

## CONSUMER BEAUTY WORK: PHENOMENON AND PRACTICES

What is consumer beauty work and what are the motivations that drive beauty work practices?

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**Abstract**

For many people, their appearance is the most obvious thing with which they identify themselves. In today's postmodern society, consumers are endlessly searching their self-identity through different consumption practices, such as improving their appearance through beauty work. Beauty work can be defined as altering and improving one's appearance with different products and consumption practices, such as applying cosmetics, tanning and exercising.

Often, engaging in beauty work offers many individual and institutional rewards, such as feeling more confident, authentic and liberated, and increasing social and socioeconomic power by looking more attractive. On the other hand, there lies a paradox of power in beauty work - by internalizing advertising discourses that possess oppressive gender bias toward female inferiority and objectification and then engaging in beauty work, consumers legitimize power hierarchies within society. Beauty work can also subject consumers to judgment and poor self-esteem.

From the marketer's perspective, it's increasingly important to understand consumers' identity projects, practices and their underlying motivations in the contemporary consumer culture, where self-identity, individuality and freedom and the expression of these qualities through beauty is essential. The beauty industry also makes up a significant part of the world economy (636 billion US dollars in 2022). Building on the sociological notion that beauty is a social construct, this thesis reviews literature on consumers' beauty work and aims to identify the motivations that drive it.

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**Keywords** beauty work, cosmetics consumption, beauty consumption, identity work, identity projects, motivations, beauty, cosmetics

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# 1. Introduction

For many people, their appearance is the most obvious thing with which they identify themselves. In today's postmodern society, consumers are endlessly searching their self-identity through different consumption practices (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), such as improving their appearance through beauty work (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). Beauty work can be defined as altering and improving one's appearance with different products and consumption practices, such as applying cosmetics, tanning and exercising (Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Smith et al, 2021).

Often, engaging in beauty work offers many individual and institutional rewards, such as feeling more confident, authentic and liberated, and increasing social and socioeconomic power by looking more attractive (Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Schouten, 1991; Madan et al, 2018). On the other hand, there lies a paradox of power in beauty work - by internalizing advertising discourses that possess oppressive gender bias toward female inferiority and objectification and then engaging in beauty work, consumers legitimize power hierarchies within society (McCabe, 2018). Beauty work can also subject consumers to judgment and poor self-esteem (Samper et al, 2018).

All identity work, including beauty work, is shaped by the influence of social categories, such as gender, class, occupation and race, and by the dilemmas of the self, such as feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Larsen and Patterson, 2018). In addition, culture, norms and self-concept affect consumers' beauty work practices significantly (Madan et al, 2018). This thesis mainly builds on the sociological recognition that beauty is a social construct (Kwan and Trautner, 2009), and beauty work is identity formation through consumption practices (Vacker and Key, 1993), which usually happens inside culturally and socially prescribed ideals and norms.

The beauty industry makes up a significant part of the world economy, and billions of people aspire to look beautiful every day. It is estimated that the world market for beauty and personal care is worth around 639 billion US dollars in 2022 (Peruzzi, 2022), and the market is expected to grow each year. From the marketer's perspective, it's increasingly important to understand consumers' identity projects, practices and their underlying motivations in the contemporary consumer culture, where self-identity, individuality and freedom and the

expression of these qualities through beauty is essential (Larsen and Patterson, 2018). Understanding consumers' consumption practices, which are shaped by identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), can contribute to making more strategic and ethical marketing decisions.

This thesis reviews literature on consumers' beauty work. Beauty work has been widely studied during the past decades in sociology and feminism fields (e.g. Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Rudd, 1997; Wolf, 1991). In recent years, the term beauty work has started to appear also in consumer research context (e.g. Samper et al, 2018; Reisenwitz, 2021; Smith et al, 2021). Although there are a handful of consumer research studies on beauty marketing and consumers, they all address beauty work practices with different terms. As the research on consumer identity projects and beauty work increases, it is significant to identify the ongoing discourses and themes and find the underlying motivations for consumers engaging in beauty work to understand consumers' purchase decisions. Therefore, this thesis is guided by the following research question:

*“What is consumer beauty work and what are the motivations that drive beauty work practices?”*

This literature review adapted the search method described by Hungara and Nobre (2020). First, articles published in journals with an ABS ranking of 3 or higher were selected as major journals for this thesis. The search for articles began by doing an EBSCO search, after which articles were included or excluded based on relevancy. The articles were mainly searched from EBSCO Business Source Complete and Sage Journals databases, but also from Emerald Insight and Taylor & Francis Online databases. The search started with search words such as “beauty and consumption” and “beauty work”, and then the search was limited to only peer-reviewed journal articles. Most of the main journals that were selected were from major consumer research journals, such as Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Culture and Journal of Consumer Psychology. Some journals with an ABS ranking below 3 were also selected to support the main journal articles. In addition, some journal articles from the sociology and psychology fields were chosen to support the findings, and a few handbooks by academic publishers. The thesis reviewed a total of 63 peer-reviewed journal articles.

The thesis is structured as follows: First, the thesis will present some common definitions of beauty, introduce a theory of commodified beauty, and then conceptualize the term beauty work. The thesis will also discuss beauty ideals and the beauty industry in the same chapter. Next, the thesis will discuss different beauty work practices and the motivations behind them based on empirical evidence, and identify common themes in the reviewed literature. At the end, the thesis will draw general conclusions, discuss the topics of the thesis and provide suggestions for future research.

