Is Makeup Really Used for Self-Expression?
Libby Jones

A woman draws a saturated line across her lips, staining them a matte brown. Across her face, a dozen products dye her skin, her eyebrows, her eyelashes.

She has spent an hour making sure her makeup is perfect. She blinks at herself in the mirror, content with her handiwork, and feels confident enough to leave the house.

On her lunch break, she follows up a yawn with a snippy comment about how hard it is to be a woman, about how she has to wake up so early to shower, shave, blow-dry her hair and apply makeup.

Historically, makeup has taken many forms and served many purposes. It has been used to denote social status, to celebrate the dead, to look like a victim of the consumption without having to actually die.

Even within our society, the modern Western one, makeup serves many purposes. Stage and special effects (SFX) makeup transform performers and hobbyists into characters and creatures.

Globally, the makeup industry is worth about [$530 billion](#) and is "[one of the most prevalent places for women to self-start their way to big-time success.](#)"

[About 97 percent of women New England college students wear makeup](#), and all the respondents in this survey started wearing makeup before the age of 18.

In America, makeup is not only for women; it is for girls too.

Countless girls, many of whom are teenagers and many of whom are even younger, run accounts on YouTube and Instagram declaring themselves MUAs - makeup artists.

These accounts are filled with videos of makeup tutorials, reviews, and other content related to the cosmetic industry. The owners of the accounts often have partnerships with cosmetic companies to offer viewers discounts on products or tools like brushes.

In nearly every post on these accounts, the MUAs sport "full faces" of makeup.

Oftentimes these girls are celebrated for being creative, entrepreneurial and unafraid to express themselves, but the near-universal use of makeup raises the question of whether they use makeup to express themselves or to express society's expectations of them.

Every society has its own standard of what beauty looks like, but the Social Issues Research Center (SIRC) cites [media as a source](#) for the rigid, pervasive and unrealistic standards of beauty that we are exposed to every day.

Magazines, advertisements and now social media portray beauty as something that fits a mold, but is attainable.

And beauty is important.
Attractiveness is literally an advantage in society. Conventionally attractive people are more popular, more hireable and more trusted.

So when trends like the 10-Year Challenge emerge and bring swaths of people declaring their teenage or even tween-age selves "ugly" on social media for kids who probably look a lot like those "before" pictures to see, the effect on their self-esteem is going to be detrimental regardless of the intent.

All these pressures on women and girls push them to seek "solutions" at younger and younger ages and result in the armies of tween makeup gurus.

These extreme pressures also result in a culture of wearing a lot of makeup: for the top 10 video results on a Google search of "lazy makeup tutorial," an average of 11.6 products were used per video (excluding brushes and tools) and the mode number of products was also the highest at 15.

Every video in this result had the word "lazy" in the title, and many also proclaimed themselves to be "easy" or "simple," or only take five or 10 minutes. But they still all used a significant amount of products (the smallest number was seven products) and some were advertised as taking "only" 30 minutes.

Videos like these, on their own, are not some conspiracy to make women hate themselves. But they are indicative of a culture of insecurite and pressure that has taught women to be ashamed of how they look naturally.

The fact that 15 products is seen as "lazy" means that, at least to some, 15 products is viewed as a minimum.

Video	Unique product count (excludes brushes and blenders)
LAZY GIRL MAKEUP TUTORIAL!	9
LAZY "ON THE GO" 5 MINUTE MAKEUP TUTORIAL	14
My Go-To QUICK, EASY & LAZY Glam Look	Makeup Tutorial	15
LAZY Christmas Makeup Tutorial I Aylin Melisa	15
My Lazy Day Makeup Routine	7
COLLEGE/LAZY MAKEUP ROUTINE	MY 10 MINUTE MAKEUP TUTORIAL	10
EASY 5 Minute Makeup Tutorial for Work, School, or Lazy Days	12
Lazy Day Simple Makeup Tutorial	10
Lazy Day Makeup Tutorial	Quick and Easy	9
An Honest Makeup Tutorial for Lazy People	Kiki G	15
Average products: 11.6	

The "minimum" amount of makeup should be zero products.

Even makeup culture that claims to embrace the "natural" look is not about wearing less makeup or no makeup; it is only about wearing different makeup. "No-makeup makeup" and "bare-faced looks" often still entail concealer, foundation, mascara, brow products and nude lipsticks.

