BEAUTY IN THE EYE OF POPULAR CULTURE:

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE OBSESSION WITH FEMALE IMAGE:
THE BEAUTY RITUAL

By
MEGHAN C. SCOTT

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Approved by:

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Dr. Celestino Fernandez
Department of Sociology
What is Beauty?

What exactly is beauty?
Who gets to decide whether or not we are beautiful?
We surely can’t decide for ourselves for the world would scorn us as conceited.
Look in the mirror!
Trace the shape of your nose, run circles around your eyes and lips.
Try to make your hair catch the light so it shines ever so perfectly.
You whisper under your breath, “I guess I am pretty,” but is it you that gets the final say? ...

Who decides whether or not we are beautiful?
Magazines that paste their air-brushed beauties for all to admire.
Movies stars who walk toward the camera, smiling, sucking in their stomachs and sticking out their boobs.
Who was the first person to claim that blondes had more fun?
Who was the first to say that white is better than black, skinny is better than fat, and tall is better than short?

The truth is, we all define beauty.
Every time you stand in front of a mirror.
Every time you gain a few pounds and then step on the scale.
Every time you dye your hair or pop in colored contacts.
Every time you look at yourself and smile and of course,
Every time you wish you were someone else.

~ Laura L. Swain (at age 16)
Abstract

Images of women in popular culture have throughout history placed the female body on a pedestal as an icon of beauty and sexuality. But are the images of beauty and sexuality found in magazines, movies, television and music realistic? No, and this is where the problem lies. Women look to these images of movie starlets and supermodels to determine what they should look like as women. An obsession with beauty soon follows because these images are, more often than not, intangible. This obsession is coupled with a number of practices – beauty rituals – burdens, and sometimes dangers, in a woman’s everyday life. It is not only adult women who deal with these issues, but children and teenagers. These practices are being started at an earlier age than has been seen in the past. What does this mean? What effects do these practices have on a woman’s every day life? What does this body obsession say about us as Americans? What can be done to change the obsession with becoming the ideal woman seen in popular culture to an acceptance of self?
The Beauty Ritual

By changing the way you look . . . you can create a new you!

COSMOPOLITAN, 1991

As American women, we look to the images of popular culture to gauge our appearances, our beauty, but mostly our imperfections, knowing that what is presented in these images is both highly expected and desired. Though expected and desired, the women of popular culture do not make it easy. Actresses, singers, models and heiresses are sun kissed, have hairless bodies, perfect nails, perfect hair, perfect skin and eternal youth. Though it is not easy to achieve “perfection,” the average woman spends hours daily trying to get as close as possible. A study done by beauty company Newbert Revolution found that women spent a total of 3 years of their life getting ready. This obsession with “perfection” is not the result of male gaze, but the result of female gaze. Women are constantly comparing themselves and competing with other women. Since the late 19th century, this comparison and competition has been mostly with the women of popular culture. The images of these women are constantly there, “in your face.”

Before popular culture had any real means of transmitting these images to the masses, women relied on each other. Beauty secrets were passed on from mother to daughter, from one family member to the other, or were shared among friends. The only point of reference was the average woman, unless you were in close contact with the elite. But by the late 19th century women were trading pictures of retouched and idealized actresses. Not long after, a wide range of media – advertising, beauty magazines and film – mass produced images of actresses, singers, models and aristocrats, permeating popular culture with an unrealistic idea of beauty. These mediums did not only provide a picture
of the ideal woman, but also the means and materials needed by women to achieve that beauty. The obsession with beauty began, and popular culture’s influence on self-image and self-esteem soon followed. Standards were set and tangible, and women no longer relied on family or friends for beauty secrets.

The excitement of a tangible, known standard of beauty was short lived as women realized it was not easy to maintain, or even achieve, “the look” of the women permeating popular culture. With beauty being measurable, the development of beauty critics, mostly men, soon followed. These men were harsh in their criticisms, as Ted Shawn stated, “The only thing that is shameful to expose is ugliness.” But what and who was ugly? One man, Florenz Ziegfeld, took the liberty of determining just that, who and what was beautiful – creating standards that are still used in judging beauty in our culture today. As director of “The Ziegfeld Follies,” he claimed his first step in trying out girls for his companies was to “weed out those who are not pretty in face and form” (Latham, 2000). The most severe casting restrictions based on physical attributes at that time were defined and enforced by those casting “The Rockettes.” Any woman that wished to be a Rockette had to be a certain height, with the correct body proportions, and have a certain look. Many other shows used similar restrictions in their castings. Ziegfeld also declared that beauty was “an essential feature of the female worth” and that “Beauty and brains are not often found together” (Latham, 2000). Ziegfeld was a firm believer that success was achievable through beauty. Ziegfeld and other critics with similar beliefs, perhaps inadvertently, birthed the system of restrictions (for women) found within the workplace that are present today.
Over time, women’s presence in the workforce (outside of the home) has grown. More and more women have occupations in a number of different fields. But “women’s mounting presence in the workforce generated anxiety that was frequently represented in bodily and sexual imagery” (Peiss, 1996). In the early nineteenth-century, the number of new jobs that opened to women “required particular attention to appearance and interpersonal behavior. Saleswomen, waitresses, secretaries, entertainers, and others working in clerical and service sectors transformed themselves into the ‘types’ expected in these jobs” (Peiss, 1996). As women have continued to break through cultural boundaries, “the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon them” (Wolf, 1990). Discussed by Naomi Wolf in her work, The Beauty Myth tells a story: “the quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it” (Wolf, 1990).

Any successful woman or one capable of success is expected to also want to be beautiful and so it has become a qualification for a woman wishing to enter the working class. In the study Who Attains Social Status? Effects of Personality and Physical Attractiveness in Social Groups (2001), Cameron Anderson and his colleagues discuss their study on how personality and physical attractiveness affect an individual’s status. Face-to-face group meetings, short-term and long-term, were used to figure out which characteristics were admired by group members. Physical attractiveness, usually a valued attribute was predicted to elevate a person’s status. Those who are physically attractive are given more attention and attractiveness has positive social outcomes. More friends, higher salaries, and other likeable characteristics, whether true or false, become attached
to a person’s pleasant appearance. Anderson and his colleagues’ experiment showed that physical attractiveness was in fact influential in the attainment of social status.

In a study done by Arnie Cann, *Stereotypes About Physical and Social Characteristics Based on Social and Professional Competence Information* (2001), undergraduate students were given hypothetical information about a target’s social and professional success and competence, at both high and low levels, and were then asked to estimate height, weight, rated physical attractiveness, interpersonal attraction and intelligence. The college students rated those who were more successful and competent as “taller, more physically attractive, and more socially attractive” (Cann, 2001). This indicates that there is a positive relationship between competence and success, and physical characteristics. In another study conducted by Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jeff E. Biddle, *Beauty and the Labour Market*, relationships between sorting or selection for a job and “looks” and between differences in wages and “looks” were analyzed. They examined data sets that included interviewers’ ratings of the candidates’ physical appearance. Hamermesh and Biddle found that “plain people earn less than people of average looks, who earn less that the good-looking” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1993). They also found that unattractive women are less likely to participate in the labor force and that “better-looking people sort into occupations where beauty is likely to be more productive.” The impact of looks on earnings tended to be independent of occupation. Like Anderson and his colleagues’ studies, both Cann, and Hamermesh and Biddle’s studies show that physical attractiveness is influential in the attainment of social status. If women want to be successful, they need to be beautiful. The results are disheartening. The beauty qualifications found in the workplace have not only furthered women’s
obsession with their image, but also have left little room for any social situation to exclude a beauty qualification. Work is the one place where people should be hired for their skills and abilities – for their resume, not for their looks.

The evolution of beauty into something that is required for women to be successful, find a significant other, and find happiness with their external appearance, has created more stress and unhappiness among women. Mothers start socializing their daughters early on the importance of appearance. But these girls are also exposed to the images of popular culture from an early age, and even the girls that do not get tips and advice from their mothers learn quickly. Just as women compete with other women, girls compete with other girls. If these girls are not taught by their mothers and/or not exposed to the images in popular culture, they will learn from their peers, whether from friends through attending slumber parties, or foes through teasing and harassment. “More than any previous generation, they expect to look perfect – just like the models and personalities they see every day in retouched, airbrushed photographs in magazines as well as on television and in the movies” (Brumberg, 1997). Despite the constant chance for exposure, some women will choose not to obsess over their image, but this is rare. An overwhelming majority of women obsess about their image, and so the beauty ritual seems to have found a permanent place in a woman’s life. A woman’s beauty ritual consumes most of the free time she has, and the beauty ritual today, though not much different than the beauty ritual of the past, includes additional practices, some being more severe. Waxing, shaving, acrylic nails, manicures, pedicures, tanning, hair dying, perming, straightening, chemical peels, facials, Botox, plastic surgery and many more enhancing activities have found their way into the beauty ritual arsenal. Each practice has
its own history and its unique inception into women’s everyday life. Some of these practices will be discussed in the following sections.