## 2. Beauty and consumer beauty work

### 2.1 Beauty as a concept

Understanding beauty is a very complicated task (Jessop, 1932) and it requires at least some philosophical investigation (Vacker and Key, 1993) to define it. Beauty has fascinated researchers for thousands of years, and there are many philosophical discussions attempting to define what beauty means. Beauty has also been studied in various different contexts, such as biology, psychology, sociology, ethics and cultural and political contexts. For example, Grammer et al (2003) argue that human beauty standards reflect our evolutionary past and emphasize the role of health assessment in mate choice by analyzing the attractiveness of visual characters of the face and the body, but also of vocal and olfactory signals. On the other hand, feminist theorist Wolf (1991) claims that beauty and beauty ideals are cultural and oppressive to women and therefore also a political and feminist issue.

**Figure 1** Philosophical discussions of issues pertaining to beauty.\*

Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Beauty as an aspect of nature (Aristotle)</li> <li>● The form of beauty (Plato)</li> <li>● Transcendental aesthetic (Kant, 1790)</li> <li>● Qualities of beauty (Weiss, 1961)</li> <li>● The objectivity of beauty (Kovach, 1974)</li> </ul>
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number and magnitude of beauty (Aristotle)</li> <li>● The perception of beauty (Kant, 1790)</li> <li>● Mathematics of beauty (Hay, 1856)</li> <li>● Senses of beauty (Santayana, 1896)</li> <li>● Beauty as intuition (Carritt, 1914)</li> <li>● Experience of beauty (Dewey, 1932)</li> </ul>
Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Beauty as subjective (Hume, 1757; Kant, 1790)</li> <li>● Beauty as objective (Kovach, 1974)</li> </ul>
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The morality of beauty (Plato)</li> <li>● The relation of beauty to the good (Kant, 1790)</li> <li>● Beauty and human freedom (Kallen, 1942)</li> </ul>
Cultural/political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Beauty and the ideal state (Plato)</li> <li>● Beauty and education (Schiller, 1795)</li> <li>● Beauty and the free society (Kallen, 1942)</li> <li>● The relevance of beauty (Gadamer, 1986)</li> <li>● Beauty and the police state (Caygill, 1989)</li> <li>● Consumer aesthetics (Holbrook, 1987a)</li> <li>● "Pagan" beauty (Paglia, 1991)</li> <li>● The myth of beauty (Wolf, 1991)</li> <li>● Beauty and anarchy (Vacker, 1994)</li> </ul>
Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Man-made beauty (Aquinas)</li> <li>● Beauty and utility (Kallen, 1942)</li> <li>● Beauty and product design (Calkins, 1927)</li> </ul>

\*This list is not meant to be all inclusive. Simply, the purpose of this list is to note that the topic of beauty has been discussed from a variety of perspectives relating to a multiplicity of issues. Many of the issues pertaining to contemporary discussions of beauty are not new and it might behoove us to consider some of the insights of both past and current thinkers. The interested reader is encouraged to sample some of this literature.

**Figure 1:** *Some of the philosophical discussions of issues pertaining to beauty.* (Vacker and Key, 1993, p. 3)

The main discussion about beauty revolves around whether beauty is in the eye of the beholder - meaning if beauty is subjective or objective (Moore, 1942). Kant argued that we cannot say or define in logical and conceptual terms what beauty actually is (Bernard, 1914). He observed that beauty is perceived in our consciousness and something we feel and therefore subjective. On the other hand, the notion that beauty is objective has its roots in Aristotle's nominalism - Aristotle thought that essences were in things or objects. However, this notion of beauty is also questionable because it ultimately leads to subjectivism (Vacker and Key, 1993).

Additionally, even though there are many philosophical theories explaining the subjective and objective nature of beauty, it can be concluded that beauty is also the actualization of a potential or a universal ideal (Vacker, 1993) - for example, some of the same ideas of beauty exist across cultures, and there are beauty ideals within cultures (Madan et al, 2018). Therefore, we can assume that there are similarities in beauty and its expression across cultures.

In most cultures, beauty has been viewed as an essential part of womanhood (Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, 2013), and there are some external features that have been prevalent beauty ideals for women for millenia (Taran, 2015). For example, pale smooth skin and straight light hair have long been associated with beauty and wealth (Mady et al, 2022; Redmond, 2003). These eurocentric beauty standards are recognized to enforce racial discrimination and perpetuate social categories (Mady et al, 2022). Also, symmetry and the golden ratio of a face has been an appreciated feature for millennia in western countries (Taran, 2015) and research shows that average faces are seen as more attractive (Langlois and Roggman, 1990).

Thinness is also widely idealized in contemporary popular media. Thinness is portrayed as beautiful, desirable, and valuable, and it transfers success onto a wide range of life goals for women who fit the ideal (Redmond, 2003). In addition, in the modern consumer culture, youthfulness is associated with beauty and health and it is urged to combat aging by time-consuming body maintenance methods - with the help of cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries (Featherstone, 1982).



Although some external features have long been beauty ideals, the trends also change significantly over the years (Peruzzi, 2022). In marketing literature, women's beauty ideals are often conceptualized as cultural constructions orchestrated by marketers via advertising and visual communication (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Modern institutions of advertising, retailing, and entertainment now produce different notions of beauty that change from year to year, which places stress upon women to conform to the beauty ideals. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, women's bodies were expected to look more defined, but the current trend encourages women toward slenderization (Mazur, 1986).

