through the physical aesthetics of makeup creativity. More men in the makeup industry have helped highlight the point that creative expression through makeup is for everyone and not just those who are female-identifying (Little, 2016).

The incorporation of beauty, makeup and expressive fashion is not only limited to those who specialise in creating makeup-oriented content; male influencers and digital content creators, especially Indian ones, experiment with the content of self-care, makeup and clothing, even when their main forte may be different. Popular digital content creator, Siddharth Batra, whose content features fashion and grooming videos, has challenged societal misconceptions that associate males concentrating on fashion and beauty with them being homosexual or queer. Siddharth Batra is a popular influencer sporting androgynous and feminine looks or outfits and centring his content around promoting male beauty and grooming. Another popular creator, Ankush Bahuguna, who started in the sphere of creating entertaining and socially-relevant comical videos, has now also ventured into makeup vlogging. This further exemplifies that male creators are exploring the fields of fashion and makeup without explicitly making it their main or primary content; instead, they are adopting these ideals as complementary aspects to their lives. Many male creators are now becoming brand ambassadors for promoting grooming, skincare and self-care on their platforms, further assisting in normalising these ideals amongst men.

Due to growing popularity and normalisation via social media, makeup is now seen more as a creative pursuit rather than a traditionally gendered field. The movement of content creation through social media has urged makeup to be embraced as a creative medium that is not focussed on only one end of the gender spectrum.

3.4 Hallyu - The Korean Wave (A Real Example)

With the rising popularity of Korean-pop (K-pop) - which includes Korean music, series and culture - including that of artists such as BTS, supplemented by Netflix making Korean dramas easily available, the "Hallyu" or 'Korean Wave' has swept the world and global audiences, influencing preferences in films, serials, music, art and especially beauty and skincare.

K-pop stars experimenting with masculinity and beauty, challenging concepts of 'what it means to be a beautiful man' in a heterosexual or non-heterosexual way, has opened up possibilities for beauty among men across the globe, and plays a pivotal role in the concentration of beauty among men internationally (BBC News, 2018).

In this respect, South Korea is considered to be a trailblazer in setting examples for men's beauty culture, primarily through its pop-cultural influence (Rapp, 2020). South Korean men have been using beauty products even when most of the world considered them unmarketable to men. Their usage for such products is not limited to simple skincare products but also cosmetics like brow pencils, base creams and more. Global data reports of 2018 show that 3/4th of South Korean men even get a professional salon beauty treatment done at least once a week. Apart from trying to look like K-pop idols, who are known for their feminine looks, the desire to look younger as they age is another reason South Korean men take care of their skin and put emphasis on beauty. (Yunsuk, 2019)

The industrial effect of the 'Korean wave' has resulted in international cosmetic brands like L'Oréal launching Korean beauty concepts - BB creams along with Garnier and air-cushion foundation with Lancôme - to explore and capitalise on consumers' fascination with South Korean beauty. (Tyrimou, 2017)

4.0 Conclusion

Through the course of this paper, the authors have understood and analysed how gender has played a pivotal role in the way individuals project and interpret the concept of makeup and fashion.

With the advent of technology and social media, popular culture has had a closer, more intimate reach to its relevant audiences; fashion and beauty bloggers have intricately influenced the way common persons incorporate these ideals into their lives, as a physical manifestation of self-expression. This increased reach of social media platforms has led humans to rightly question what was earlier believed about traditional gender roles and gender identity, resulting in more and more individuals exploring and expressing their gender identities through beauty, makeup and gender-bending or androgynous fashion.

While this paper recognizes the role of gender expression through appearances and aesthetics of clothing and makeup, it must be acknowledged that the usage of these ideals is diversifying; it is no longer limited to use by females or queer individuals, but also cisgender, heterosexual men who opt for an androgynous appearance, without it having a reflection of their gender identities. This is exceptionally portrayed by South Korean men, who implement concepts of beauty as a part of their regular lives, just as male artists in Korean dramas, music and more.

Makeup and fashion as exemplified through pop culture has permeated within the 'acceptable' norms of society - especially among avid social media users - and, at every step, these ideals continue to challenge the restrictive associations humans have with gender norms and roles. As a consequence, in the makeup industry, this popularity has been portrayed by male beauty bloggers launching their own makeup lines and appearing as cosmetic brand ambassadors.

The authors of the paper would conclude by highlighting that through the exponential growth of social media platforms, there has been tremendous conversation and analyses surrounding self-identity, gender and more. This is resulting in the concepts of beauty, makeup and gender-bending fashion gaining popularity and greater acceptability in society; however, there is a long way to go before the gender-neutrality of these concepts is normalised in human society.

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