Make Up

The women of popular culture – actresses, models, singers, aristocrats and heiresses – have always dictated what is beautiful. So many women would give or do anything to look as much like them as possible. However, more often than not, this image of beauty is one that is, in many ways, unachievable. But women, throughout history, have turned to make-up for help. “Across time and cultures, cosmetics have been important means of expressing social status, commonality, and difference” (Peiss, 1996). Historically, make-up was used to embellish the face, to enhance one’s appearance. It was a way to make the eyes, lips, and cheek bones stand out, and women used it to achieve prominence among other women. Now make-up is used as a tool to achieve a false naturality; a natural, youthful look, where the use of make-up is not used for prominence, but for blending in. Women wear make-up in hopes of becoming a part of the mob of “natural”, but beautiful women. With the use of make-up among women being visible, the changes over time have been more clearly seen.

A working woman aims for beauty and attractiveness, the elements that are thought to be necessities for becoming successful in the business world and achieving social status. Since the majority of women in the twenty-first century find themselves among the workforce, the obsession with image has been coupled with the widespread use of make-up throughout the female population. The problem at hand is not that women have a desire to be beautiful, but rather, it’s the way in which women achieve this image of beauty and who is dictating it. Within a woman’s culture, the idea of make-up as
“natural” is a fallacious one. Women with the help of make-up, fix, touch up, and hide their “flaws.” This image of “natural” beauty is created in an unnatural way. But with popular culture presenting only images of flawless women, it seems that women’s necessity for make-up was inevitable.

The intention behind a woman’s use of make-up has been important from the start. Post-Civil War, the use of make-up by prostitutes, harlots and the like was seen as a tool of deceitfulness and trickery. An ordinary woman who wore make-up was thought to have the same intent. “A painted face is a false face, a true falsehood [sic], not a true face” (Tuke, 1616). Advice was given to “marriageable men on how to tell authentic beauties from fakes” and they were warned to look for light skinned African Americans who tried “passing into white society” (Peiss, 1996). Beauty secrets were thought to be unseen by men but visible to women. The female gaze dictated whether intentions were acceptable or not. Performance of identity became important and by the late nineteenth century it was of the utmost importance. This changed the ways in which the use of make-up was understood. “What had been perceived as a falsifying, deceptive practice might instead be understood as dramatic enactment in a culture increasingly oriented to ‘looks’” (Peiss, 1996). Measurements of beauty became more tangible as actresses and “beauties” were no longer seen as cunning women but as celebrities and stars. Their use of make-up and hair dye became “all the rage.” “By the 1860’s, celebrity carte de visite photographs circulated widely. These images of retouched and idealized actresses were traded and placed in photograph albums, often on the same pages as family and friends” (Peiss, 1996). The apparent relationship between make-up and performance seemed to
justify its use. Though the nineteenth century saw justification and acceptance of make-up use, a woman’s intent was still just as important.

Artifice was allowable, beauty manuals now conceded, if used in the service of representing a woman’s ‘true’ identity. An old woman who used rouge to deceive a man into marriage was a ‘painted Jezebel,’ observed one advice book, but reddening the cheeks was a ‘fair stratagem’ of the young woman if its use originated in ‘an innocent desire to please.’ Here the older view of [make-up] was acknowledged but displaced by a new understanding of artifice based on the intentions and desires of the cosmetics consumer (Peiss, 1996).

The distinctions made by intention have and continue to be important. One could also argue that the distinctions made between cosmetics and make-up have and will always be just as important to the women using them.

Though one would think make-up can be easily grouped with cosmetics, there is a clear distinction. According to Peiss’ “Making Up, Making Over,” “‘Paints must not be confounded with Cosmetics [. . .] these consequently assist nature, and make amends for her defects. Paints, another said, masked nature’s handiwork, hiding expression and truth behind an ‘encrusted mould,’ a ‘mummy surface.’” (Peiss, 1996). In the eighteenth-century, the making of paints depended on manufacturing, chemicals, medicine firms and pharmacists; where cosmetics were seen as part of “kitchen-physic,” household manufacture – well within a woman’s domain. (Peiss, 1996) With women manufacturing them in their own home, cosmetics were widely and confidently used. But the image of dangerous ingredients and a scientist in a lab kept a majority of women from using make-up. If that weren’t enough, make-up was seen as an unnatural means of achieving beauty. A woman made beautiful by only cosmetics may have been seen as more beautiful than a woman who was made beautiful with the help of make-up. The nineteenth century again saw a change in the way make-up was viewed. A woman’s domain had broadened,
beauty secrets were shared between friends and passed on from mother to daughter. Make-up was no longer seen as a scary product, and women began using make-up on an every day basis and as long as they had good intentions, they were thought to be just as beautiful, if not more beautiful then a woman who used strictly cosmetics.

The 1920’s, the era of the Flapper, saw women who were experiencing “spiritual equality, domestic sovereignty, and a transcendent purity rooted in, but not limited to, sexual chastity” (Peiss, 1996). The need to stay within “kitchen-physic” had subsided completely. Make-up was a way to express spiritual freedom and female sexuality. The 1920’s saw a drastic change in the use of make-up among American women. It was, after all, the age of the “Flapper,” women who rebelled against the social standards of womanly appearance – their legs were shown, hair was short, and posture was horrific. Bruce Bliven describes the Flappers as women who were “heavily made up, not to imitate nature, but for an altogether artificial affect [. . .] poisonously scarlet lips, richly ringed eyes” (Latham, 2000). Make-up was used for enhancement. A woman was able to make herself noticeable and was given the opportunity to stand out from other women with the use of make-up. A woman was able to create her own look – African-American women could be paler, white women could be darker, ordinary women could be exotic, mysterious or alluring. Women were free from social constraint and could experiment with their own look. “A mass cosmetics trade, supported by the coordinated efforts of advertising agencies, women’s magazines, and professional beauty ‘experts,’ had validated a female identity signified by, and to some extent formed in, the marking and coloring of the face” (Peiss, 1996). Make-up presented the Flappers’ with leeway; it allowed them to create drastic change in physical appearance and this change would later
mark the change of women’s role within American culture. Women had brought themselves into the spotlight as a result of their rebellion – they were now center stage.

During this movement, images of the Flapper were circulated throughout a wide range of media, and these “mass-produced images distinctly and powerfully began to influence female self-conceptions and beauty rituals” (Peiss, 1999). Advertisements, editorials, magazine articles and other mediums presented the materials needed by women to alter and augment their appearance; make-up permeated popular culture. In Peiss’ Promoting the Made-up Woman, a Maybelline advertisement for eye make-up promises “Eyes that Charm” and a product that might even “Beautify Your Eyes Instantly” (Peiss, 1999). This presented the ease by which a woman could achieve beauty; all she had to do was put on some eye make-up and she was able to attract others. If make-up was worn, there was no way she would go un-noticed. A trading card reads, “Every one recognizes your ability to paint (Yourself),” above a woman, looking in a mirror, paints her eyebrows on. In a way, this suggests make-up application is a skill; one that a woman should be good at or else it is noticed. Other advertisements focus on the testimonies of popular women of the twenties, Gloria Vanderbilt and O.H.P Belmont. The use of known and respected women became a way to draw in consumers. The “who’s who” of popular culture – screen stars, aristocratic beauties, and the Flapper – formed the image of the ideal woman of the twenties. This was the beginning of popular culture’s influence on self-image, and it also sparked the development of a group of critics, such as Ted Shawn and Florenz Ziegfeld, who created a new set of standards, where beauty was influential and sometimes the determining factor of a woman’s status and success. “A period that began with cosmetics signaling women’s freedom and
individuality ended in binding feminine identity to manufactured beauty, self-portrayal to acts of consumption” (Peiss, 1999). Women slowly started to realize that even though make-up made them feel more attractive, it was also beginning to take a toll on their confidence. After the Flapper, women were expected to use make-up and it forced its way into their daily routine.