## 2.2 Commodified beauty

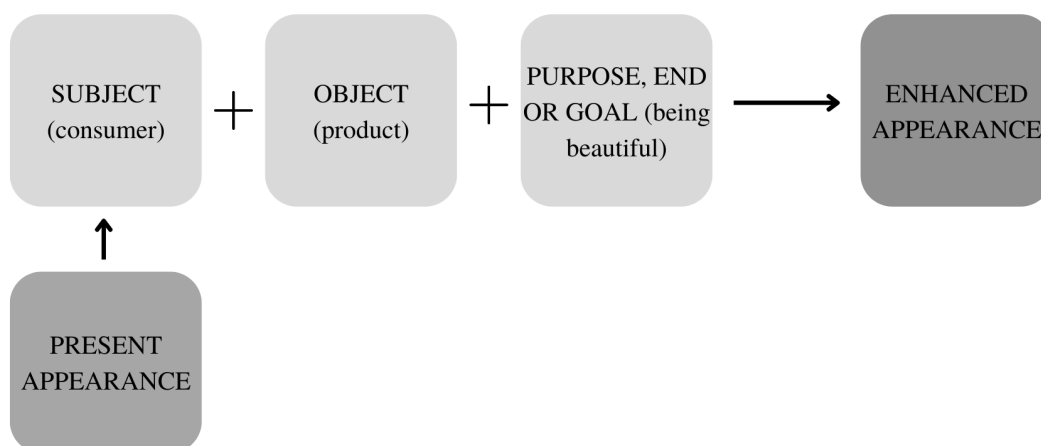
Taran (2015) explains that beauty marketing began in the late 19th century when beauty started to democratize and commodify. In ancient Egypt, beauty regimes served as part of religious rituals and long after that the use of cosmetics was an expression of status. Advertising and the widening circulation of magazines drove the democratization of beauty products in the 19th century and once home-made or artisanal, but now industrially manufactured beauty products found their way to boutiques and salons and the scene was set for the creation of the first global beauty brands (Taran, 2015). The beauty industry continued to develop along with the development of media - Taran (2015) argues that Hollywood movies normalized making up from a sin into a glamorous luxury and the TV finally turned it into a daily habit and an essential component of modern womanhood, making it also a symbol of liberty for women. On the other hand, Peiss (1998) claims that since the 1920s, beauty companies started to emphasize makeup as a way of increasing women's attractiveness to men and to be attractive for the male gaze.

Nowadays, the beauty industry covers a wide variety of products and services that include skin care, color cosmetics and hair care products, fragrances, beauty appliances and salon and spa services. It is estimated that the world market for beauty and personal care is worth around 639 billion US dollars in 2022 (Peruzzi, 2022) and the market is expected to grow significantly each year.

Vacker and Key (1993) also suggest a theory that today's beauty is commodified, and according to the theory, understanding beauty usually requires an object, a subject, and a purpose or an end. Commodities are produced for the subject, which in this case is the

consumer who is also the beholder of the beauty, and then the commodities are bought and consumed by subjects for the purpose of being beheld as a beauty object. In other words, consumers aspire to pursue beauty through consuming commodities as objects. Also, the beholder's beauty requires a purpose, end or goal, for which things can be beautiful (Vacker and Key, 1993). For example, one does not purchase a hairbrush for its intrinsic value, but the commodity can only be pursued as beautiful when it actualizes its purpose by enhancing the subject's beauty. And it is the purpose that gives a functional aspect to beauty.

It's also argued that the fundamental function of beauty commodities is to enable the consumer to move from a present state of affairs, an existing or anticipated state of beauty deficiency, to a future state of affairs involving more beauty or continued beauty (Vacker and Key, 1993).



**Figure 2:** *Commodified beauty according to Vacker and Key's theory (1993).*

The figure shows how consumers aspire to pursue beauty through consuming commodities as objects in order to fulfill the goal of being beautiful. Consumption, which requires the subject, object and the goal, helps the consumer to move from the present state of beauty to a future state of affairs including more beauty.

### 2.3 Conceptualization of beauty work

As discovered in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which is one of the most predominant marketing theories, we are living in an increasingly postmodern society (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Continuous uncertainty, not committing to certain ideologies and communities for too long, and the fragmenting nature of lifestyles and society are all connected to enhancing individuality and personality. This also means that consumers are

searching for their self-identity through different consumption practices, as consumption can be seen as a way to build identity, culture, sociality and lifestyle (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

It is an inescapable fact of modern life that our possessions define and remind us of what we are (Belk, 1998). We use material possessions to seek happiness and other feelings, and remind us of our accomplishments and relationships to other people. This interlinking of possessions and identity can also be called the *extended self* (Belk, 1988). There is also empirical evidence for how consumers construct identity narratives through possessions, and how these narratives include conflicts and contradictions (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005). Besides operating on an individual level, the extended self operates on a collective level involving family, group, subcultural and national identities. In other words, similar consumption habits connect people. Ricoeur (1984, 1992) also suggests that people require a narrative identity for themselves in order to make time human and socially shared. Narrative identities help us make sense of ourselves and our lives by creating stories we can or cannot tell.

The term identity work is widely used within the context of consumer identity projects and the interlinking of possessions and identity (e.g. Larsen and Patterson, 2018; Arnould and Thompson, 2005) - it also signifies how consumption practices help to shape identities and lifestyle. In academic literature, many terms are used to describe beauty related identity work - these terms include, for instance, beauty work, appearance work, appearance management, beauty labor and beauty management. In sociology related beauty studies, Gimlin (2003, 2007), uses the term “body work” as an umbrella term for appearance work, body labor, emotion management and body-making through work. Appearance work is a subcategory that Gimlin (2003, 2007) defines as management and modification of one's own looks and physical wellness, which comes close to the term beauty work. Also, beauty work and beauty labor are narrower terms used in sociology that reflect appearance and beauty practices performed on oneself and on others, respectively (see Roth and Neil, 2006; Kwan and Trautner, 2009). In sociology, beauty work is also defined as the beauty practices that elicit certain benefits within a social hierarchy (Kwan and Trautner, 2009).

