Identity and the Market

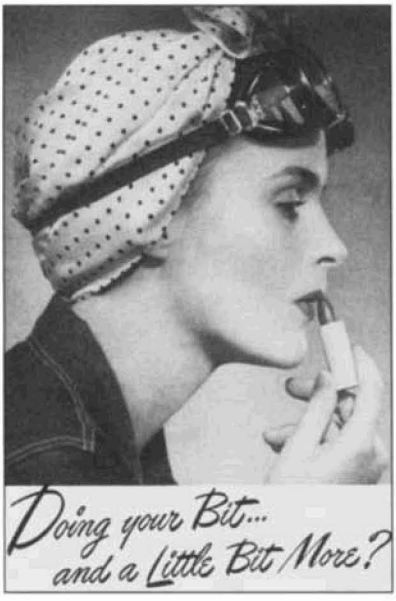
By 1940, manufactured beauty formed a major sector of the economy and informed the everyday practices of women. In the decades that followed, mass media tied cosmetics ever more closely to notions of feminine identity and self-fulfillment, proliferating images of flawless female beauty—mostly youthful, white, and increasingly sexualized. The made-up face would now be regulated by fashion seasons and firmly bound to the internal workings of the female psyche. Nevertheless the postwar look of perfect femininity disintegrated in the last third of the century. Ironically this development owed something to the efforts of the mass beauty industry itself, which linked distinct social identities to cosmetics consumption through market segmentation. However, it was also the mounting discontent among African Americans, feminists, and gay activists that challenged the widespread acceptance and commercial exploitation of the governing beauty ideals. From the 1960s onward, ideas that had long shaped Americans' understanding of cosmetics were challenged anew in a vigorous political debate.

• • •

When the United States entered World War II, some questioned whether women should continue to seek "glamour as usual" in a world bent on destruction. In the *New York Times* novelist Fannie Hurst criticized frivolous, self-absorbed women who tarried in beauty salons and complained over shortages of silk stockings and makeup. Observing that women were on the threshold of a new era, she said, "The history of their role in this desperate struggle will not be written in lipstick." Replying to Hurst, a "red-blooded, red-lipped" housewife countered that American women's brave response to the national crisis was not diminished but enhanced by reasonable attention to appearance. Beautifying showed "women's own sense of pride" and respect for the men "we try most to please." She asked, "Would we help them more if, when they are about to perish for freedom's sake, we showed ourselves to them worn with sorrow and dejection?" Lipstick worn as a badge of courage signified "iron in our hearts," the "red blood of the true American woman."[1]

In the wake of the Depression and rise of fascism, the attractive, made-up woman of the 1940s bespoke the "American way of life" and a free society worth defending. Indeed, she had become a global commodity and symbol, exported in Hollywood movies and promoted by cosmetics firms. American women were "beautifying themselves according to the 'American plan,' " Max Factor, Jr., proclaimed. "The women in most of the other countries in the world have been, too." Even before Pearl Harbor, journalists had worried that a "national glamour shortage would seriously lower national morale." Once the United States entered the war, pinups and snapshots of the glamorous girl next door served to remind soldiers of the home front and women's service to national ideals.[2]

Cosmetics advertising during the war continued to use the old sales pitch of love and romance, now set in USO camps and seaports. But increasingly a conscious message emphasized women's part in winning the war. These new appeals were not directed at "those who have noth-



ing to do but sit around and look pretty for the returning warrior," a trade journal noted, but at the "new cosmetic market—women war workers."[3]

Among the memorable wartime ad campaigns was Tangee's, which appeared in major women's magazines in 1943 and 1944. Tangee exalted the function of such "mysterious little essentials" as lipstick in a world at war, praising women's success in "keeping your femininity—even though you are doing man's work." Tangee conceded that "neither our cosmetics, or anyone else's, will make you a better WAC, or a better war-worker, or a better wife." But it claimed a large symbolic and psychological boost from lipstick, which enabled women to "do" as a man and "appear" as a woman. Lipstick helped women to put on a brave face, "conceal heartbreak or sorrow," and gain "self-confidence when it's badly needed." Picturing the Venus de Milo with the Statue of Liberty, Tangee equated the protection of freedom and democracy with the protection of beauty. Lipstick symbolized "the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely—under any circumstances," and this, Tangee concluded, was "one of the reasons why we are fighting."[4]

It is tempting to dismiss these views simply as the work of ingenious advertisers, but they carried far beyond the pages of magazines. The national emergency unsettled conventional ideas about women's capabilities. As they tackled jobs traditionally held by men, women faced strong pressures to maintain their femininity through grooming and makeup. Even the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, organized during the war, ordered women ballplayers to take makeup lessons from Helena Rubinstein and to appear ladylike on the

Above and opposite: *Tangee advertisements*, Ladies' Home Journal, *1944, 1943.*

Pratt and Read poster.

field. With the sudden increase of women war workers, psychiatrists and efficiency experts alike testified to the importance of cosmetics in countering fatigue, improving morale, and increasing productivity. Lockheed and Sperry installed beauty salons and cosmetics stations; Boeing offered charm classes in its factories; the Seattle Navy Yard's management and unions provided advice on good looks.[5]

