The emergence of genderfluidity and postgenderism in the make-up world

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Abstract

Make-up has been a gendered concept for centuries. Its use has been attributed almost exclusively to women in several historical eras, including modernity. However, I noticed two recent trends regarding this subject: the growing inclusion of men and people of other genders in this practice, and a process of undoing gender in the world of make-up. The objective of my research is to explore how these movements are reflected in the media. My approach is qualitative. The method I chose is content analysis. This study reveals that the artistic beauty world and social media have been embracing and promoting gender diversity when it comes to wearing and applying make-up. Decorative cosmetics are less seen as a source of gender restriction, and more as a fun way to explore one's identity and creativity. Moreover, people are encouraged to share their experience with each other and to be supportive.

Keywords
Gender fluidity, postgenderism, undoing gender, masculinity, femininity, make-up identity

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Introduction

Make-up has always been a controversial topic, whether in the academic world, the feminism movements or in everyday life. Wearing decorative cosmetics has long been debated over in polarized stands. Some may think it is a form of oppression, objectification and sexualization (primarily of women), while others insist it is a form of expression of one's femininity. Although in ancient and renaissance times men and women alike wore make-up, medieval and modern societies strongly gendered this practice, deeming it feminine. Women used to be demonized and judged as lustful witches and prostitutes if they wore colour on their faces in the Dark Ages. Women in the present are being examined, judged and discriminated positively or negatively against by the amount of cosmetics they wear or not wear and the context in which it is worn. However, save for a brief trend among the celebrities of the 1980's (David Bowie, The Human League), the concept of a man wearing coloured, stereotypically "feminine" make-up has been taboo since the 1700's.

Being interested in the cosmetics field and paying attention to the trends of the recent years, I noticed a marginal, but increasingly popular movement: the gender fluidity or even "un-gendering" of the make-up practice. While this pattern is most visible in the media, I also remarked social changes among non-famous people.

Pantone's colour of the year 2018, "Ultraviolet", reflects the shifting global attitude regarding gender ideology. It follows suit to their 2016's duo of baby pink "Rose Quartz" and baby blue "Serenity". We can poetically liken the colour purple to a beautiful, fluid blend between two primary colours, feminine red and masculine blue. One only has to look at the basics of colour theory to notice that there are numerous variations of the colour purple, from cool glacial pink to dark indigo, from subtle mauve to bright orchid, akin to the spectrum of gender. Pantone's colour of the year always inspires make-up trends and products, among others. An important reason why Pantone chose "Ultraviolet" is to pay homage to Prince, who sadly passed away in 2017, his iconic "Purple Rain" song and his androgynous look. David Bowie and Jimi Hendrix are also paid respect through this shade. Thus, 2018 might be an important year for cosmetics and gender diversity.

My research explores gender fluidity and postgenderism in the make-up scene. I am interested in how femininity and masculinity is redefined in media. This present project focused on the inclusion of men in the increasingly diverse beauty world.

Theoretical background

Foucault spoke of the socially constructed body. In capitalism, the mind is controlled through the institutional control of the body. Gender is such an institution that has a corporeal dimension. It refers to a collectivity of people, it transcends time and space, creates expectations, models behaviour and is inseparable from the individual (Martin, 2004). Barbara Risman (2004) recognizes the three-dimensional structure of gender. At the individual level, gender is internalized and shapes our self-identity. Through

interaction, we gather expectations and compare ourselves to others. Ideologies and structural inequalities also have an impact on how gender is constructed and manifested (Risman, 2004).

Biopolitics impose norms regarding the use and modification of our bodies, to gain biopower over us. According to this perspective, the body is social, not individual (Foucault, 1990). Marcell Mauss also defines the body as mostly socially constructed, an object and an instrument of culture.

Jean Baudrillard defines the body as a good, an investment, and a beautiful, fetishized object. We dedicate time, money, physical, mental and spiritual effort into reproducing a hyper-real standard imposed to us by the media and economy (Baudrillard, 1995, 1998). Thus, seduction is a simulation (Baudrillard, 1990). However, Baudrillard has an essentialist approach; he only attributes the role of the seducer to women.