The term beauty work has also started to appear in marketing research context in recent years (e.g. Reisenwitz, 2021; Samper et al, 2018; Smith et al, 2021). Although the term beauty work has not been widely used in marketing context, in this thesis, the term “beauty work” is

used the most because it best describes the phenomenon; work is defined as a continuous, time-consuming, rewarding and wearing activity that involves mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or a result.

In marketing and consumer research context, beauty work can be defined as enhancing one's appearance through consumption of beauty commodities and services sold by companies that operate in the beauty industry (Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Reisenwitz, 2021; Samper et al, 2018; Smith et al, 2021). As previously stated, the beauty industry covers a wide variety of products and services such as skin care, color cosmetics and hair care products, fragrances, beauty appliances and salon and spa services (Petruzzi, 2022). Besides being identity work and part of our narrative identities, beauty practices are also thought to be transformative rituals or rites of passage (McCabe, 2020; Schouten; 1991), which we will discuss in detail later. This thesis mainly builds on the sociological notion that beauty is a social construct (Kwan and Trautner, 2009), and beauty work is identity formation through consumption practices (Vacker and Key, 1993), which usually happens inside culturally and socially prescribed ideals and norms.

Because beauty is often thought to be an essential part of womanhood (Eckert and McConnell, 2013) and therefore beauty work is strongly gendered, most of the research focuses on women's beauty work practices. Therefore, this thesis mainly reviews literature on women's beauty work, in spite of a few examples that demonstrate how beauty work is performed among men. Research also shows that beauty work can be a means to raise status and compensate for lacking power, which might partially explain its popularity among women because women are socially oppressed (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008; Pyrah, 2021).

However, beauty work as a concept is not and should not be limited to any gender because beauty can be sought for by any individual. This theme will be explored in the last chapter of this thesis. The next chapter will take a look at some of the general motivations that are proposed to drive consumers' beauty work practices.

### **3. Motivations for beauty work practices**

This chapter introduces both theories and empirical evidence for consumer beauty work practices and tries to identify the main motivations that drive them, based on the reviewed literature. Drawing from the widely known sociological notion that beauty, like gender, is socially constructed (e.g. Butler, 1990; Rudd, 1997), the chapter will introduce different social rewards and judgments that influence consumer beauty work, and how beauty can be used as social capital. The chapter will also explore how women negotiate authentic beauty, and also how beauty can be a transformative ritual to restore one's self-concept. Resistance and the paradoxical nature of beauty work's empowerment will also be discussed.

#### **3.1 Social rewards and judgment**

Historically, people have undergone extreme discomfort, pain and risk in order to conform to cultural beauty standards. Examples of these extreme rituals of beauty include the binding and permanent deformation of the bones of the feet or the cranium (Brain, 1979; Kunzle, 1989; Polhemus, 1978), painful constriction of the waist and torso (Cooley, 1866), tattooing (Polhemus, 1978; Sanders, 1989), and ritual body scarification (Polhemus, 1978). Each of these means of extreme beauty work have been accepted and encouraged in its respective culture (Schouten, 1991).

It could be said that the modern equivalent of extreme beautification in the western countries is cosmetic surgery, which is also painful and possesses many risks. All of these extreme examples highlight the lengths to which people are willing to go in order to look beautiful in their culture. However, most people still stick to more mundane practices of beauty.

Sociology research shows that there are several social rewards for looking attractive in one's respective culture. The social benefits that come with looking attractive provide strong incentive for consumers to participate in beauty work practices (Kwan and Trautner, 2009) - even extreme ones. For example, physically attractive people are assumed to have more socially desirable personality traits (Dion, Berscheid and Walster, 1972; Langlois et al, 2000), possess greater interpersonal influence (Dion and Stein, 1978), and they can even earn higher wages (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994; Landy and Sigall 1974; Samper et al, 2018).

Bourdieu's theory (1986) about cultural and social capital also supports the idea that appearance can manifest power in social settings.

Schouten (1991) introduced the term marketing character, originally borrowed from Fromm (1947, 1976), to indicate that bodily appearance could be used as an asset in social relationships. People might increase their own socioeconomic value by managing their lives as commodities - for example, undergoing plastic surgery can improve the "market value" of a person and hence improve their performance in key social roles. In this case, beauty work could also be defined as impression management and conscious self-presentation. For instance, Schouten (1991) found that aesthetic surgery provided satisfactory results for his informants because they found their social role performances improved and heightened self-awareness of appearance led to feeling more confident.

While beauty ideals depend on the culture, culture is recognized to impact the pursuit of beauty. Madan et al (2018) discovered that in Eastern cultures, people are more likely to use beauty-enhancing products than in Western cultures. This use is driven by the tendency to conform to societal norms, which in turn leads to increased self-discrepancy. Beauty work practices then help minimize this discrepancy (Madan et al, 2018). Furthermore, El Jurdi and Smith (2018) discovered how national identity influences how people conceptualize and pursue beauty, and how they interpret beauty in media and pop culture through mirroring. The study revealed that people mirrored their views of beauty by conforming to the dominant beauty consumer culture, identifying by following the styles and practices of known individuals in the larger social environment, and by subverting to the dominant beauty practices by creating their own meanings of beauty. In any case, national identity was mirrored in all the acts in the pursuit and construction of personal beauty ideals.