While feminine beauty was promoted as a powerful tool to spur output and lift morale, it was circumscribed by carefully defined boundaries. At Pratt and Read's aeronautical division, one placard, urging women to be cautious with adhesives, used the slogan "rashes from glue keep glamour from you," but another warned that glamorous looks—long curls, frilly blouses, and high heels—had no place on the production line where "it's smart to dress the part." As if to underscore women's temporary place in defense plants and heavy manufacturing, workingmen often complained about women "prettying up" on the job, suggesting that they were more devoted to the mirror than the welding torch.[6]

Earning high wages but faced with shortages of clothing and other

Women war workers making up, 1941 and 1942.

style goods, working women did spend heavily on cosmetics. Leg makeup, produced since the 1920s as a substitute for stockings, became commonplace. "Victory Girls," seeking fun, companionship, and sometimes sexual encounters with servicemen, openly declared themselves with flirtatious gestures and heavily painted faces. At some war plants, their looks exacerbated tensions within the community over single women's sexuality and autonomy. A company official at Moore Dry Dock in Seattle, apparently pressured by his wife, "went about among the girls in his jurisdiction with a bottle of acetone and a handkerchief and forced them to remove their nail polish and lipstick."[7]

The centrality of cosmetics in women's lives became a pressing issue for the federal War Production Board, charged with restricting the manufacture of consumer goods to conserve metals, chemicals, and other materials needed for the war effort. Some government officials voiced skepticism about cosmetics, believing that demand was produced artificially by the advertising industry. Trying to decide whether to ration beauty products, the board questioned magazine editors and consumers about cosmetics use, especially the "influence of age, race, [and the] changing of women's sphere of activity to [the] war effort." Many women stated their willingness "to give up wrinkle eradicators, nail polish, and what not if it will help sock the Axis." In a 1942 survey of Baltimore consumers, women over forty declared that most beauty preparations were inessential; they had come of age just before cosmetics had become a mass industry. Younger women, however, viewed powder, rouge, and cold cream as necessities. And there was one item deemed indispensable by nearly all—lipstick.[8]

In July 1942, the War Production Board's Order L-171 restricted some cosmetics manufacturing and packaging and banned new products from the market; production of the most popular cosmetics was to be reduced by about 20 percent. Relative to other limitation orders, L-171 was quite mild. Nevertheless, within four months the board rescinded its order and called for women to curtail cosmetic purchases voluntarily. Certainly the cosmetics industry had exerted steady pressure on the government, and some board officials argued that needed

materials, like metals used in powder compacts, could be adequately conserved through existing regulations. But at the same time, the War Production Board, sensing public opposition even to the limited order, had undoubtedly come to appreciate cosmetics in a new light—as vital to securing women's commitment to the war effort.[9] Beautifying had evolved from an everyday grooming habit into an assertion of American national identity.

Following World War II, the beauty industry entered a rococo period and, like other consumer industries, began to produce a limitless array of goods, colors, and styles. By 1948, 80 to 90 percent of adult American women used lipstick, about two-thirds used rouge, and one in four wore eye makeup. "Women are now constantly buying additional shades of Lipstick, even *before* they completely use most of them up," Max Factor reported. Although department stores and drugstores remained the leading outlets for cosmetics, growing numbers of women shopped for glamour at new self-service supermarkets, discounters, and shopping malls. Door-to-door firms expanded from their traditional rural territory into middle-class suburbia: as 70,000 Avon Ladies rang doorbells, the company's sales skyrocketed from $10 million in 1940 to almost $87 million in 1956. Many firms still followed the prewar style of operation, depending on "cookbook magic"—the "intuition and hunch of a few cosmetic chemists"—but increasingly the largest corporations invested in scientific research and systematic product development.[10]

The promotional strategies cosmetics firms had developed in the 1920s effloresced in the postwar years—extended product lines, coordination of cosmetics with fashion seasons, tie-ins, and fads exploited as a matter of course. High-powered advertising remained fundamental to the industry. Revlon exemplified these trends: Charles Revson, the American-born son of Jewish immigrants, joined with his brother Joseph and chemist Charles Lachman to form a nail enamel company in 1932. By the 1940s Revlon introduced new colors of lipstick and

nail polish each fall and spring fashion season, developing elaborate campaigns around original and enticing color names. These proved so popular that women named their bowling teams the "Fatal Apples" and the "Pink Lightnings." In record time, the company pushed one new product after another into the market. Locked in fierce competition with Hazel Bishop, a chemist who had burst into the cosmetics market in 1950 with an indelible lipstick, Revlon waged "lipstick war" on television; when the firm sponsored the television quiz show "$64,000 Question" from 1955 to 1958, sales tripled. By the end of the 1960s Revlon had become the cosmetics industry's equivalent of General Motors, with six separate product lines intended to appeal to different classes of consumers.[11]