The next woman’s movement was not as much focused on appearance as it was on sexuality. In the 1950’s, Marilyn Monroe, pop culture idol and actress of film, played a key role in sexual culture. She became a sex icon, the woman that everyone wanted to be and the epitome of how women wanted to look. Make-up was still used to enhance appearance, but it was at this stage that people began to see this enhancement as “natural.” Sexuality was seen as natural and so any aspect of sexuality became natural. This included make-up. In Dyer’s *Heavenly Bodies*, he refers to Monroe as authentic, one who appears “natural in her sexiness,” but also one who complicated the definition of natural (Dyer, 2004). Monroe worked on her image, she created it. There was nothing natural about it. She dyed her hair blonde, altered her body, and used make-up to her advantage – used it to bring out her eyes and pout her lips. Monroe pulled off being both natural and sexy but she was only natural in the way she approached female sexuality and sex, not in her appearance. Though make-up was and is far from natural, it had gained the reputation as such with the help of Marilyn Monroe.

After Monroe, make-up began its steady transformation into an instrument used to achieve natural beauty. The women who grew up in the 1970’s did not quite fit the mold. They looked natural because they were natural – they did not use make-up. They were care-free and enjoyed self-acceptance. Nevertheless, companies began to advertise
products as natural and youthful, both in appearance and in the feel of the product. In an advertisement found in Glamour, Neutrogena claims that their make-up is “Beautiful. Beneficial” and that a woman can “be more beautiful when you wear it” (Glamour, 2007). In another ad found in Cosmopolitan, Maybelline claims that their make-up is “0% obvious, 100% you!” Their Dream Matte Mousse foundation “blends so evenly, perfects completely. [. . .] With an amazing air-soft feel. It’s like no other make-up you’ve tried…or applied” (Cosmopolitan, 2007). Women, both in the past and now, have changed their appearance in order to be accepted in society, because popular culture has told them it is necessary. However, women in the past focused their appearance on being desirable, and attracting the opposite sex, all the while challenging social standards. Women now focus on an appearance that will gain them success and status in the business world. Another ad for eye make-up, created by Rimmel, seems to capture the overall theme with the phrase “Big eyes for the Big City. Get noticed.” (Cosmopolitan, 2006) – make-up gains the attention of those within a woman’s community and in the office. This means they must also look professional and sophisticated. Too much make-up or extravagant hair could be distracting in the workplace. It is now about looking natural – being easy on the eyes. Just as advertisers of the twenties looked to aristocratic beauties, advertisers today look to actresses and musicians to sell make-up. Beyonce acts as the spokesmodel for Loreal, Rihanna for Cover Girl. Catherine Zeta-Jones is a spokesmodel for Elizabeth Arden, Carmen Electra for MAX Factor. Jessica Alba acts as the spokesmodel for Revlon. These women epitomize what the average woman wants to look like – gorgeous and “natural.”
As women’s presence in the workforce grew overtime, the number of new jobs available for women required attention to physical appearance. It was and is clear that attractiveness is essential in getting and keeping a job. One way of attaining that beauty is the use of make-up, but this can be just as demanding as trying to develop a well-rounded resume. “Inside the majority of these controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning their freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of ageing and dread of lost of control” (Wolf, 1990). While the majority of women fall under these pressures, there are some who still hold onto the age old idea of natural beauty – no make-up and gradual ageing. Even though one might think a woman following this routine would live a life free of stress, she is still under cultural expectations and pressures. One woman, Darlene Jespersen, was fired from her job because she refused to wear make-up. The casino chain Harrah’s created a new company policy titled the “Personal Best Program,” through which make-up was made mandatory. Jespersen and other employees were given an ultimatum, wear make-up or lose your job. Along with make-up, the policy states that female employees must have painted nails and teased hair. The company’s main concern is with the appearance of its staff; they should appear to have taken the time to get ready for work and have pride in their appearance. Enhancement of physical appearance is now not only a qualification for getting hired but also one demanded within the workplace to keep one’s job. “The job market refined the beauty myth as a way to legitimize employment discrimination against women” (Wolf, 1990). If women want the right to work, they must expect to follow all expectations and requirements drawn out by employers. Women’s culture would also agree, “‘doing woman’ means doing make-up
and choosing styles, manicures and hair do’s’” (Frost, 2001). Make-up is no longer an extra step in a daily routine, it is the main step.

Today’s popular culture makes it very difficult for women to change make-up’s importance in every day life and success. It seems like every other commercial on television is one for make-up or skin care products. Beauty magazines fill the shelves and make-up ads are on every other page. Celebrities, actresses, singers, models, and heiresses are still the images of beauty that women hope to accomplish. They all wear make-up and have perfect skin. When they don’t, the tabloids make sure to take pictures and then display them in their magazines along side comments saying how terrible they look without it. Increasingly more businesses have implemented policies about appearance in the workplace. As long as make-up fills every aspect of a woman’s life, it seems it will be hard to do anything else but wear it.

Because make-up fills every aspect of a woman’s life, it makes sense that daughters are exposed to make-up and its use at an early age. As a result, girls are starting to use make-up at earlier and earlier ages. In Peg Zeglin Brand’s introduction to Beauty Matters (2000), she presents an image that could speak volumes about this phenomenon. The photo, from Carrie Mae Weems’ Kitchen Table Series, depicts a woman and her daughter with their own individual make up mirrors and their own stick of lipstick, each applying it with care.

Time stands still for the brief and trivial act of applying lipstick. […] There is concentrated effort here: studied imitation, a deliberate process of replication bridging a generation gap between an adult notion of “beauty” and a child’s notion, not yet formed. There is a ceremonial sharing of information, an induction into the secrets and codes of beautification, a transference of power. But, we begin to notice, this initiation rite is for women only (Brand, 2000).
Girls learn “beauty secrets” from their mothers first before looking to popular culture to form their own beliefs about what beauty looks like and what make-up is needed to achieve it. They stress wearing make-up and having a good appearance because, to them, it is a necessary means for being taken seriously and becoming successful. Women should always look like they take care and respect themselves. But mothers have also formed their beliefs about beauty from popular culture. So though it is not realized, girls are exposed to popular culture’s influence first through the lens of their mother and then must decide themselves what beauty looks like through their own lens. It is a vicious and sometimes confusing cycle. The images of young girls in popular culture are, of course, unrealistic. Young girls should not be wearing as much make-up as an adult, but these are the images offered. From watching their mothers, daughters are exposed to the pressures and anxieties created by the necessity to be beautiful within our society.

So although it does not quite make sense, make-up has become natural. Not natural in a sense of god-given beauty or wearing the face we were born with, but rather a task that over time has become an every day activity and is present in the appearance of almost every woman. Women spend thousands of dollars a year on make-up to make themselves look “natural.” The desire to achieve ‘beauty’ is “necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, evolutionary: strong men battle for beautiful women” (Wolf, 1990). Women wish to be desirable and wanted by men, but many feel that this is impossible without the use of make-up. Popular culture presents an image of women that is hard to achieve, but that image is what men and employers look for when making their selections. But more importantly, the images of women in popular culture set standards on which women judge themselves and other women. Make-up has given them the
opportunity to mirror that image or at least look similar. But as much as women wish to be desirable, they wish also to be successful. Coupled with the desire to be beautiful for the sake of being beautiful, beauty has become a mandate within the business world, and for these reasons, make-up continues its presence in women’s culture.

**Perfect Skin and Eternal Youth**

Cosmetics are ‘articles which are intended to be rubbed, poured, sprinkled or sprayed or introduced to, or otherwise applied to, the human body for cleaning, beautifying, promoting attractiveness or altering the appearance without affecting the body’s structure or function’ (Allen, 1981)

Across time and cultures, cosmetics have been an important part of a woman’s beauty ritual and a way to express her status and individuality. However, historically, acceptance of cosmetic use and quality has been ever-changing. The use of cosmetics today is not as controversial and cosmetics themselves have not always been of the quality we experience today, safe and FDA approved. In the early 19th century there was a distinct line between cosmetics and paints or make-up, though this line is not as clear today. “Paints must not be confounded with Cosmetics, which often really do impart whiteness, freshness, suppleness and brilliancy to the skin . . . these consequently assist Nature, and make amends for her defects,” where make-up created a mask that hid nature (Peiss, 1996). Cosmetics used for skin care consisted mostly of home remedies. In an anonymous book titled *The Duties of a Lady’s Maid; with Directions for Conduct, and Numerous Receipts for the Toilette* (1825), it was recommended that one could remove freckles by simply dipping a bunch of green grapes in water, sprinkling them with alum and salt, wrapping them in paper, baking them under hot ashes and then squeezing out the juices to wash the face (Corson, 2003). Today, this would sound ridiculous and we may
question the mentality of the author. But in the early 19th century all skin care remedies were concocted in similar ways. Soaps, cold creams, pastes, vitamins and the like were created at home.