In most cultures, performing as a woman often includes beauty work (Butler, 1990; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Women are instructed and praised for engaging in beauty work that makes them desirable in the heterosexual market: diets, hairstyling, shaving legs, makeup and cosmetics are all extensions of the self driven by the expected heterosexual desire (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Overall, learning to be a woman involves learning to look and act in a certain way. However, gender is not the only aspect of social identity that influences how to look and act: class, age, ethnicity and race all interact with appearance and gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Even though engaging in beauty work can bring many individual and institutional rewards, consumer research also shows that consumers judge women who engage in certain types of beauty work as possessing poorer moral character (Samper et al, 2018). However, these judgments occur only for effortful beauty work that is perceived as transformative (significantly appearance-altering) and transient (lasting relatively short time). For example, cosmetics and tanning receive more judgmental comments and observations than skincare or exercise - putting high effort into one's beauty signals misrepresenting one's true self, which is considered as a negative trait (Samper et al, 2018).

People who view high effort beauty work as misrepresentation of the true self also show lower willingness to purchase higher-effort beauty products. In addition, the attractiveness of the woman performing the beauty work, and whether the effort is attributed to external norms or causes, affect the eliciting of moral judgments (Samper et al, 2018). For instance, if the beauty work was performed by a more attractive woman, the high-effort beauty work was seen as less discrepant from her true self. The study by Samper et al (2018) successfully sheds light on why effortful cosmetic use is perceived negatively, yet high-effort products are commercially successful.

Overall, human beauty is recognized to be a cultural construct that involves both facial and body attractiveness (e.g. Rudd, 1997), and the search for beauty often happens inside of the culturally prescribed ideals to avoid judgment and to fit in.

### 3.2 Rites of passage to restore self-concept

Self-concept and beauty work have been a popular topic in both social psychology and consumer research and research shows that beauty work can provide a sense of enhanced self-concept and self-esteem for consumers (Schouten, 1991). On the other hand, there is both correlational and causal evidence for the link between low self-concept clarity and beauty work, which is mediated by public self-consciousness (Madan et al, 2018). It is also proven that low self-concept clarity increases appearance management only when it's perceived to be socially acceptable (Wang and Yu, 2022; Madan et al, 2018). However, beauty work can often serve as a personal rite of passage to restore harmony to an incongruous, ambiguous, or unsatisfying self-concept, especially in times of interpersonal or intrapersonal life changes

and role transitions (Schouten, 1991). There is also socio psychological evidence to suggest that the ritualized acts of purchasing and using cosmetics can enhance personal identity construction and give a stronger sense of cultural power and social agency in a postmodern world (Rudd, 1997).

Consumer researchers have stated that the ritual construct has great potential for interpreting many aspects of different consumption phenomena (Rook, 1985). Many researchers note that women's beauty practices could be viewed as transformative rituals, often to improve one's self-concept (Gentina, Palan and Fosse-Gomez, 2012; McCabe, 2020; Rudd, 1997; Schouten, 1991). A ritual is defined as a set of episodic behavioral events that occur in a certain, fixed sequence, which is repeated in the same sequence over time and evokes a certain behavioral and emotional response (Rook, 1985). Some also define a ritual as a both precise body movement and a symbolic vehicle that reproduces social relations that reveal the effects of power (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990).

Schouten (1991) notes that rituals and symbolic consumption can be critical for personal transitions and can be catalysts for significant life changes of individuals. For instance, Gentina, Palan and Fosse-Gomez's study (2012) indicated that teenage girls use cosmetics as a ritual activity symbolizing the desire for emotional autonomy and the shift from parental influence to peer influence, during the role transition from childhood to adulthood. The study also suggested that teenage girls needed to be rebellious and to play and experiment with cosmetics in a location secluded from adults, which has also great implications for the marketer. Liu, Keeling and Hogg (2012) also note that cosmetics use can function as a coping mechanism, responding to changes occurring at different stages of life. Beauty work aids to create, re-define and defend aspects of self, and it can even be a means of strategically manipulating and attacking others.

It is also known that women's emotional state changes during makeup rituals from feeling unprepared and disheveled to feeling more confident, beautiful, happy and prepared for upcoming social events (McCabe, 2020). On the occasion when women who usually wear makeup don't use makeup, they feel uncomfortable, self-conscious and embarrassed about themselves more easily. Besides doing beauty work before a social activity, touch-ups, and changes throughout the day are also ways to add energy and awaken the self - both externally in appearance and internally in renewed spirit, and to prepare for the next social encounter



(McCabe, 2020). Some take the discussion about women's makeup practices further and argue that makeup and beauty work functions as "camouflage" for people who are more anxious, defensive, and unstable, and as "seduction" for those who are more sociable, assertive and extroverted (Korichi et al, 2008). It is also proven that beauty work is connected to sexuality, fantasies and anticipation of romance and romantic encounters (Brown, Doherty, and Clarke, 1998; Holliday and Cairnie, 2007; Rook, 1985).

In addition, consumers' beauty work rituals serve as a way to connect their inner and outer beauty together. Women's own embodied experience emphasizes inner worth that connects internal feelings with external self (McCabe et al, 2020). After interviewing consumers who had undergone cosmetic surgery, Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer (2002) found that almost all the interviewees argued almost identically as follows: "When they look good, they radiate self-esteem. But if they are negatively preoccupied with their physical appearance and feel that they look unattractive, they cannot convey a positive impression of their inner self, either. And this inner self, they insist, is still what matters" (Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer, 2002; p. 9). Schouten (1991) also found that cosmetic surgery is a personal rite of passage to restore harmony to an incongruous, ambiguous, or unsatisfying self-concept, especially during times of significant life changes and role transitions, such as career developments or changes in interpersonal relationships. It is also a rite of passage in order to reintegrate self-concept by feeling more comfortable in the new social role, and a catalyst for further self-change.