From its earliest days, the cosmetics industry had practiced market segmentation by dividing its customers into class, mass, and African-American markets. In the 1940s a more nuanced effort to define consumers according to demographics and lifestyle took shape. Women's magazines like *Seventeen* and *Charm* targeted high school girls and working women respectively. Consumer panels and cosmetic juries—early focus groups representing distinct demographic sectors—enabled businesses to tailor their advertising to housewives, students, and other categories of women. Teenagers and even children emerged as distinct segments of the market. "We should recognize teenagers on their own," urged one marketing expert, "develop products, develop packages, prices that fit the teenagers." Ten-cent sizes, originally promoted as samples, soon sold expressly to teens. In the early 1950s, Tinkerbell pioneered the sale of grooming aids for children, at first mainly bath products but later powder and lip gloss. The African-American market also gained new attention from mass-market firms; black newspapers, magazines, and consumer surveys promoted the view that African-Americans' wartime experience had not only escalated the demand for civil rights and better jobs, but had intensified their desire for consumer goods. Cosmetics manufacturers even renewed their interest in marketing to men.[12]

Still, adult women remained the most important consumers of

beauty preparations. Cosmetics use continued to vary across the country, with expenditures highest in urbanized areas and lowest in the rural Northeast and South. Many Southern white women followed the prewar practice of applying vanishing cream as a powder base, but Northern and urban women purchased modern tinted foundations. Surveys of African-American consumers found striking regional differences in the late 1940s: In Knoxville black women reported few cosmetics purchases, but in Philadelphia over two-thirds used hair products and over half used skin preparations.[13]

Following strategies of persuasion codified before World War II, advertisers delivered a therapeutic sales pitch, illustrated ads with images of flawless beauty, and made consumption integral to achieving the feminine ideal. Directing attention to both facial surfaces and psychological depths, the beauty industry sharpened its paradoxical pitch. Pond's, for instance, promised that cosmetics would produce a "real, warm Inner You."[14] One *became* a woman in an act of making up that was, incongruously, *inherent* to feminine nature.

Makeup products and styles in the 1950s served this notion of a performance that disguised its performance. As Coty put it, women could "wake up beautiful." Indelibility became a cosmetic ideal. Hazel Bishop captured one-quarter of the lipstick market with a product that "stays on you, not on him." Here was a lipstick that did not come off on napkins and men's collars, that need not be reapplied, that a woman could even wear to sleep. Unlike the flapper of the 1920s, who reveled in the public cosmetic gesture, the woman who chose indelible lipstick effaced makeup's artifice.[15]

Liquid and cake foundations that provided "coverage" also permitted an illusion of permanence. Widely used since Max Factor introduced Pan-Cake makeup in 1938, water-soluble foundation in cake form gave the face a certain look: It concealed uneven skin tones—which were, indeed, natural for most women—under a matte, uniform, and finished surface. Women often perceived foundation to be too heavy or even dirty, however, and by the late 1950s cosmetics firms were touting foundations that were sheer yet covered the skin. Cover

Girl perfectly captured the contradictory goals, advertising itself in the 1960s as "clean makeup," "so natural you can't believe it's makeup."[16]

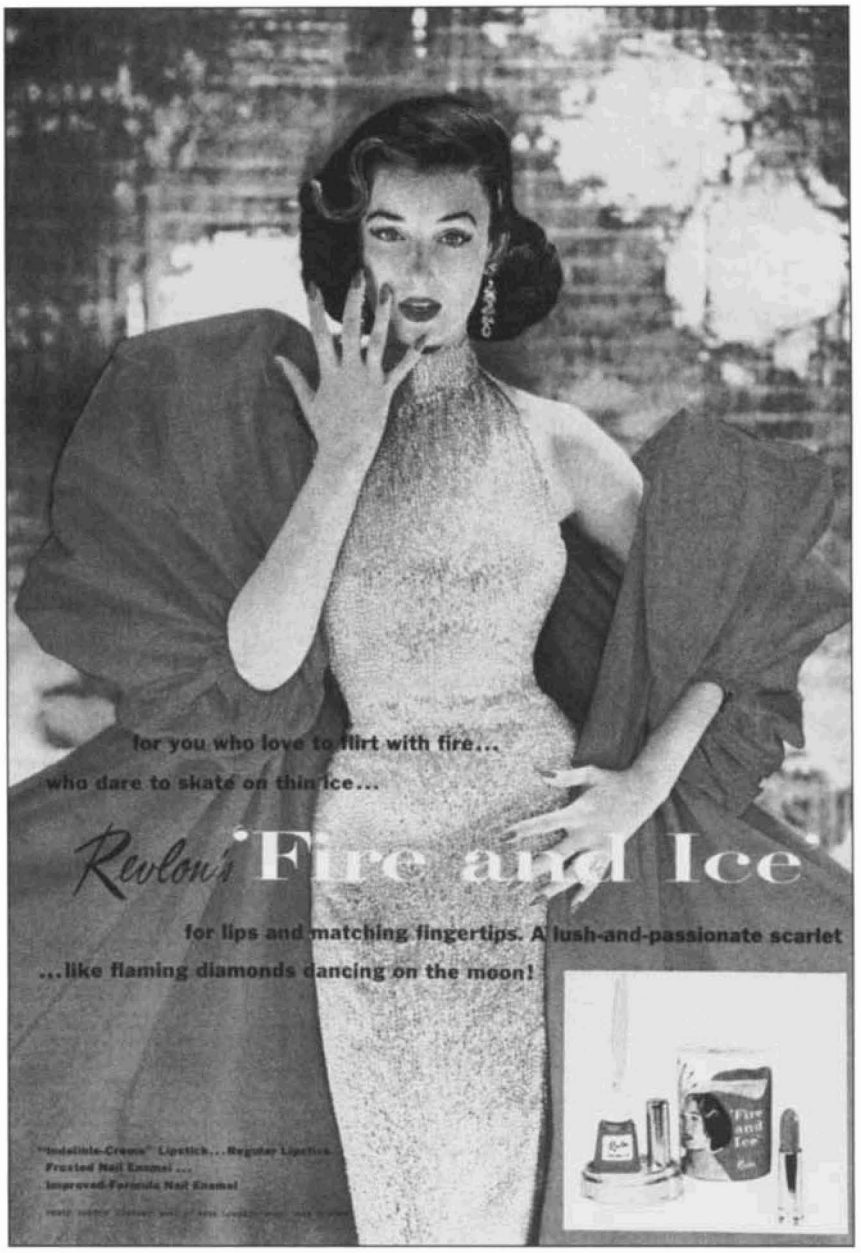
The simple act of putting on lipstick or foundation became even more aligned with therapeutic claims than it had been in the 1930s. Psychologists and social scientists weighed in, warning women that too much paint reflected the unresolved psychodynamics of childhood, a misplaced effort to attract father and attack mother. One psychiatrist called makeup a female pathology, a form of "extreme narcissism" through which women "reduced themselves to a symbol of the genitalia." However, most supported the cosmetics industry's view that lipstick and mascara were natural signs of maturing femininity. In one article on "mentally healthy beauty care," stories of average women using cosmetics were illustrated with photographs of patients in mental institutions, both groups gaining a psychological lift through makeup. Advocating a "middle road," psychiatrists advised each woman to use all the cosmetic aids possible to create the appearance of her real self.[17]