By the mid-19th century, though commercial products were available, women still kept with the tradition of home remedies and a greater number of recipes were available. Only now they were targeted for different skin types, skin problems and aging. Some doctors recommended these household manufactured recipes, others recommended plain soap. The ingredients in these concoctions – butter, honey, egg, almond oil, goat’s grease – may have hid flaws and created an illusion of smoothness and clear complexion, but they were not keeping the skin clean. They were, in fact, creating more skin problems (Corson, 2003). Cosmetics were also becoming less controversial and women were more accepting of their use as long as it was used to portray one’s true self. This acceptance was spurred by the use of cosmetics among performing artists. By the late 19th century the cosmetic and beauty product industry was rapidly growing with the help of magazines, beauty advice, and advertising. With the cosmetic industry booming, it became more preferable for women to buy products then to continue with “kitchen-physics.” Though “kitchen-physics” continued in homes well into the 20th century, the majority of women turned to products found in catalogs, stores and beauty parlors and suggested in magazines like Vogue.

The 20th century saw the beginning of the real obsession with skin and beauty. The 19th century and “kitchen-physics” had created a generation of women and girls burdened with acne. “The first two decades of the twentieth century, women began to think about beauty and the self in ways that were more external than internal” with
popular culture’s help (Brumberg, 1997). Though the desire to have great skin and a 
flawless face had always been present, coupled with the wide use of pocket mirrors and 
the availability of household mirrors, the thought of getting or having acne created an 
obession, especially among adolescent girls. “There was a clear gender difference in the 
intensity of adolescent self-scrutiny [. . .] It was girls, not boys, who displayed a ‘new 
sense of toilet’ marked by zealous concern about hair and skin” (Brumberg, 1997). It was 
popular culture’s mandates for women with flawless skin that demanded skin 
maintenance among adolescent girls. Cultural mirrors – movies, advertising found in 
magazines, department store counters and dressing rooms – created consistent scrutiny of 
appearances. A good complexion was important in achieving social acceptance and 
popularity among her peers. “In the modern world, where image meant so much, it 
surprised no one that so many adolescent girls regarded even an occasional blackhead as 
‘a physical and psychic calamity of the first magnitude’” (Brumberg 1997). And acne 
was not going to go away by itself. Mothers became more concerned with their daughters 
complexions, because, of course, their daughters’ complexions could reflect poorly on 
them. “A good mother wanted a beautiful daughter, and if good looks did not come 
naturally, the mother had critical work to do [. . .]” (Brumberg, 1997). Mothers turned to 
cosmetics for help. Every acne-treating skin care product available was bought to combat 
social problems associated with pimples and a bad complexion. Adolescent girls that had 
their own money spent it on acne treatment. It was not long before advertisers took 
advantage of this.

Cosmetic industry advertisers capitalized on adolescent anxiety and insecurity by 
promising both flawless skin and the popularity and attention that comes with it. Clearasil
adds from 1951 included a Personalities of the Month. They would spotlight a high school girl and her story of skin success from using Clearasil, next to the picture of her chatting up a handsome boy. (Brumberg, 1997). The 20th century created more products, witnessed a complete acceptance of the use of make-up and cosmetics in tandem, and saw the majority of women using them on a daily basis. Advertisers capitalized on widespread use just as they had capitalized on the anxieties of young girls. Advertisers’ “aim being to pound into the head of every girl and woman in the land the fundamental principle of the cosmetics industry; namely that good complexions, fair hands, and lovely hair are not born, they’re made” (Bustelo, 1986). A Pond’s face cream advertisement shows young faces with flawless, “glowing” skin and promises rejuvenation and smooth, luminous skin, the kind achieved with the use of their products. They insure a great appearance that is easy to maintain and stress “the social disadvantages of a bad complexion, the social incentives of good one” (Piess, 1999). Again, showing that it was unacceptable within society to have a bad complexion. Movie stars, models, singers and aristocrats were seen as the epitome of flawless skin. Advertisers took advantage of this, using them as examples of picture perfect complexion in magazines and at the end of the 20th century, television commercials.

If perfect complexion did not create enough anxiety on its own, the 20th century also saw the beginning of the obsession with age. Not only did one have to have perfect skin, but one had to keep one’s skin from aging. No wrinkles, discoloration or dark circles. The cosmetic industry had the new task of persuading women that aging was socially undesirable and had a new and different, but necessary, set of products to sell. However, the industry itself needs to do little persuading. Popular culture does it for
them. “[…] it is only in societies like our own that the pursuit of lasting youth is paramount, that only a youthful appearance is considered attractive” (Allen, 1981). As progress was made with curing the acne problem and adolescents not needing those products anymore, it was not long before the skin care industry encouraged adolescent girls to be as proactive about aging as they had been with acne. “To be required to develop a personal regimen to keep the skin youthful even before youth has ebbed taxes the normal dermal consciousness of girls in some unfair ways” (Blumberg, 2007).

Popular culture and its advertising made women feel old at 30 and adolescents think they are aging by the minute.

With this obsession on aging widespread, it didn’t take long for employers to consider age when hiring – as make-up had found itself a requirement in the workplace, so had cosmetics through its role in anti-aging.

Cosmetics are a prize example of the special discrimination that women workers are subjected to. Far from being a luxury (and they are taxed as such), cosmetics are a grim necessity for the older or not physically blessed woman worker. She must constantly compete, in the labor market and on the job, against younger or more attractive girls. The male boss who selects experienced and efficient workers, rather than those who radiate a Hollywood-like glamour, is rare indeed. (Baker, 1986).

To women workers, cosmetics are a necessity. Naomi Wolf calls this the “professional beauty qualification” or PBQ. “Since 1971, the law has recognized that a standard of perfection against which a woman’s body is to be judged may exist in the workplace, and that if she falls short of it, she may be fired” (Wolf, 2002). This includes skin and aging. To provide an example, Margarita St. Cross was a Playboy Club waitress who was fired because she had lost her Bunny Image. St.Cross’s male coworkers were not subject to the same code. Female workers were ranked on the following scale:
1. A flawless beauty (face, figure, and grooming)
2. An exceptionally beautiful girl
3. Marginal (is aging or has developed a correctable appearance problem)
4. Has lost Bunny Image (either through aging or an uncorrectable appearance problem)

In *St. Cross v. Playboy Club of New York*, the court recognized the Bunny Image and determined that she had lost her Bunny Image and that the evaluation “was well within the competence” of the Playboy Club to decide (Wolf, 2002). Though some might consider this a poor example because it is Playboy, a company that profits on the images presented in popular culture, it is still disturbing. Women are subject to these “professional beauty qualifications”, and not men, with aging being one of great importance. “The association of ugliness with old age is so prevalent that it is unconscious, except of course for the old, who are keenly aware of how their wrinkles, thinning hair and otherwise aging bodies are regarded by the youth-obsessed culture around them” (Halprin, 1995).

Cosmetic industry advertisers again capitalized on women’s obsessions but this time it was age. “The Queen,” a beauty editress recommends Wrinkola as a “most successful wrinkle erasing cream for everyone who desires to retain their charm of features” (Corson, 2003). There is even an advertisement for a Youth-Molde head band and chin strap recommended by *Vogue*. It was thought to be “best for keeping your hair line in place and support sagging muscles at the same time” (Corson, 2003). Advertisers still looked to the movie stars, singers and models of popular culture for help in magazines and television commercials. “One look at the radiance of movie stars in their middle forties, achieved solely through a higher standard of living and the alchemy of
modern beauty temples, is enough to convince millions of women that this is something they want too” (McGowan, 1986).