Regarding my subject of research, I think that when make-up is used as a mean of seduction, it is only partially a way of "doing gender". It may or may not reproduce a standard of beauty; it could also be a way of differentiating oneself from it. Also, the agent and the subject could be female, male, or of other genders. After all, make-up ads that feature ideal feminine looks are primarily aimed at women consumers. Moreover, the use of make-up may be a way through which the weaver is creating diverse identities for herself or himself.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, also affirmed that gender is a hyper-realist concept, based on ideal types of femininity and masculinity that are promoted by the media and the society. She asserts that these features are only partly found in the real individuals (1999).

According to Erving Goffman, our bodies are a valuable interactional instrument through which we can easily switch from one role to another, given a certain context and audience. While we communicate with ourselves and others through our bodies, the ways in which it can express meaning is determined socially, at the macro level (Goffman, 1959).

Giddens asserts the dual role of the body as an object upon which structure acts and an agent of reflexivity that changes the structure (1991). We design our own bodies. Chris Shilling explores the reasons for sociologists' new-found interest in the body. Consumerism, second-wave feminism, medical advancements in plastic surgery, genetics and reproduction techniques are some of them (2004). I can also see how third wave feminism affected the way we see our bodies and what we do with them.

Feminism used to separate matters of gender from the physical body, because it fights against the stereotype of "female is nature and male is culture". In recent years, corporeality has been reintroduced in feminist research. Donna Harraway adds a postmodern touch to gender, linking it to the idea of a cyborg – part biology, part technology; the body is artificially created through cultural ideas. She proposes that the joining forces of the human body and new technologies can set women and men free from patriarchy and capitalism (1985).

Judith Butler talks about the genderized bodies. She critiqued the feminist theories of the past for both reinforcing the binary of sex and gender and stating that

biology does not define us. Butler's idea of gender and sexual freedom would be to dispose ourselves of it and its constraining narratives that link certain sexes to certain gender performances and sexual orientations (1992).

Androgyny has been associated with some cultural and religious beliefs through the years, including the New Age movement (Singer, 1977). It was firstly proposed in social science by Sandra Bem, who defined gender as a continuum, not as a binary, in her Sex Role Inventory (1974). She argued that people that possess intensely stereotypical attributes according to their birth sex are problematic; the mentally and emotionally healthiest individuals were situated in the middle. Judith Lorber (2005) stated that degendering would free and expand the opportunities of people to express themselves and choose their careers and paths in life without socially imposed restraints.

Nowadays, this utopia seems to be closer than ever from happening, even if gender-free societies still do not exist. Novel biological, neurological and informational technologies, like sex-change medication and surgery, brain manipulations, virtual reality gadgets and A.I. development, make a postgender future possible (Dvorsky and Hughes, 2008).

Francine Deutsch (2007) proposed ways in which research can focus on the process of undoing gender. Scientists should look at the ways and moments in which gender becomes less important for interaction and its relevancy; determine if gendered interactions are bound to promote inequality; investigate how change is simultaneously produced at institutional and interactional levels; notice the effects in the interaction between genders.

Methodology

In my paper, I aim to apply the research perspectives presented previously to the matter of gender fluidity, undoing gender and postgenderism in the make-up world. My approach is a qualitative one, allowing me to merge science and art into one (Babbie, 2010). I will perform an in-depth interpretation of a small number of cases (Rughiniş, 2007). The method I chose is that of content analysis, because it allows me to discover hidden meanings and patterns (Babbie, 2010) in media content related to make-up. My analysis unit is the media product, whether it is a campaign, a commercial, a music video or a social media post regarding decorative cosmetics. I investigated a number of 13 of such units.

The indicators I looked for in my study are as follows: the presence of cosmetics and make-up accessories; the performers are wearing make-up and/or applying it to themselves or others; non-conforming and cross-gender appearance and progressive attitudes towards cosmetic decorations; explicit mentions of cross-dressing, postgenderism, genderlessness; the presence of a male subject or agent who is interested in make-up; the objectification, sexualization and feminization of the male body; embracement of taboos; women's reactions towards the undoing of gender in relation to applying and wearing make-up.

Results and critical reflections

There are at least several hundreds of these clips on YouTube. I may be underestimating! It has been and it still is a popular phenomenon in the recent years. The high number of viewers these videos attract suggest people's curiosity and desire to explore the socially taboo notions of a man wearing and/or doing make-up. While traditional stereotypes are invoked and how a man looks in make-up or his skills are mocked for fun, many of these clips are revelatory to the posters and the commenters. Some boyfriends admit they enjoyed the experience of being a make-up model, others love the artistic freedom painting their girlfriend's face gives them. Some even like how they look after. Several girlfriends were pleasantly surprised by their loved ones' talent. One interesting pattern is that of the man undoing and doing different genders during the video, changing their language, tone and gestures.