The war's end was the catalyst for this psychological interpretation of cosmetics. Movies, advertising, and advice literature reflected the view that women were bound to experience "harsh inner conflicts" as they faced the traumatic return of husbands and boyfriends, the death of loved ones, and their own job losses. Now, a Pond's executive explained, they were searching "not for romance alone, not for marriage and children alone, not for beauty alone, but for something far deeper." Martin Revson, Charles's brother and a Revlon executive, similarly spoke of a reservoir of emotion and desire that could not be tapped by the old advertising appeals. Invoking Henry David Thoreau and oddly anticipating Betty Friedan's description of the "problem that has no name," he observed that "most women lead lives of dullness, of quiet desperation." The answer lay not in seeking educational and employment opportunities, as Friedan would later argue, but in a "wonderful escape" into the fantasy world of feminine beauty.[18]

In the postwar years, sexual allure and desire were celebrated as key attributes of the normal female psyche. "By femininity I mean all

the aspects of sexuality which permeate the female personality," wrote G. M. White in the *Ladies' Home Journal,* "including her 'way of thinking,' dressing, walking, talking . . . her tone of voice, her gestures, the faint perfume of soap and cosmetics and lack of whiskers."[19] This conception greatly influenced how the cosmetics industry addressed women consumers in the late 1940s and 1950s. For years advertisers had acknowledged women's sexuality but contained it safely in the story of heterosexual romance and marriage. They dealt gingerly with women expressing their sexual desires, relying on double entendre and flirtation. Even movie and romance magazines, whose beauty ads explicitly connected makeup and sex appeal, maintained a logic that downplayed women's sexual assertion: A woman acted upon her desire for a man by making herself beautiful, in order to catch his attention and awaken *his* desire.

Fire and Ice, a Revlon lipstick color introduced in 1952—"for you who love to flirt with fire, who dare to skate upon thin ice"—definitively changed the sexual resonance of cosmetics advertising. The "innermost essence of Woman" included her fantasies and sex life, Charles Revson maintained, for "the genuinely sexy woman is the 'good' woman." With Fire and Ice, Revlon portrayed a fantasy of the "high class tramp" who "somehow you know [is] really a nice girl." The ad featured a beautiful model in a low-cut, sequined gown, sporting a come-hither, knowing expression. Revlon women had "lips parted and moist," and wore "molten fabrics as extra skin," breathlessly wrote a journalist in *Printers' Ink.* Accompanying the photograph was a questionnaire for consumers to see if they were "ready for Fire and Ice." It asked conventional questions about heterosexual romance but also quizzed women on their desire for sensuous pleasure, their adventurousness, and their iconoclasm: Do you dance with your shoes off? Do you secretly hope that the next man you meet will be a psychiatrist? If tourist flights were running would you take a trip to Mars? "Every woman in the civilized world" answered the questionnaire, observed Beatrice Castle, Revlon's fashion director. "It was like having a cheap analysis."[20]



Revlon's "Fire and Ice" advertisement, 1952.