McCabe et al (2020) found that experimenting routinely with different cosmetic products and styles is a means for women to negotiate authenticity and an attempt to connect inner and outer beauty together. However, the experimentation happens within self-circumscribed boundaries and within societal norms. All women have personal limits beyond which experiments are seen as inappropriate and the authentic self does not extend beyond the comfort zone. Experimentation serves as a way to renew identity and stabilize identity through testing the boundaries of the authentic self (McCabe et al, 2020).

Furthermore, El Jurdi and Smith (2018) discovered that when negotiating an authentic self or identity, people had beauty "rules" that encompassed opposite binary notions of beauty: real vs fake, natural vs unnatural, inner vs outer, character vs "looks". To many research

participants, real beauty signified an authentic self, and to look authentic and be the true self, one must disdain everything fake.

Overall, rituals serve as key mediators between practices, feelings and social norms and discourses. For women, beauty work is a personal rite of passage that connects inner and outer beauty, and afterwards, the heightened moments of self-awareness lead to feeling more confident, energized and prepared for social events. In addition, beauty rituals are also a way to negotiate an authentic self. However, engaging in beauty work is a reflexive agent that paradoxically provides both a source of self-confidence and identity formation, yet it fosters judgment of appearance against them (McCabe et al, 2020), which we will explore in the next chapter.

### 3.3 Empowerment

Bourdieu's theory (1986) about cultural and social capital suggests that appearance can manifest power in social settings. To many people, beauty work can be a form of taking control and raising power in social settings. Beauty work can serve as a means to raise status and compensate for lacking power, which might partly explain its popularity among women and marginalized, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008; Pyrah, 2021). Studies have found that the sociological and psychological sense of power significantly shapes consumption choices - for example, both willingness to pay more and to acquire status-related products increase in low-power consumers (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008).

It is also suggested that when personal control is threatened, consumers prefer logos and branded products, and environments that are tangibly or intangibly bounded over those that are unbounded (Cutright, 2012). Schouten (1991) argues that plastic surgery, a more extreme form of beauty work, can be an intrinsically rewarding form of taking control over body and emotions. It can also be used as a means to increase control over the emotions of other people. Like the ownership of some objects allow us to maintain and express power and control in relationships, so can the ownership and control of one's own appearance.

While beauty work can provide feelings of power, it is also argued to sustain power hierarchies in society (Wolf, 1991; McCabe et al, 2020). To some extent, women have internalized many beauty advertising discourses - yet without fully yielding to them or resisting them. Rather, women use advertising discourses in their own beauty work rituals for creating confidence and to prepare themselves for engagement in the world (McCabe et al, 2020) by conforming, identifying and subverting to the prevalent norms in their own way (Smith, 2018). It is also a known fact in marketing that self-expression enhances the perceived authenticity and public promotion of beauty work, which shows in modern cosmetics advertising (Smith et al, 2021). On the other hand, the advertising discourses often promote gender inequality and sustain it as an ideological force in our society. Overall, beauty rituals act as producers and legitimizers of power hierarchies in society, which makes beauty work inherently paradoxical (McCabe et al, 2020). It has also been proven that exposure to advertising with highly attractive models increases comparison standards for physical attractiveness (Martin and Kennedy, 1993).

It seems that women rely on beauty work for self-confidence and authenticity, even if it both judges and liberates them. Women as consumers seem to accept the advertising discourses of beauty even though they assume a gender bias toward female inferiority and objectification of women's bodies (McCabe et al, 2020; Wolf, 1991).

There is a handful of empirical evidence supporting the idea that beauty work is a paradox of power. For example, Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer (2002) conducted research interviewing consumers who had undergone cosmetic surgery. They found out that many of the interviewees' answers were somewhat contradictory: many claimed undergoing cosmetic surgery for themselves, and not to please others. However, at the same time they said that they wanted surgery to feel more in control, to battle social pressure and feelings of inadequacy, and to have better self-esteem. Perhaps the informants did not realize the paradoxicality of their claims or they would prefer not to say it so directly, because it conflicts with the widespread postmodern ideal of self-determination and independence (Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer, 2002).

Feminist studies also recognize that beauty work is both liberating and oppressive to women. Wolf (1990) argues that our all-pervading emphasis on the importance of female beauty entraps women in the ceaseless pursuit of a physical ideal of women at home, at work, in the

media and in public life, and therefore beauty work is an oppressive and destructive function in society. Wolf (1990) claims that the prevailing beauty standards are merely symbols of the female behavior that a period considers desirable, and that beauty standards are actually describing behavior, not appearance. Wolf (1990) also suggests that beauty is a currency and belief system keeping male dominance and patriarchy intact.

Along with promoting gender inequality, the dominant beauty ideals also sustain racial discrimination (Bryant, 2019), discrimination towards different shaped and sized bodies (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013; Harju and Huovinen, 2015) and towards the LGBTQ+ community (Henrichs-Beck, Szymanski, Feltman and Batchelor, 2015). However, the current consumer research literature fails to notice this, which creates a significant research gap.

Overall, while beauty work can be a form of taking control and increasing social power, the dominant beauty ideals hold immense amounts of power over consumers. In the next chapter, the thesis will explore how consumers oppose the dominant beauty ideals.

### 3.4 Resistance

As noted, in marketing literature, women's beauty ideals are often conceptualized as cultural constructions orchestrated by marketers via advertising and visual communication (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Redmond (2003) argues that the idealized versions of femininity are unrealistic, oppressive, and even deathly for women - women are instructed to look natural yet at the same time they are told that their bodies have to be worked on, manufactured, dieted and beautified to become this ideal.