Today, not much has changed when it comes to cosmetics or the obsession with flawless skin and age. There is an even wider array of skin care products and the companies that provide them. Products once only found in beauty parlors, salons and spas are now available in one’s everyday grocery or drugstore. Young girls and women alike look to magazine advertisements and television commercials for new solutions to their skin care and aging problems and rely on the women of popular culture for some insight as to what they should aim to look like. Still, there is some hope. Dove has launched a “Pro-Age” campaign targeting the women who grew up in 1970’s – care-free and self-accepting, now in their 50’s – suggesting that aging itself is beautiful. Gray hair and a few wrinkles here and there are okay. Who knows, this may spark many more companies to launch similar campaigns, not only aimed at the aging but also the young. Nevertheless, cosmetics continue to help us achieve “beauty” and allow us to get closer and closer to the images presented in popular culture but they also continue to be a burden, another step in the beauty ritual.

**Cosmetic Surgery**

For women who can’t cover up flaws with make-up or reverse aging with cosmetics, there is cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery is the most recent practice in the beauty ritual and the most extreme. What was once a procedure done only in medical emergencies for reconstructive purposes has become another way for women to change and enhance their appearance. Women can fix wrinkles with a Botox injection or in more extreme cases, with a face lift. They can even change their nose entirely if they do not
like it or think another nose would be more attractive, likewise with other parts of the
body, including breasts, legs, the buttocks, etc.. The ability to change a “trouble-spot”
entirely may be too enticing and appear too easy. But it is not always easy. These
surgeries more often than not result in complications and dissatisfaction, and in some
cases, multiple corrective surgeries. Despite this, the industry and the number of cosmetic
surgeries performed annually are growing. Women’s obsession with their image seems to
outweigh the risks – they seem to care more about their beauty and appearance than their
health.

At the turn of the 20th century, surgery of any kind was risky. General anesthesia
was not commonly used until the 1920’s and the first antibiotic was not discovered until
the 1930’s. These antibiotics were not generally used until after World War II. Before
then, “few people could justify the gamble of going to sleep and not waking up again for
the sake of smaller breasts or a flatter stomach” (Romm, 1992). Even with these new
medical advances, surgeons did not know how to make a lot of the cosmetic changes
women were requesting. With the increase in interest, surgeons started to pay more
attention to the “subtleties of anatomy” (Romm, 1992). By the 1950’s, women were
having nose jobs and getting scars removed, but most plastic surgeries were performed
for medical reasons or in emergencies. Soon other surgeries followed; eyelid surgeries,
face-lifts, breast reduction and enhancement, and body contouring. The field of plastic
surgery continued to grow for aesthetic reasons.

The number of cosmetic surgeries has dramatically increased over the years. 664,000
procedures were performed in the United States in 1990, a 70 percent increase
from 1981 (Synnott, 1993). In 2006, it was estimated that 11 million procedures were
performed. Today procedures include all of those done in the past plus more, including Botox injections, micro-dermabrasion, and chemical peels. With medical advancements, the number of procedures will continue to grow. The number of cosmetic surgeries among teens has sky-rocketed; “it is likely that more children and adolescents are modifying their appearance than at any other time in history” (Sarwer, 2001). More than 175,000 adolescents underwent cosmetic surgeries in 1999 compared to 24,623 in 1998. The increase in the number of cosmetic surgeries in the last few years is astonishing.

These numbers can, at least in part, be explained by the growing obsession with beauty among women. Plastic surgery seems to be the easiest way to fix flaws that otherwise may be unfixable. Most women who seek cosmetic surgery are usually dissatisfied with their bodies. It has been suggested that cosmetic surgery is body image surgery, and popular culture supports this. “Magazine advertisements frequently use models as representations of postoperative results and promise dramatic improvements in self-esteem and quality of life” (Sarwer, 2001). Plastic surgery is within reach of every woman who is willing to make sacrifices, “who is strongly motivated to have it. What often determines whether or not to have plastic surgery is the individual’s own sense of priorities [. . .]” (Stallings, 1977). Though it is much easier for wealthy women to decide to have these elective surgeries, average women may give up a TV set, a vacation, a new car, or even take out a loan to have these procedures done if it means that they are that much closer to looking like the women of popular culture.

But these procedures do not always end in improvements. Many result in complications, corrective surgeries and in some cases even death. A study noted that from 1994 to mid-1998 there was a mortality rate of 19.1 per 100,000 population for
plastic surgery compared to breast cancer at 15.4 and motor vehicle accidents at 15.2. “It seems that the rather benign view that cosmetic surgery is relatively risk free is unfounded” (Smith, 2002). However, popular culture makes it seem that these surgeries are simple, “in and out” procedures, suggesting all women who are unhappy should look to cosmetic surgery for answers. Unfortunately, this message is being delivered to an unintended (or maybe not so unintended) audience – young girls and adolescents. If mothers agree to it, young girls will be having these surgeries. It has become almost commonplace for high school girls to ask for breast implants as a graduation present. A new children’s book, My Beautiful Mommy, written by a plastic surgeon, explains cosmetic surgery and why mothers are having elective surgeries. Moral of the story: after the surgery, “Mommy” looks even more beautiful than she did before. This book sends the message to little kids that to be prettier, they should have cosmetic surgery – conditioning is starting at earlier ages for the part of a woman’s beauty ritual that is the most expensive and severe.

As long as society and popular culture are teaching young girls that cosmetic surgery is the answer to their body image problems, the industry will thrive and women will continue to put themselves at risk to become more beautiful. Plastic surgery, like make-up, has become something that is considered “natural.” If the results cannot be seen, how is the public to know that a woman is beautiful with the help of cosmetic surgery? Surgeons continue to look for new ways to make recovery shorter and scarring minimal. But there is nothing natural about cosmetic surgery. Women should not have to physically alter their appearance to meet the standard of beauty. Cosmetic surgery just may be the most excessive practice of the beauty ritual.
Hair

Of all the gay fashions that are come in vogue,
Since wearing the mantle, or bonny red brogue
There’s none so praiseworthy – you’ll find – I declare,
As the elegant fashion of papering the hair

The modern dames, both abroad and at home,
Have got such a fashion of wearing the comb;
To church or to market, they cannot repair,
But must take an hour to paper their hair.

When in the evening they change for to walk,
To see their sweethearts, and with them to talk,
An hour or two they must certainly spare,
To fit in their comb, and to paper their hair.

*Paper’d-Up Hair, 19th Century*

“From the earliest times of which there is any record, hair – its length, texture, color, growth, and loss – has exerted a strange fascination on the human race” (Cooper, 1971). Cooper suggests that this obsession with hair stems from man being the only “naked” ape. Hair only grows densely on certain parts of our body and therefore became that much more important. Historically, women have always paid special attention and given extra time in their beauty ritual to the care and styling of their hair.

The fact that it can be cut and shaped, with a normally guaranteed regrowth to allow for changes of length and style, has added considerably to its charm for us and has made it not only a conveniently pliable from of sexual adornment and attraction but also an easily controlled variable to denote status, set fashion, or serve as a badge. It has become not only sexually, but also culturally and socially significant (Cooper, 1971).

Women have always dyed, cut, permed, curled, straightened, and used a variety of products to achieve the hair desired at the time. A woman’s hair was and is a seduction tool. A Roman satirist Apuleius said it best; “If you despoil the most startlingly beautiful woman of her hair, though she were Venus herself . . . she would not be able to seduce
even her own husband.” Men, in all myths and folklore, were often lured in by women and their hair. Why hair? Darwin believed that “the human female has become so denuded of hair on face and body that, by contrast, her remaining largest area of hair has gained in desirability” (Cooper, 1971). But it is not only a seduction tool – “women always seem to have paid more attention to the demands of fashion than to the desires of men” – but also a status symbol, a fashion statement, an asset. Women learn at an early age that hair is important. As soon as girls can hold a brush in their hand, not only are they brushing their dolls’ hair, but also their own, coming up with ways to fix it. Styles have changed, new technologies and products have arisen, but the obsession and importance of a woman’s hair has remained the same throughout history and hence a very important step in the Beauty Ritual.