Youtubers' willingness to break the gender norms correlates with several social trends: the rise of equality between men and women, progressiveness, shrinking rates of sexism against women and men, increasing gender self-expression and acceptance of diversity.

Roleplay, gendered objects and objectified genders: Tom Ford's "Lips and Boys" lipstick campaign, 2014

The message behind the visuals for Tom Ford's cosmetic campaign is complex and somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, it builds an outlet for men to express themselves. On the other hand, it sexualizes and objectifies men in the same way women are in make-up ads. As for the lipsticks, they are fetishized into a fallic symbol of sensual masculinity, and given men's names. Still, both genders wear them with pride. We could say that each man has his signature shade in his name; the lipstick becomes one with his identity. On the other hand, women metaphorically "wear the men" on their lips, so their identity is constructed around theirs. To prove this point further, there is a lot of kissing in this advertisement between people of the opposite gender wearing the same colour.

Embracing gender transition: M.A.C.'s and Caitlyn Jenner's Lipstick in Finally free, 2016, and Caitlyn Jenner's make-up Collection, 2017

Caitlyn Jenner shocked the world with the big reveal of her transformation, in April, 2015. Once known as Bruce Jenner, an Olympic gold-medal-winning decathlete, she confessed that she always felt like a woman. She used to cross-dress and take hormone replacement medication, although not when his ex-wife Kris Jenner was around, at her request. Indeed, he was a very private person before, although he was part of the publicity hungry Kardashian-Jenner family. It seems that she has blossomed now into a confident and extroverted woman. Each step of her journey was publicly documented (even before the reveal), like a deja-vu of the "Doing gender" study by West and Zimmerman (1987). Her relatives (especially her daughters) seemed very supportive to her and they looked to have embraced Jenner's true self. Being a highly mediatized sex and gender change

(completed in January 2017), the attitude they displayed provides a positive model for the families of those that are going through the same process. However, Caitlyn confessed in 2017 (Sawyer and Jenner) that they have distanced from each other since her reveal. This shows a sad truth. Although the world has progressed as far as the gender and sexual minorities are concerned, biases and taboos are still present.

To celebrate her new life and encourage everyone to be themselves, Caitlyn created a lipstick with M.A.C. Cosmetics, a very popular company with good quality products. M.A.C. is also known for their support of women's and minorities' causes and their AIDS fund. The proceeds from selling the Finally Free lipstick went to a charity for transgenders.

As for their second collaboration, M.A.C. stated: "Caitlyn Jenner's collection continues her mission of sharing her transition with the world, championing All ages, All races and All sexes. Elegant, classic shades for lips, eyes and cheeks are beautifully suited for those who embrace life, in whatever form they choose. Specially packaged in luxurious soft-touch black and shiny gold" (M.A.C., 2017). The shades are versatile, although very feminine: not too bright pinks, peaches and reds. However, the proceeds from these will not be donated to charity; many criticized M.A.C. and Caitlyn Jenner for this.

Mass marketing postgenderism: Catrice's "Genderless" cosmetic campaign, 2018

Catrice's collection is revolutionary. An affordable European make-up company has created a collection aimed at all and any gender identities. The shades in the collection are gender-neutral: flesh pink, green, taupe and dark bordeaux. As for the packaging, it is cool steel grey, reminiscent of postgenderism and even uniformity. The female and male models are androgynous and look similar one to another. Both have short platinum blonde hair and wear subtle, neutral make-up and white shirts, grey pants or beige costumes, free of any gendered way of styling. Catrice states that they were inspired by international designers' "No Gender, No limits" credo and their demand for greater freedom. "Gender segregation is being perceived as more and more out-dated – a mind-set that requires the matching make-up! With this Limited Edition, Catrice is giving everyone the opportunity for self-realisation. Seven unique products for the eyes, lips and face create confident looks for a modern me" (Catrice, 2018).

Catrice not only embraced the inclusion of all gender identities through this collection, but they truly "de-gendered" make-up. However, the fact that this is limited edition raises one important question: Is it truly a progressive stand or just a passing marketing trend? I think that in order to make a clear stance, Catrice must make this collection permanently available. Nevertheless, "Genderless" is a bold attempt to question the status-quo of gendered make-up.