Strikingly, Fire and Ice portrayed a moment of pure glamour, featuring, as one advertising executive put it, a model "totally floating in space . . . in a complete world of her own." There was no heterosexual encounter here, no romantic scene, just a self absorbed—or self-sufficient—woman. How ordinary consumers perceived Fire and Ice is not documented, but the ad itself offered a mix of visual and verbal cues. In one sense, Revlon had transported the image of the eager sex-pot, common in men's magazines such as *Esquire,* into the marital and domestic milieu of women's magazines. But the advertising women who developed the campaign claimed that the new postwar Italian movie stars—"tough" but "all woman"—had inspired them. The ad was intentionally tongue-in-cheek, they insisted, and presented a playfulness in which women were in on the joke, not a "burlesque" that demeaned and objectified them. Warning other advertisers to maintain that distinction, Revlon advertising executive Kay Daly observed that "the difference is devastatingly different to women." Daly's perceptive comment nevertheless failed to acknowledge how hard it was to draw that line in a culture increasingly saturated with perfect images of sexually alluring women.[21]

The sensual Revlon woman who "only went out at night" was one of several beauty types in the postwar decades. The old taxonomic convention of the cosmetics trade responded to the increasingly calculated effort to carve out markets, position products vis-à-vis competitors, and create specific brand personalities and looks. When Noxzema developed Cover Girl as a medicated makeup for teens as well as adults, it knew that a frankly sexual appeal would anger girls' parents. So advertisers consciously established the product's image against the Revlon woman with a consistent look of daytime, wholesome beauty. Interviewed about the campaign years later, they repeated the mantra that Maybelline was "for not too intelligent girls," "Revlon was for tarts," and "Cover Girl was for the nice girls."[22]

For all their differences, the Cover Girl and the Revlon Woman were both standards of perfection against which most women would come up short. Many contemporary writers have vividly recalled the

pressures to conform to those beauty images as they came of age, their feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of them. As early as the 1940s, social scientists reported that the quality teenage girls most wanted to change in themselves was their physical appearance. This anxiety was surely aggravated in the next two decades—a period of relatively confining roles for women—as advertising, magazines, and television produced a succession of feminine images that were often contradictory and sometimes even undermined the ruling models of beauty that young women strove so hard to match. Changing the face each fashion season, producing an array of beauty requisites, delineating narrower markets based on lifestyle, and making a therapeutic appeal the cosmetics industry compelled consumers to continually interrogate, experiment with, and renew their looks.[23]

These contradictions are especially apparent in the socialization of girls into cosmetics use. Where to draw the line—between proper grooming and unseemly glamorizing, between children's make-believe and adult makeup—vexed parents, schools, and manufacturers. Girls were taught the lesson of better appearance through cosmetics, yet cautioned against looking too sexual and mature. Most firms refused to sell eye shadow, rouge, and tinted lipstick to young girls, although Tussy did market a Budding Beauty Glamour Set. In the name of good grooming and personality development, schools, girls' clubs, and stores offered classes in beautifying, a trend that had begun in the 1930s but steadily accelerated in the postwar years. Pond's, Noxzema, and other mass marketers distributed booklets and filmstrips on "teen beauty," prepared grooming units for home economics classes, and hired beauty consultants to talk to teens.[24]

The girls themselves made experimenting with makeup a central part of teen culture in the 1950s. A sizable minority of preteens began to wear makeup to school and social events, around the time that they experienced the onset of menstruation and other physical changes of puberty. More so than in earlier decades, the passage into "womanhood" was anticipated and certified through the visible use of makeup. By the mid-sixties, teenage girls, who comprised 11 percent of the pop-

ulation, bought nearly one-quarter of all cosmetics and beauty preparations.[25]

As was true in the 1920s and 1930s, makeup styles marked the generations, but teens in the sixties created strikingly distinct looks. Eye makeup, used relatively infrequently into the 1950s, became extraordinarily popular, and the "big eye look" altered the balance and appearance of facial features. Thick bands of black eyeliner, glittering eye shadow, and white lipstick sharply distinguished girls from their mothers, whose taste ran to red lipstick, light mascara, and a matte complexion. Generational differences in makeup styles mirrored more radical conflicts over sexuality, social life, and politics.[26]

At the same time, makeup fashions identified cliques and cultural groups within the teenage world. Sociologist Jessie Bernard contrasted the clean-cut, middle-class cheerleader, "a breathing replica of a *Seventeen* model," to the working-class "majorette" wearing "gaudy" makeup; the former were often college bound, while "twirlers" clustered in the secretarial courses. Makeup traced bonds of friendship among girls who shared the exuberant triumphs and dismal failures they encountered in their efforts to achieve the right look. Indeed, the embrace of cosmetic excess—not only the vast quantities of makeup applied but the time spent in doing so—led some schools in the early 1960s to forbid makeup, extreme hairdos, and tarrying in the rest rooms.[27]

The beauty trade was deeply implicated in these trends, as it sought to navigate parents' concerns and girls' desires. Cover Girl, Maybelline, and Revlon all created beauty images that meshed closely with the ways high school students themselves classified girls into cliques and codified their evolving sense of personal identity. Yet experimentation and play were possible, and in many ways encouraged, by the profusion of ads and advice, the variety of makeup ideals, and the endless supply of new products.[28]