“Doing hair” has almost always entailed the same things – washing, brushing, styling, dying, and the list goes on. The 18\textsuperscript{th} century saw the beginning of manuals on hair care that included advice and recipes for good hair. To make the hair grow thick one only needed “three spoonfuls of honey and a good handful of Vine-sprigs that twist like wire” (Corson, 2003). Dying hair was also quite common. Black was especially desired and “particularly useful for setting of the whiteness off the Neck and Skin […]” (Corson, 2003). Oil of tartar and a comb could be used to achieve the desired black color, and oil of benjamin was suggested for setting it. One could also use powders to get the desired hair color whether it be white, blonde, black, brown or red. Most means of dying, growth and styling were homemade but this did not mean every woman could achieve the hair fashions of the time. Ingredients for these recipes were sometime hard to come by and/or expensive. This meant having the right hair was a sign of wealth or status. Hairstyles
were also quite extravagant and ridiculous and needed a large amount of hair and so hairpieces also became popular.

In the 19th century even more manuals were published on hair care and style, and women passed on their own tips to friends and family. Tricossian fluid became a more popular way to dye hair. It only took a few hours, was easy to use, and was mostly permanent. Unlike powders, you could use pomatum and wash and the color would not fade (Corson, 2003). In his “Criticism on Female Beauty” in 1847, Leigh Hunt suggested that women’s hair should be “long, soft, flexible, thick, and of a colour suitable to the skin.” Dying one’s hair was okay as long as it was complimentary. He also preferred that women not use hair pieces because they were deceiving. However, if one did use one, it should not be disguised. By the mid-19th century there was opposition to the use of dyes. In Good Society (1869), ladies are advised, above all things, never to “attempt to change the colour of the hair by means of fashionable dyes and fluids.” There is no way that these artificial colors could possible harmonize naturally with one’s given skin, eyes and eyebrows. Desire for fashion and attractiveness were seen as senseless. Despite the opposition, women continued to use hair dyes and other products to follow the day’s fashions and attract men.

The late-19th century saw a decrease in household recipes and an increase in commercial products. This also meant an increase in the number of hair care products over all. Wigs and hair pieces could also be found in catalogs. Advertisements for hair regenerators were also abundant, promising that “no matter how gray your hair is, or how bleached or how spoiled by dyes, makes it beautiful, natural, healthy. Restores gray hair to colour of youth. Gives your hair new life” (Sears, Roebuck & Co., 1897). Products or
cosmetics for hair were more accepted than make-up at the time, suggesting the importance of good hair and its upkeep. One major hairstyle had evolved by the end of the 19th century. With the outbreak of acne problems among teens, they looked for anyway to cover them up. “In the 1980’s, American girls displayed a notable enthusiasm for a particular hairdo that was linked to their anxiety about blemishes on the face. Bangs” (Brumberg, 1997), and they have been fashionable ever since.

The 20th century saw complete freedom and acceptance of all beauty products for women beginning with the 1920’s and the “Flapper.” Manuals and advice on hair became more specific. Certain hair styles were expected for different events and different outfits. Hair ornaments such as feathers, tule and butterflies also became more popular. Products for itchy scalp, falling hair and dandruff also emerged. One advertisement for Crani-Tonic Hair-Food found in Vogue (1903) suggested that everyone would use it if they knew how “delightfully refreshing and beneficial its use is.” Beauty parlors emerged and women spent lots of money getting everything done by other people, instead of doing it at home themselves. With women increasingly in the workforce, they could afford to have someone else do their hair. They could also afford to have more hair products and an increase in advertising soon followed. Though a luxury, it created an expectation and qualification for women to have good hair, both at home and in the workplace.

Hairstyles continued to be published in fashion magazines so that women could easily keep up with trends and fads. Focus turned to movie stars, singers and actresses for style ideas and most were emulated. There were a lot of changes in style, almost each decade having its own.
The end of the 1910’s, the 1920’s and the Flapper introduced short, boyish hairstyles and elaborate headbands. In the 1930’s, women no longer wanted to look like boys. Styles were softer and included finger waves and center parts. Rita Hayworth defined the look. The 1940’s was an era of glamour. Hairstyles were more simple and elegant. Hats were popular so hair was styled close to the head. A woman could easily wear one of her extravagant hats and when she wanted to take it off she would still have great hair. Veronica Lake defined glamour during this period. The 1950’s was even more glamorous. With the war over, women had more time to spend on their hair and so the styles were more flamboyant. Lots of curls, fluffed up, teased, permed, and sculpted. Lucille Ball and Doris Day’s hairstyles were coveted by many women and Audrey Hepburn started the pixie cut. The 1960’s saw the bouffant. Height was important and so this hairstyle was usually shorter at the neck with the majority of the hair at the crown. Teasing was common and hair ornaments were popular. The end of the 1960’s, the early 1970’s and the Hippy era, saw a more natural hairstyle: long, straight and flowing like Cher’s. The 1970’s and the Disco era meant big hair. Farrah Fawcett’s feathered back hair was one of the most coveted and copied hairdo. Angela Davis’ afro became a symbol for Black pride and was not only worn by women but also men. From there, hair only got bigger. In the 1980’s, there was an abundance of different hairstyles that were popular; short asymmetrical haircuts, big and permed, romantic curls and the list goes on. In the 1990’s hairstyles were more natural and needed less hairspray. Cuts were angled and layered or soft and flowing Jennifer Aniston and the Friends cast, as well as Sarah Jessica Parker, were looked to for hair fashion tips.
The 20th century also marked the “dumb blonde” phenomenon. Blonde hair was once seen as a sign of purity and innocence, but the 20th century saw blonde hair as something different. “It is possible to argue that purity implies innocence, innocence may mean ignorance, and ignorance denotes stupidity” (Cooper, 1971). Hence, the “dumb blonde,” but this does not account for the fact that blondes are seen as sexy and preferred by men; Marilyn Monroe being the perfect and best known example. Sex symbols relied on the appeal of their blonde hair. It also does not account for the fact that not all blondes are “dumb.” Luckily for women with brown hair, blonde hair could be achieved with a bottle. But because of this, blondes were seen as natural deceivers and brunettes as frank and honest in nature. An article in Daily Mail in November 1969 quotes a psychologist, “If a man is serious about a girl he wants her to be natural. Anything artificial does not appeal to a serious thinking man who values quality. Generally a man prefers a blonde for a mistress and a brunette for a wife. Brunettes have more integrity.”

Today, “doing hair” includes the same things. However, one could say it is more influenced by the women of popular culture and the hair product industry. Advertising is a lot more common. It is found in abundance. The women of popular culture create the images found in these advertisements, but they are almost not needed. We are exposed to actresses, singers, models and heiresses in other ways. What medium they are presented in does not matter; we still want their hair. Beauty magazines provide “steps to sexy hair,” “ways to healthier hair,” and offer lists of the products the “stars” use. Women no longer rely on each other for advice. “Dumb blondes” still exist and even use it to their advantage, but we don’t jump to conclusions about a woman’s character because of her hair color. It is more a subject of satire and comedy. Women are still expected to have
flawless and healthy hair in the workplace. It must be obvious that a woman has taken the time to fix it just right. Even if the style itself may appear unkempt, it must be deliberate. It also seems that a hairstyle should be gender appropriate – Hilary Clinton received a lot of comments about her “masculine” haircut. “Just as surely as an arrangement of flags on a ship has meaning, so does an arrangement of hair speak in its own coded language” (Cooper, 1971). And so it keeps a place in a woman’s beauty ritual, and people continue to notice and comment on a woman’s hair.

**Hair Removal**

Charles Darwin believed that natural selection favored “not only epigamic hair in the male, but also contrasting nakedness in the female [. . .] our ancestors liked a woman with a fine head of hair but a naked body” (Cooper, 1971). Nowhere in the world do women have as much hair as men. This is especially true in the United States; American women may be the most bare in the world. The images of women presented in popular culture are hairless except for head hair and eyebrows. No facial hair, no body hair and more recently no pubic hair. Ancient techniques included plucking, burning, threading, scrubbing with sugar and waxing with beeswax. The 20th century saw new techniques including scrubbing with sandpaper and Brilo pads, razors and depilatory creams. Most of these are still used by women today with a few new technologies. Women use waxing, shaving, bleaching, plucking, depilatories, electrolysis and lasers to remove unwanted hair. Because women look to images of popular culture, hair removal has become a very time-consuming step in the Beauty Ritual.