In spite of that, not all people aspire to fit into the dominant ideals of beauty. In the sociology field, there is a handful of research showcasing resistance to normative beauty practices. For example, Butler (1990) introduces how drag is a means of subverting normative constructions of sex and gender, creating "gender trouble". Resistance to the ideals of thinness are also prevalent, which Lebesco (2001) calls "queering corpulent bodies/politics" that resist the equation of fat with ugliness. Some also argue that cosmetic surgery is a tool to resist dominant patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty by looking more artificial (Kwan and Trautner, 2009).

Resistance has also been studied in consumer research context. El Jurdi and Smith (2018) discovered that while people mirror their views of beauty and negotiate an authentic self through conforming to the dominant beauty consumer culture, they also do it by subverting to the dominant beauty practices by creating their own meanings of beauty.

Gurrieri and Cherrier's (2013) inquiry focuses on female "fat activists" who battle for bodily acceptance via posting fashion content online. These "fat activists" or "fatshionistas" subvert to the idea that fat can't be fashionable or beautiful, and they critique embodied beauty ideals and aim to promote positive body image for all sizes and greater visibility for their experiences and representations of fatness (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Fatshionistas aim to renegotiate cultural beauty ideals through three performative acts - coming out as fat, mobilizing fat citizenship and flaunting fat. However, the representation of fat women does not signify an anti-consumerist, anti-materialistic, philosophical or spiritual approach to beauty - rather, it was about creating more acceptance and visibility for different bodies and that way renegotiating the cultural notions of beauty (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013).

Harju and Huovinen (2015) found that fatshionistas resist and widen the norms of femininity through four different performative practices, which include destigmatization, reappropriation, communality, and mimicry. All the performative practices were found to display skillful appropriation, manipulation and negotiation of existing cultural norms surrounding gender, fashion and the market. Harju and Huovinen (2015) also pointed out that the performative acts of identity were broadly defined as either similarity-seeking or diversity-assertive tactics - for instance, through destigmatization of fat bodies, fatshionistas opposed the dominant feminine beauty ideals. On the other hand, fatshionistas sought for similarity via relying on the fatshionista community, and mimicking other community members. The study underlined that while some may subvert to dominant norms in resistant ways, they still rely on their community norms.

The body can also act as a signifier of an alternative gender or sexual identity and therefore resist prevalent norms. Holliday and Cairnie (2007) found that men's cosmetic surgery could be a way to resist hegemonic masculinities, even though most men undergoing cosmetic surgery wanted to reinforce their masculinity and fit into the heteronormative ideals. They discovered that, for instance, gay people may want to conform to the norms of their gay

community and that way resist the dominant ideologies of the heteronormatively masculine beauty ideals. In the gay community, masculinity and femininity were both accepted for men as well as the fluidity of beauty and the body and therefore challenging the traditional ideals of beauty (Holliday and Cairnie, 2007).

It is intriguing that while resistance is prevalent, people seem to rely on the support of their subculture, where they receive acceptance. In the end, even resistance can be normative in a way. In conclusion, all resistance practices display skillful negotiation of existing cultural discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and beauty.

## 4. Summary and discussion

This thesis has reviewed literature on consumers' beauty work, especially the embodied experiences of women, since beauty is strongly gendered and traditionally viewed as an essential part of womanhood in western cultures. The thesis has explored the phenomenon of consumer beauty work and the motivations that drive beauty work practices through reviewing 63 research articles.

Postmodernity has highlighted the importance of free will and beauty has become part of women's liberation and *expression of one's true identity* (McCabe et al, 2020). Nowadays, beauty is expressed through the consumption of goods and services produced by companies that operate in the beauty industry - in other words, *beauty is commodified* for the most part (Vacker and Key, 1993). The term beauty work helps us to describe and understand this phenomenon better.

This thesis has reviewed different motivations that drive the consumption of beauty products and services, and found that partaking in beauty work is socially insinuated and encouraged in many contexts. The paper has also reviewed literature through the sociological presumption that beauty is a *social construct* (Rudd, 1997), and applied consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) to indicate that beauty work is *identity formation* through identity work which is enabled by consumption (Vacker and Key, 1993).

There are countless social benefits for looking beautiful that incite consumers to partake in beauty work that *adheres to cultural norms* (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). On the other hand, women often face judgment for their appearance, especially if the beauty work seems to misrepresent one's true self (Samper et al, 2018). Beauty work that is seen as misrepresentation of one's true or authentic self is often both *transformative* and *transient* - meaning that it significantly alters one's appearance for a short period of time (Samper et al, 2018). This judgment which seems to be dependent on culture eventually leads to changes in beauty practices, if transformative and transient beauty work is not socially accepted.

Beauty work is also a personal *rite of passage* to gain control and self-confidence, and to restore self-concept during significant life changes (Schouten, 1991). It is also a means to

increase body capital and improve marketing character (Schouten, 1991). The rituals or rites of passage also serve as ways to *negotiate an authentic self* through beauty work practices.

While culture affects beauty work and people want to fit in, *resistance* to the widespread beauty ideals is also prevalent (e.g. Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013; Harju and Huovinen, 2015). Even though resistance is characterized as opposition to the dominant consumer culture, it still often entails the support of a respective subculture (Harju and Huovinen, 2015). Therefore, even resistance can be normative in a way (Harju and Huovinen, 2015).

As much of the research conducted on beauty work focuses on women's beauty practices, this thesis mainly reviews literature on the same topics. However, while there is a handful of evidence that beauty work is more popular among women, it's important to remember that 'woman' is a very broad descriptor, and that women are not a homogeneous group of like-minded individuals. Like consumer identity projects, beauty work is a term created only to simplify and that way understand consumer behavior better. In truth, each consumer is vastly different from another and there are as many consumption habits and motivations as there are people.