Encouraged by manufacturers, even male consumers revised conventional views of masculine identity by incorporating toiletries into their postwar appearance. Military service during World War II had

transformed men's formerly haphazard grooming habits. Neat hair, a close shave, clean body, and polished shoes were all subject to inspection and policing. Indeed, for servicemen such matters could upset traditional hierarchies: Farm boys and working-class youth could attain status and rank in part by attending to good grooming. Army PXs stocked a wide variety of aftershave lotions, skin creams, deodorants, talcum powders, sunburn remedies, and lip pomades. Seaforth distributed a Commando Kit filled with miniature grooming aids for men at the front who went without showers and a change of clothes. Even cologne was "used by the G.I.s as a substitute for water when there are no bathing facilities handy." Soldiers wearing loud or exotic scents and sailors with pirate-style hoop earrings—called "Asiatics" by their shipmates—may have found a sub-rosa means of expressiveness in regimented lives that mixed danger with drudgery. Like women's cosmetics during the war, men's toiletries were promoted as "morale boosters." Observed the president of Shulton, maker of Old Spice: "It is our feeling that toiletries are necessary for men and women to maintain their self-confidence and their courage."[29]

Promising "better living through better grooming," postwar firms produced a new array of men's toiletries with "no froufrou." Reinforcing masculine stereotypes, package designers rejected pastels for plaids, red, gold, and black, and made colonial apothecary jars, Scotch whiskey jugs, and practical Lucite containers to "fit a man's hand." A variety of scents were marketed as manly: Pine suggested the great outdoors; cognac and leather evoked the men's club; citrus was invigorating. The fastidious man of quality may have promoted expensive aftershave in the 1930s, but two other masculine images now appeared in toiletries advertising: the military hero and the romantic male, whose use of aftershave enhanced his lovemaking abilities. By the late 1950s, major women's cosmetics companies began to develop male product lines, such as Arden for Men, which included face cream, cleansing mask, lip pomade, and hair spray.[30]

Journalists noted the breakdown of men's inhibitions with a bemused tone that masked a certain uneasiness with the new "vanity of

the American male." "After priding himself for generations on his stale old hunting shirt and his stubbly beard, he has suddenly grown self-conscious," *Business Week* reported in 1953. Its survey found that men shaved on average five times a week, much more regularly than before the war; half used aftershave, and over one-third used deodorant—a figure the magazine called "startling." Most strikingly, the connection between fragrance and effeminacy weakened: The "Scented Sixties" were celebrated as the "decade of the male breakthrough."[31]

The commercialization of men's appearance was often explained, paradoxically, by men's need for a sharp look in corporate America *and* by a new hedonism that rejected the conformity demanded by the business world. Important elements in this market were teenagers and college students, who, beginning in the 1950s with the fad for Canoe, had by the 1960s become major purchasers of men's grooming aids. The advertising manager for Swank's Jade East, a popular aftershave, explained: "I was told on one southern campus that girls wouldn't date boys who didn't use them."[32]

Although men's toiletries had earlier played with sex appeal—Mennen's slogan was "the he-man aroma that wows the ladies"—the theme became pervasive in 1960s ads that "imply a dash of fragrance leads to a rash of heterosexual activity." Believing in its power as an aphrodisiac, men made musk surprisingly popular. But in much of this marketing to men, the need to counter effeminacy turned romance into sexual aggression and violence. Swagger, Si Señor, Macho, and Score were typical trade names. "What helps a man handle a woman?" one ad asked. "Dante knows. This time treat yourself to Dante. Next time she won't forget." In television commercials using clips from the James Bond movie *Thunderball,* an announcer intoned: "When you use 007, be kind," "careful, it's loaded," and "licensed to kill . . . women." The initial advertising campaign for Jade East, running as the government began to build up military forces in Vietnam, depicted a sensual Asian woman in a jungle fantasy of Oriental exoticism, female desire, and submission. The commercial's closing line: "If she doesn't give it to you, get it yourself." Stripping the beauty image of notions of mental

health, self-improvement, and romance that dominated women's cosmetics marketing, these ads put women firmly in their place.[33]

Criticism of cosmetics was muted in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although sometimes seen as symptomatic of the baleful influence of consumerism, cosmetics rarely earned activists' or social critics' sustained attention. Indeed, when the obscure socialist journal *Militant* attacked the cosmetics industry in 1954 for selling women useless products, the editor was astonished to receive a stream of protest letters from women readers, "the kind of response that only an important issue deserves." Readers' defense of cosmetics echoed that of working women decades before. "I'm no sucker for beauty-aid ads," reader Helen Baker wrote, "but economic pressure—I have to earn my living—forces me to buy and use the darned stuff." Older or unattractive women needed cosmetics to compete in a job market where office work required glamour and factory bosses expected women to present an "illusion of the necessary vigor and youth." Many criticized the *Militant*'s paean to the moral beauty of ordinary working women: "There is nothing beautiful in the dishpan hands, the premature wrinkles, the scraggly hair, the dumpy figures in dumpy housedresses." Hard work, monotony, poor health, and the struggle to survive robbed working-class women of the beauty and self-fulfillment to which they were entitled. "I wish to improve and enjoy my physical appearance and at the same time improve and develop all the other sides of my personality," wrote one reader. "And I think all women have a *right* to both these things."[34]

The most penetrating criticism of the American beauty ideal continued to come from African Americans. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks exposed the racism and violence behind the mask of white femininity in a 1959 poem on the death of Emmett Till. Brooks imagined the inner monologue of the white wife whose beauty served as a symbol of white supremacy and pretext for lynching African-American men. She carefully puts on her makeup before serving breakfast to her husband, a participant in Till's murder:

Whatever she might feel or half-feel, the lipstick necessity
was something apart. He must never conclude
That she had not been
worth It.[35]

African-American appearance dramatically reemerged as a public issue after the war. Expenditures for personal care products among African Americans rose steadily. A new generation of black entrepreneurs capitalized upon the growing market. The place Walker and Overton had once had in the industry was now held by George Johnson, S. B. Fuller, and Rose Morgan. *Ebony*, a glossy general-interest magazine for African Americans appearing in 1945, made beauty a central preoccupation. The civil rights movement sparked a renewed attack on discriminatory practices in commercial beauty culture. Black women filed lawsuits against white-owned salons that refused them service, and industry workers fought to eliminate race-specific requirements for hairdressers and cosmetologists. By the mid-1960s, beauty salons in urban business districts were increasingly integrated, with about one-quarter of black beauticians working in white-owned shops or on white customers. This was a "double-edged sword," *Ebony* noted, since integration drained business from neighborhood shops run by black women. Those shops still served as community institutions, and during the civil rights era they spread news of protests and organized voter registration drives.[36]

African Americans also protested their exclusion from the mass media's promotion of American beauty. Black manufacturers purchased spot commercials on local radio but could not sponsor television shows. In 1954, when Rose Morgan wanted to broadcast a "series of 'sing-offs' among church choirs" that would include ads for her beauty preparations, she "ran into a stone wall" at the Dumont television network. Segregated beauty pageants, modeling agencies, and women's magazines also came under attack. An African-American agency, Brandford Models, opened in 1946, with models posing in bathing suits and sportswear Brandford called "freedom clothes."

However, large agencies and mainstream fashion magazines did not hire even the occasional black model until the late 1960s. *Mademoiselle* featured the first makeovers for "distinct racial beauty types" in 1967. It was not until 1974, however, that the first black model, Beverly Johnson, appeared on the cover of *Vogue*.[37]

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, observers began to notice a decline in African Americans' use of hair straighteners and bleaches. The growing political and cultural interest in Pan-Africanism and black nationalism found expression in appearance. Opera tenor George Shirley wore "his hair quite long and natural, in a manner which has already become identified with a number of leading diplomats from Africa," wrote a columnist for the *Amsterdam News* in 1962, and "even more startling is a similar trend among the ladies" started by South African singer Miriam Makeba. In perhaps the most famous hair-care scene in American letters, Malcolm X described the physical and psychic pain of hair conking, a straightening process using lye and other chemicals that created the stylish hair of zoot-suiters. In Malcolm's view, conking signified the depths of black alienation from body and spirit. Only on joining the Nation of Islam did Malcolm X claim his true black identity, with a new appearance that included short, unprocessed hair.[38]

By the mid-1960s, young civil rights workers were adopting natural, unprocessed hair as an expression of black solidarity and authenticity. "We, as black women, must realize that there is beauty in what we are, without having to make ourselves into something we aren't," explained Suzi Hill, an organizer in Chicago. She hoped to end the frustration and self-loathing of black women who "go through a lifetime of hiding themselves." Black nationalists repudiated a white aesthetic felt to be oppressive with the phrase "black is beautiful," the raised fist, and the iconic Afro. With little awareness of a complex history, black critics condemned the African-American cosmetics industry for colluding with white supremacy, destroying African pride, and exploiting the "pitiable escapist dreams of the black masses" by selling hair straighteners and skin bleaches.[39]

At first the mainstream African-American press featured few images of the new natural style. Straighteners and bleaches continued to be widely advertised. Catching *Ebony*'s editors by surprise, readers in 1966 complained about the magazine's long-time depiction of black women, which featured models and beauty queens with European features, light complexions, and straightened hair. Shirley Works wrote, "I am sick of seeing Negro women 'lift' makeups intended for the 'natural' look on white skin, transformed to the 'unnatural' look on us." She worried that her daughter would see only bleached blonde models in the mass media. "I've looked at white fashion and glamour magazines," she wrote, "and go through mental gymnastics trying to figure what and how much can be appropriated." When *Ebony* ran a cover story called "Are Negro Girls Getting Prettier?" angry letters assailed its choice of models. "Why don't you put some Negro girls on your front page so we can see," fumed one reader, while another sarcastically commented, "It should be titled 'Are Negro Girls Getting Whiter?' " Soon thereafter, *Ebony* featured the revolution in African-American beauty in a story on "The Natural Look," with a twenty-year-old civil rights activist, not a professional model, on the cover.[40]

The natural look was "more than mere style," even to those who were not activists. "I just feel more black and realistic this way," said an art student who no longer straightened her hair, while a model noted that "it was the natural thing to do." Members of an older generation, however, sometimes perceived earlier stereotypes in the new style. "The ladies who are practicing this look are just plain, lazy, nappy-haired females," complained one man. In a Chicago church, a minister spontaneously preached a sermon on a woman with natural hair: "I have spotted something in our midst that is *evil!*" (Ironically, sixty years earlier Madam Walker had struggled to convince the clergy of the morality of her hair-care system.) One *Ebony* reader criticized the natural as a return to primitivism: "Let's not lead our women back to grass huts." Another questioned the reduction of aesthetics to politics. "Why should Negro women be obliged to prove their racial pride by wearing their hair natural?" she wrote. "Why should Negro women have a mis-

sion to extol their ancestry by sporting a certain haircut?"[41] The natural look had brought about a reappraisal of black appearance; first as a radical symbol, then as fashionable style, it retained its political associations with black pride, authenticity, and freedom.