In advertisements, "no-makeup" spreads are still heavily Photoshopped and edited, and still don't defy beauty standards. They help tweak those standards, sure, but they don't break down the system that tells women they need to change their appearance to be accepted.

Women's insecurities are profitable - many of the most popular cosmetic products run upwards of $30 and when many women are using over a dozen products every day, loyalty to designer brands and even just the volume of product it takes to maintain this standard of femininity even at a drugstore price point add up.

Women already pay more for just about every product in life. This "pink tax" combines with the uniquely feminine experience of being expected to put on makeup if anyone outside your family (and for some women, even family members) for a devastating roadblock in the struggle for confidence, independence, and self-support.

Criticism of this system of pressures and expectations isn't well-recieved. From the large-scale outrage at celebrities daring to act against it to much more common interactions in life and online, people don't like when things they have amde themselves comfortable with are challenged.

If you post on just about any social media platform about the negative ways makeup culture affects people, especially if you're a woman, someone will make a comment they think is original and hilarious: something along the lines of "someone's just mad she has no contour game," or "sounds like somebody is bad at makeup."

Makeup is so deeply entrenched in our culture and our society that to many people, it is inconcievable that anyone would feel uncomfortable with or alienated by it. If they don't like it, these people reason, they must just be jealous of those who can do it better than them.

This phenomenon is why it's near-impossible to breach the subject of how to change makeup culture. The very people who can change it - women, en masse - are the same people who spend their entire lives being told they only have worth if they conform.

We are living in a world in which half the population is told that their natural state is dirty and lazy, and even if they spend the effort, time and money to change that, it still won't necessarily be enough to get out of the second category. Maybe 30 minutes of work is acceptably "lazy," but it is still "lazy."

Even as someone who doesn't wear makeup regularly - who makes a point to avoid it, in fact - I feel pressured to add a disclaimer that I don't hate makeup. I don't even dislike it.

What I am wary of is makeup *culture*.

Because not only is makeup culture a way of trapping women into the idea that they need to wear makeup, it is also the set of expectations that punishes women socially for doing it "wrong."

I am lucky; I have never personally felt insecure due to my lack of makeup in any situation. What I have felt insecure about are my makeup choices when I did wear makeup.

I liked the idea of bold, blue lipstick, but after I put it on and it wasn't perfect like a magazine spread, I would wipe it off and forgo it. I could never draw a perfect wing of eyeliner, so I would give up after rubbing my eyelids raw with makeup remover after a few tries.

I can't speak for every woman, but I think a significant amount of them would be more comfortable defying norms - maybe by wearing blue lipstick because they like the color, maybe by going barefaced for the first time in years - if they took the time to sit and think critically about *why* they wear makeup.

Ultimately, the trap of conforming to expectations is so hard to escape specifically because people are given the illusion of choice - if enough women *believe* they are choosing to wear makeup, then they provide an extra level of pressure on those who know they don't really want to take the time to "put on their face."

Makeup is, conceptually, a lot of fun. It's an opportunity to turn your own face, your own body, into a piece of art to express your style and your emotions.

In practice, however, makeup is just a new bullet point on a rigid standard, and no matter how much the specific styles of makeup change, unless we take the time to think critically about who profits from our feelings about our bodies, our faces and our makeup habits, it will continue to be a bastion of insecurity and pressure on women.

Spending an hour every morning putting on makeup may or may not be a worthwhile use of time to you.

But taking an hour one time to decide for yourself whether it is - and more importantly, *how* it is - is not only a worthwhile use of time to you as an individual but also as a member of a society that should give women - and men, and everyone in between and outside that binary - a real choice, not just the illusion of one.

Editorial analysis - Jessica Valenti (The Guardian)

Jessica Valenti is an author and editorial columnist who writes about feminism, politics, and culture and has a column called "The week in patriarchy." Her style combines emotionally appealing examples of how issues affect specific people and logically appealing trends and statistics. Valenti also uses varying graf lengths to emphasize certain points or explain and analyze certain things in more detail. Using sentence and paragraph structure is one of my favorite ways to create emphasis. A stylistic element that is common among editorialists because it makes for more convincing writing is ending with a call to action. Valenti's calls to action call for cultural analysis and self-reflection to drive change.