Facial hair removal, across time and culture, seems to be the least contested and “extra” hair has always been unwanted by women, thus securing its place in the beauty
Many women would rather discover their sex tape on YouTube than admit they have facial hair” (Allure, April, 2008). Women do not want to have the same facial hair as men; it is not feminine. Upper lip, chin and even cheek hair is removed, and the only hair left is the eyebrows and even they are plucked and shaped to match fashions or personal preference. Eyebrow fashion has changed over time from The Mona Lisa and Marlene Dietrich in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, where women shaved off or plucked and then penciled in their eyebrows, to the 1980’s and Brooke Shields and Mariel Hemingway, where eyebrows were worn thick and heavy, more natural (Synnott, 1993). Though the fashions have changed, attention to the eyebrows has not. An article in Cosmopolitan (2008), states that “the perfect arches can upgrade your entire look” and that “great brows are like the day after a night of great sex: Nobody knows what you did, but they notice you look incredible.” Facial hair is also the most visible and noticeable by others and so it has become important in social situations, especially within the workplace. Its removal has, in a way, become an expectation. In 1983, a woman was fired from YMCA for refusing to remove her ‘excessive hair growth’. Her argument was ‘If God gave it to me, why should I have it off?’ (Synnott, 1993). Employers expect good grooming. Even during the Feminist movement, when women rebelled, letting their leg and pubic hair grow wild, they maintained and removed their facial hair (Synnott, 1993). The norm of removing facial hair is universally observed – even most men shave regularly, often daily.

However, it is harder to determine what is desirable in relation to body hair, “reactions to which vary far more than to head hair, both historically and geographically” (Cooper, 1971). Though body hair removal is not completely contested, it seems to be
something women complain more about, but as stated before, most women do not want to have the same type and amount of hair as men; and in the United States, it is clear that what is desirable is the absence of body hair. Women use their preferred methods of hair removal to remove leg, arm, stomach and other hair they think may be visible to others in one situation or another. Their mostly bare bodies set them apart as feminine and are also a sign of personal care and hygiene. This is not a new phenomenon. Ovid suggested as early as 2 BC that women shave their legs; and in most ancient civilizations, women removed all their body hair because it was thought to be ugly and unclean, and of course, bare bodies were more sexually attractive to men (Synnott, 1993). Today, if a woman takes the time to remove body hair, she is viewed as caring about herself and her appearance, and therefore, portrays self-confidence. With the opinion being that “hairy legs are men’s legs,” most women take the time to remove body hair. But they also try to spend as little time removing it and look for techniques that keep hair away longer. An advertisement for Sally Hansen’s Extra Strength Spray-On Shower-Off Hair Remover says you “Just spray. Shower Away. Done” and the results “last days longer than shaving” (Cosmopolitan, 2008). Sally Hansen’s Naturally Bare Honey Wax Hair Removal promises “results that last up to 8 weeks” (Allure, 2008). So although the techniques have changed, body hair removal appears to have always had a place in a woman’s routine.

One area of the body seems to be getting more attention in recent years – the pubic area. “Only over the past ten years or so has it become fashionable to spend hours and dollars removing hair from the pubic bone [. . .]” (Cokal, 2007). The private areas of both men and women were never shown in any popular culture medium before the late
20th century. Women focused their beauty efforts on what was seen by other women and men in society; they did not waste time or money on the upkeep of something never seen by anyone beside their husband. The Sears catalogue advertised razors and depilatory creams as early as the 1920’s. But World War II caused a reduction in the availability of cloth used for swimsuits and that meant smaller, more revealing swimsuits and “increased potential for stray hairs” (Cokal, 2007).

Women used razors or even sandpaper, and sometimes burned the hairs away. This determination to remove hair at any cost shows again that the hair was considered scandalous and intolerable; to let a stray curl peek through would have been to demonstrate an execrable lack of self control and a louche, dirty sexuality. Worst, it would have been ugly (Cokal, 2007).

The hair removal practiced by women after World War II was minimal. Again it only focused on what could be seen by others. However, what was once a very private and seldom seen area of the body has become public. “Pornography has ‘transformed the pussy into a legitimate object of style, like legs or lips; it’s so widely represented that it has become public – though largely viewed in private.’ [ . . . ] and the fashion is the direct result of pornography’s influence on popular culture” (Cokal, 2007). Pornography, the pictures of celebrities in their “barely-there” swimsuits, and issues of Playboy present women with no or very little hair in their pubic area. Women have easily made the assumption that men prefer hairless pubic areas because men are known to be attracted to or turned on by the women portrayed in popular culture. Hence, women have begun to spend their time and money removing it; they think it is expected and preferred.

“Whether they shave or wax, use a stencil, leave a ‘landing strip,’ or go all-bare, women who remove their pubic hair are catering to a particular version of sexiness that is focused on the viewer [ . . . ] and his expectations” (Cokal, 2007).
Pornography, *Playboy* and other such magazines, and celebrity photos exposed women and men to the hairless vagina, but this form of hair removal has become even more public with the advice and tips, as well as product advertisements presented in beauty magazines. These beauty magazines present pubic hair removal as part of a woman’s beauty ritual and hygiene routine. “Our culture particularizes and aggressively markets hygiene, and these days, one of the ways for a woman – traditionally considered the ‘impure’ sex – to show she’s clean is to remove her private hair” (Cokal, 2007). But it is not only hygiene. Magazines suggest that removing pubic hair is a way for a woman to pamper herself, giving her an excuse to pay attention to herself. “*Cosmo* can’t say how many women are shaving, or how much they take off – the magazine has made a valiant effort to put the new fad into a context of scientific and historical data. By doing so, the writers make readers more comfortable with the practice and even create a certain amount of pressure to participate in it” (Cokal, 2007). The pressure to participate has allowed this time-consuming and often annoying and uncomfortable form of hair removal to find its way into the routine beauty ritual.

Throughout history, the act of hair removal has hardly changed. Women have always removed their facial and body hair and more recently pubic hair. However, the amount of hair removed has increased over the years, leaving women with less and less hair. Technologies have also changed, but only slightly. Extremes like electrolysis and laser hair removal give wealthy women more techniques to choose from but the age-old techniques of waxing, plucking and shaving have remained just as popular with the average woman. The biggest change can be seen in the increasing expectations and pressure exerted on women by popular culture to remove hair. Though women have
always removed it, it seems that in today’s society, women are becoming increasingly weary that hair removal is such a major part of their beauty ritual.

**Tanning**

The color of a person’s skin has always been an indicator of wealth and social status. Today, a good tan is associated with health and beauty, “if not wealth and celebrity.” Before the 20th Century, tanned skin signified that a person was from the lower or working class. It suggested that these individuals spent their time working outside. Pale, fair skin was an indicator of wealth and upper class, suggesting these individuals spent their time indoors, relaxing and taking part in more leisurely activities. Women spent time trying to make their skin look as pale as possible with powders, sometimes even using blue chalk to make veins more distinct and make their skin appear translucent. However, in the late 19th century, beauty articles suggested that women start getting a little sun – a slight tan for the summer was desirable and even healthy for a woman’s skin (Corson, 2003). But it wasn’t until 1923 that tanning became popular by accident. Coco Chanel stepped off her yacht in Paris with a deep suntan after a trip to Cannes. Even though she stated she had just spent too much time in the sun, she started a trend that continues today (Cool Nurse, 2007). Fashions were also changing in the Twenties and women were showing more skin. Lifestyles were also changing and women left the house to enjoy outdoor, “feminine”, activities. F. Scott Fitzgerald may have added to tanning’s popularity when in his novel, *Tender is the Night*, he wrote about celebrities tanning themselves on the beaches of the French Riviera (Sunshine Tan, 2007). From the 1920’s on, tanning continued to grow in popularity.
In the 1950’s, bikinis and the full-body tan were all the rage. Tanning lotions, creams and dyes were created to simulate tanning or to patch up pale spots in real tans. These, however, were not seen as a substitute for sunbathing because a real suntan was a symbol of wealth and leisure (Sunshine Tan, 2007). For most women, sunbathing was limited to summer months, but if a woman had a tan in the winter months, it meant she had enough money to vacation in warm, exotic places. By the 1970’s, an entire generation had baked their skin to a nice, even bronze and tanning had found a secure place in a woman’s beauty ritual. But women also had less time to sunbathe as they became increasingly involved in the workforce, even if they had more money. The effects of tanning on a woman’s health were not thought of until the late 1970’s. Generations spent years tanning and sunburning without knowing about the severe damage done to the skin or about the increased risk for skin cancer. It wasn’t until 1979 that the FDA concluded that sunscreens could help prevent skin cancer and developed the first rating system for SPF’s (Cool Nurse, 2007). By the 1980’s, it was known that tanning damaged the skin and could cause skin cancer, but it didn’t seem to phase women. In 1985, the American Academy of Dermatology started a public education cancer campaign to warn the public about the dangers of overexposure to the sun, but tanning continued. Beauty magazines included advice on how to achieve and maintain a great tan and provided advertisements for products. The tanning lotions, creams and dyes created in the 1950’s remained but there were more options, and the products worked better with the advent of new technologies. For women who did not have the time to spend hours in the sun, but still wanted a “real” tan, tanning beds were created, and they quickly became as popular as sunbathing. “People could get a good base tan with just a few sessions in a tanning bed
and deepen their tan into a golden bronze look with a few more sessions” (Sunshine Tan, 2007).