In addition, beauty as a concept and descriptor is very broad and there are many contradictions in the philosophical discussions attempting to define beauty. Every individual has a different idea of beauty, as do any small groups, cultures and subcultures in the world. Also, while beauty ideals are culturally defined, our ideas of beauty inevitably refine and reinforce cultural, ethnic and racial biases. Previous studies indicate that nonconscious cultural biases and prejudices affect conscious consumer decisions significantly (Carrabis and Peverill-Conti, 2011).

While beauty work has been well studied in sociology and feminist fields, more research is needed about beauty work practices and its underlying motivations in consumer research context. It remains unclear why women still rely on makeup and other beauty work for self-confidence and authenticity in social settings, when it acts to both judge and liberate them. An interesting topic for research would also be why and how women are shamed for looking too "basic" in social settings and advertising discourses, while averageness has been proven to be seen as beautiful. For example, Garnier's advertisement for the "Fructis"



product line asks women to “shake up your style”, which is a clear indication that women should not look too conventional. It also seems that women are judged for their looks even if they fit the cultural norms and they are told that they are always either too conventional, different, made-up or not putting enough effort on themselves. It may be that in that case, it is not about a woman’s looks, but the deep-rooted sexism towards women.

Also, men’s and other genders’ beauty work should receive more attention in the field of consumer research. While the gender norms are breaking, the market for men’s beauty products is growing, and other genders, too, are expressing more interest in beauty work practices. Overall, there is still very little information about the motivations behind men’s beauty work and the existing information is quite general. Men’s cosmetics market size value is estimated to be 74 billion US dollars in 2022 and to grow to 81.2 billion US dollars in 2024 (Peruzzi, 2022) which highlights that there should be more available information about men’s beauty.

Men’s beauty work has started to emerge in consumer research studies in recent years and research has revealed that men often engage in beauty work for mostly the same reasons as women because they have similar anxieties about their looks (Byrne and Milestone, 2022). However, most often men want to enhance their masculinity through the consumption of cosmetics (Holliday and Cairnie, 2007). However, men’s beauty work is often invisible - it is not openly discussed, and the use of cosmetics is not visible on the skin (Byrne and Milestone, 2022). Research also shows that younger men seem to have different attitudes towards the use of cosmetics, and for instance, are increasingly worried about aging and other appearance related issues (Byrne and Milestone, 2022). Cosmetics companies benefit from the emerging of these fears of young men as they can sell more products. On the other hand, it is problematic that men do not feel comfortable talking about experiencing more appearance related pressure with their peers. Therefore, a relevant research topic could be men’s beauty and what kind of advertising would work best for younger consumers.

It is also often difficult to distinguish women’s and men’s beauty practices - even though they have different cultural meanings. The term “beauty work” has not been used in the context of men’s cosmetic use even though it is similar to women’s beauty practices. Therefore, research would benefit from new beauty work related theories and mutual terms.

Prior research has also neglected consumers outside of the gender binary. However, Wiid, Müllern and Berndt's study (2022) indicates that while most beauty brands primarily use female models, the increased use of non-binary, genderqueer and agender models can attract alternative target markets, and also work better on Generation Z consumers, who are increasingly rejecting gender labels and stereotypes. Therefore, more information about Generation Z's beauty regimes and thoughts regarding beauty could prove beneficial in the future, when they have more spending power.

As discovered, beauty work can also be oppositional and a form of resistance. Resistance to binary genders, the most prominent beauty ideals and beauty work overall could be studied more, too, because opposition and inclusivity are trends that are growing significantly, especially among young consumers. In other words, resistance is growing and perhaps even becoming the new norm, eventually. Often, trends move from countercultures to the mainstream market, and studying countercultures can provide essential information about consumers and offer valuable insights into the potential of new and untapped markets. Therefore, it would be beneficial to study the feelings and motivations related to beauty work in countercultures and subcultures, and also oppositional beauty work to make more strategic marketing decisions in the future. For instance, there are some consumers who have completely abandoned all beauty work, such as using makeup and other cosmetics. An interesting research topic would also be beauty practices in subcultures, such as urban hipster culture, techno culture, or drag culture.

However, it is noteworthy that not everybody that doesn't fit into the dominant ideals wants to resist them but simply their being might be seen as resistance because their looks deviate from the norm or the ideal. This could also be an interesting research topic for the future.

In addition, cultural notions often encourage people to try to reach their full potential through beauty work. In this case, the performativity of the self is divorced from a person's perceived "authentic" self. It could be beneficial to receive empirical evidence for what the current perceived "authentic" selves are and whether these selves have high expectations. It could also be studied how people that themselves engage in beauty work view their "true selves" and what they perceive to be misrepresentation of that "true self".

In the end, it is essential to remember that beauty work is a *paradox of power*. Even though many companies seem to have taken steps towards inclusivity of different bodies and ideas of beauty, beauty as a concept implies that something else must not be beautiful. It is noteworthy that while the beauty ideals might be expanding, they can never entail the idea that everybody could be beautiful as they are, or at least as beautiful as everyone else. Still, expanding upon Marchand's (1985) observation that advertising provides a pertinent space where information about social issues can be discussed, it can be argued that advertisers hold the responsibility and the power to provide a platform for topics that are not sufficiently discussed within the mainstream. Advertisers should use their power to increase inclusivity and acceptance towards black, indigenous and other people of color, LGBTQ+ community, disabled people, and to promote gender equality. All in all, beauty ideals that are embodied in beauty work practices hold immense amounts of power, and it can be used for both liberation and oppression for all people.

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