Men can do make-up, too! Instagram and YouTube male make-up gurus

Anyone who is passionate about make-up and beauty, in general, may have heard of some of the very talented and self-confident Instagram and YouTube make-up gurus.

Bretmanrock, Jistyplaven, Patrickstarrr and Mannymua733 are very popular with the female and LGTBQA public on instagram. Wayne Goss is one of the world's best make-up artists and a role-model for anyone who is interested in decorative cosmetics. He has been very active on YouTube for many years and is one of the artists whose work I follow. The constantly increasing visibility, acceptance and popularity of male and LGBTQA make-up artists is one sign of the emerging genderfluidity and postgenderism in the make-up world. It also indicates that more and more societies are positive towards a gender revolution and are letting go of some of their segregational mindsets.

I noticed this shifting attitude in my own country, also, in Romania. A few members of a Facebook group related to beauty and make-up posted pictures and videoclips of male make-up artists (one of which was around 10-12 years old), on several occasions. Most of the reactions were positive. To those women who made sexist comments, others replied with: "We are here to judge their make-up skills, not their gender and sexual identities". By asserting that, these beauty lovers further indicate that the make-up universe is heading towards a postgenderist future.

Beautiful progressiveness: Pink's "Beautiful trauma" music video, featuring Channing Tatum, 2017-2018

I watched Pink's "Beautiful Trauma" for the first time a few days before I started working on this article, on a Romanian TV music channel. I noticed it is aired quite often in my country now (as the trend dispersed from the west). I was pleasantly surprised by its interesting play on gender dynamics. The video starts with a classic 1950's scenario, in which Pink plays Ginger Hart, a housewife. Her husband, Fred Hart, is played by Hollywood actor and dancer Channing Tatum. She cooks, cleans, irons, washes the dishes and his underwear, while wearing very feminine clothing, make-up and hairstyles. In the meantime, he reads the newspaper and watches TV.

This gender segregation and inequality frustrates her; we see Ginger taking several pills through the video from her enormous supply in the cupboard. Soon after that, we learn that neither Fred identifies with the hegemonic masculinity he aptly performs. Ginger finds him hiding in the closet of her pink room, wearing her dress, gloves, bracelet and hat while looking at a ball gown. After the initial shock, Pink's character is pleasantly surprised and pulls embarrassed Fred to her make-up table. She lovingly puts bright red lipstick on his lips, to his thrill. He loves what he sees in the mirror and proceeds to perform a feminine role, while Ginger dresses up as a man, in a suit, tie and hat. They dance together, with Ginger leading Fred. He performs a delicate ballerina twirl and playfully cups his head in his hand while looking at his wife fixing her hat with a masculine attitude. I believe her support sends a strong message to the viewers about acceptance and kindness.

Then, the video switches to a scene where they are drinking and Ginger is feminine and Fred is masculine, but they seem closer than ever. After that, Ginger plays a dominatrix and is joined by a female friend, while Fred is tied up and their submissive. This breaks another stenotype about masculinity: that their sexuality must only be of a dominant nature.

Pink's "Beautiful Trauma" music video brings a refreshing perspective on gender interaction and contributes to the inclusion of men in the make-up and beauty community.

Conclusion

Freeing the make-up world of gender constraints could be of benefit to all the people involved. Breaking the norm promotes creativity and innovation, so both the cosmetic companies and their clients would enjoy new products and services.

Men who want to make a career out of this art have more opportunities than ever. Individuals of any gender should be able to express their identity through any kind of make-up, without being judged. As for when a man merely tries it on at his girlfriend's or wife's request, the experience can teach one a great deal about the amount of effort a woman is expected to invest into her appearance. Some of the reasons for it, like social pressure, may surprise him.

The growing acceptance of all genders in the decorative cosmetics world seems to be associated with and could be an effect of higher institutional and interactional equality between women and men, and between LGBTQA people and the rest. This phenomenon is most visible in the Western world, where democratic values are intensely promoted. However, some Eastern European (Romanian, for example), Middle Eastern and Eastern Asian (especially South Korean) male pioneers of make-up do exist. Indeed, gender is less and less relevant to make-up as the years go by, possibly as the socio-economic development and globalization rates increase. Further research could analyze the link between these two patterns.

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