In the 1990’s, there was no sign of the popularity of tanning decreasing. On the contrary, visiting a tanning salon became a weekly thing, even in the summer months, and sunless tanning machines were created for those who worried about exposing themselves to ultraviolet light (Sunshine Tan, 2007). Women started tanning at earlier ages since it was seen as a symbol of beauty. In 1997, a survey in *Seventeen* magazine stated that “2/3 of teens say they look better with a tan and feel healthier, more sophisticated” (Cool Nurse, 2007). But skin cancers became more prevalent. It was estimated that in 1999, 9,800 people would die from the disease and 7,800 of them from malignant melanoma (Cool Nurse, 2007). In 2000, overexposure to the sun became an even bigger concern with the decrease in the ozone layer; allowing for more harmful ultraviolet rays and increasing the risk of skin cancer and sunburn. But again tanning remained popular and still held a secure place in a woman’s (and girl’s) beauty ritual.

Today, there seems to be no evidence of the tanning craze letting up, but there has been a huge increase in the number of women who choose sunless tanning. “Tanning is here to stay, despite the increasing anxiety about sun damage to the skin. The boom in celebrity culture coincided with ‘secrets of the stars’ make-up tips and none was more accessible than fake tan” (Corson, 1972). The pages of beauty magazines are full of advertisements for tanning products, most being for sunless products. One ad for Jergens’ Natural Glow states, “Give the sun a little healthy competition [. . .] 9 out 10 women said Jergens gave them color as natural as a sun tan” (*Glamour*, 2008). Another ad for Physicians Formula’s Bronzers shows a picture of a creature with pale skin plus bronzers
equaling a smiling, tan girl; “Use bronzers everyday for a healthy-looking glow without the damaging effects of the sun” (People, 2008). An advertisement for a Hawaiian Tropic Self Tanner says “Feel the luxury of the Islands” (Cosmopolitan, 2008). With so many products to choose from, magazines give advice on which products are the best. Beauty magazines also include articles on the risks of skin damage and skin cancer, but the articles don’t seem to deter most women from sunbathing without taking preventive measures. However, the majority of women have recently begun to use sunscreens religiously to save their skin and prevent premature aging. Women are more frequently looking to sunless means of achieving the “sun-kissed” look that is still popular today and this includes the women of popular culture – actresses, singers and models. So although tanning has remained a significant part of a woman’s beauty ritual, women are smarter about the ways they achieve bronze, “beautiful” skin.

Nails

Nail care is a relatively new step in women’s beauty ritual. The first nail fashions were seen in the 19th century. “Almond shaped nails, short and slightly pointed are the ideal. Nails are sometimes tinted with scented red oil and buffed with a chamois cloth” (NAILS Magazine, 2004). The orange wood stick was invented in 1830, finding a place among the metal tools, acids and scissors used for manicuring. But significant, widespread nail care was not seen until the 20th century. The number of nail products dramatically increased. Nail files, buffers, polish pastes for softening cuticles and creating shine, bleaches and liquid nail polishes made up a woman’s nail care arsenal. Every woman’s dressing table would have these products in them and would be used on a daily basis (Corson, 2003). In 1932, Revlon was born and created matching nail and lip
colors. Women had more color options when polishing their nails. In the 1940’s, Rita Hayworth made long, oval, red nails famous and women rushed to salons to replicate the look. After Revlon, a number of other nail care companies sprung up. The 1970’s was the age of the artificial nail and women began to frequent salons. Women could easily add length to their nails or cover up unhealthy ones (NAILS Magazine, 2004). In the 1980’s, nail drills were invented and widely used and a number of new polish colors were created by a number of companies. By 1982, there were over 80,000 nail technicians working in the United States and 13,435 nail salons. NAILS Magazine was also created in 1982. By the 1990’s, the working woman considered nails as a part of her overall professional look.

Today, women still consider nails as part of the overall professional look but also part of their beauty and attractiveness. There are hundreds of nail colors and designs to choose from and a number of different techniques for artificial enhancements, such as sculpting gels, acrylics, and silk wraps. Women still look to actresses, singers and models for nail fashions and advertisers capitalize on it. One advertisement for OPI states that their nail lacquer is “The Stars’ Star [. . .] the choice of Hollywood’s best and most beautiful. Even if you’ve never walked a red carpet, OPI will make you look as if you have” (Shape, 2008). Magazines also offer nail advice; whether it be tips on how to give oneself a manicure or what the nail color is for the season. Advertisers also let readers know what the colors for the season will be. In Glamour’s “Beauty Notebook” section (2008), an article on nails offers “Tips for perfect polish” and recommends that nail colors should be “Chic, pretty, happy pastels that’ll chase that last bit of chill away.” Another OPI advertisement states, “If you love color, this is your season to shine. Bold,
bright, and beautiful, color was the big story on the fashion runways [. . .] Nail Lacquers in the India Collection by OPI are the ultimate accessory” (Elle, 2008). Most women go to salons to get manicures and pedicures. It is their little reward for the hard work they put in at their jobs or at home with their children. Tips on how to apply polish perfectly may not be as important, but the belief that nails are an important part of a woman’s overall appearance and her beauty ritual is well understood.

The Beauty Ritual: Conclusion

With every step of the beauty ritual being presented, one can see how burdensome it really is for every-day women to meet the standards created by popular culture. Although it seems like a woman’s goal to achieve a look like that of a celebrity is unrealistic, it is do-able – with a lot of time, money and effort, and of course, the right tools. But we must also remember that actresses, singers and models were once every-day women. Granted these women are usually already seen as more beautiful and attractive than other women, but it was not until they entered the realm of stardom that they needed to meet an even higher beauty standard. They go through the same rituals; they just have more time, more money, better tools, and of course, a head start. But luckily for every-day women, the steps within the beauty ritual can be completed. Every woman can get her nails done or do them herself. Every woman can suntan or use sunless tanning products. Every woman can shave her legs and pluck her eyebrows. Every woman can wash and style her hair, and get it cut to fit the latest fashions. Every woman can take care of her skin and use make-up to cover up flaws or enhance beauty. So although it is burdensome, every woman takes part in the beauty ritual because it is the easiest way to
get closer to the image of women presented in popular culture, and supposedly desired by men.

But the concern is not with whether or not a woman can go through the processes of the beauty ritual. The concern is with the existence of the beauty ritual and the obsession with female image. The pressure to be beautiful has become overbearing as popular culture’s unrealistic images persist, resulting in emotional, psychological, social and sometimes, health problems. What is more concerning is the presence of the beauty ritual among young girls. Over time, girls have begun taking part in all beauty practices at earlier ages. This has led to the appearance of psychological and social problems at earlier ages and this is disheartening. Childhood is a time when girls should have few cares in the world, except for maybe the fear of “cooties” – girls are growing up too fast. Unless things are changed, these girls will continue throughout their lives with an increasing obsession with their image, and an increasing set of practices within their beauty rituals.

However, there is hope. The emergence of campaigns like Dove’s Pro-Age have shown there may be a chance for self-acceptance. In a perfect world, all of the unrealistic images would be removed and replaced with images of the average woman, and the beauty obsession would diminish over time. Women will always care about their appearance whether the images are replaced or not, but women would not feel the need to compete with other women or obtain an image that is almost impossible to achieve. But there is little, if any chance for this anytime soon, and the cosmetic industry, plastic surgeons and advertisers wouldn’t have it any other way. However, if these key influences changed their ideals and followed in the footsteps of companies like Dove,
there is a chance that women would have a much easier time meeting standards of beauty, or at least have an easier time accepting themselves the way they are.

References


*Cosmopolitan*. (March, 2008).


http://www.sunshinetanningbeds.com/history.htm