The 1960s marked a decisive break in the way American women made and understood their appearances. After that decade, the regime of fashion fractured: Women no longer changed their hemlines, silhouettes, and colors in lockstep response to Paris designers and fashion oracles. Beautifying became highly politicized in a climate where social movements recast personal matters as public issues. The counterculture promoted an ideal of the "natural body," evident in men growing long hair and beards and women rejecting makeup. The natural body was considered authentic, real, erotic, and beautiful, a challenge to the artifice and repression of postwar society. Although not always espousing the philosophical underpinnings of this aesthetic, many high school and college students adopted its look as a form of expression, or simply as fashion.

Animated by the counterculture and the example of black women activists, young white feminists mounted an attack on beauty ideals and the beauty industry. Tellingly, the first public action of the women's liberation movement was a demonstration in 1968 against the Miss America beauty pageant. Protesting women's enslavement to commercial beauty standards, one hundred feminists filled a trash can with makeup, curlers, hair spray, bras, and other beauty aids, and crowned a live sheep America's beauty queen. In her classic, *The Feminine Mystique,* Betty Friedan had already blamed mass consumer culture, including women's magazines and advertising, for deflecting women's aspirations and limiting their roles in society. Only in the late 1960s, however, did feminists indict the beauty industry as a cornerstone of women's oppression.[42]

The Miss America protesters equated the "commercialization of beauty" with the more generalized categories of sexism and racism.

Women succumbed to the "temptation to be a beautiful object," observed activist Dana Densmore; "many of us are scarred by attempts as teenagers to win the promised glamor from cosmetics." Criticizing the dominant view that beautifying fostered women's self-esteem, she wrote: "Somehow it always just looked painted, harsh, worse than ever, and yet real life fell so far short of the ideals already burned into our consciousness that the defeat was bitter too, and neither the plain nor the painted solution was satisfactory." The more women try to achieve beauty and admiration, "the less reality our personality and intellect will have," she argued. "How can anyone take a manikin seriously?"[43] Combining an assault on consumer culture with a new emphasis on patriarchy, these critics charged that the male-dominated capitalist economy manipulated female desires and anxieties in ways that served men's personal and political control of women. Unattainable standards of beauty had an effect at once intense and narcotic: Women were driven into an absorption with appearances, into making themselves the objects of men's visual pleasure. Thus beauty practices simultaneously diverted and excluded women from intellectual work, meaningful social participation, and politics.

Feminists' condemnations of commercialized beauty reached deeply into American culture in the 1970s and after. Many young women began to use makeup more sparingly, with some giving it up entirely. Books on how to make natural cosmetics at home proliferated, their recipes reminiscent of the cosmetic tradition of earlier centuries. By 1980 toy manufacturers came under attack for selling makeup kits designed for young girls. A vast literature indicted the merchandising of women's faces and bodies in the mass media, the growth of plastic surgery, and the pressure to purchase an endless array of preparations.[44]

The "no makeup look" startled cosmetics producers and, according to a Cover Girl publicist, they initially pretended the sweeping attack on beauty products "wasn't happening." But the industry soon regrouped. Responding selectively to elements of the feminist and countercultural critique, manufacturers ingeniously repackaged products

and redefined advertising to address the increasingly politicized understanding of appearance. They embraced the natural look with organic cosmetics and invoked the "liberated" woman as a beauty type. Revlon's breezy advertisements for Charlie perfume received praise within the trade press for showing that "women quite obviously had become emancipated." The view manufacturers had long promoted—that identity was an aesthetic choice any woman could put on and wash off—proved surprisingly malleable.[45]

A new focus on scientific skin care as a necessary grooming practice deflected criticism that cosmetics objectified and demeaned women. Introduced by Estee Lauder in 1967, Clinique projected its hygienic, asexual message in a number of ways, from its trade name and antiseptic green packaging, to its neutral color palette and advertising. Its "Twice a Day" ad, likening skin care to the regular use of a toothbrush, focused exclusively on the product, not on glamorous models or sexual situations. "Our consumer doesn't want to live her life through someone else," the company's president explained. "She looks at makeup as information." Clinique became the cosmetic line of choice for many professional women and feminists.[46]

Even Mary Kay Ash, an entrepreneur who gloried in "selling femininity," promoted pink Cadillacs and cosmetics home parties not as a reaction against social change but in recognition of it. Although she criticized feminists for effacing sex differences in the pursuit of equality and opportunity, Ash deliberately reached out to displaced homemakers and other women rocked by the social and economic turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. Lauding female ability, opening job opportunities in her own organization, addressing women's needs as mothers—all the while avowing women's desire to appear feminine—Mary Kay fused feminist economic aims with traditionalist ideals of womanhood.[47]

Mass-market cosmetics firms responded more slowly and often reluctantly to criticisms from women of color about racist beauty images and exclusionary marketing. They remained financially and psychologically invested in distinctive images that represented both product and

corporation. Cover Girl's advertising agency, said one staffer, went to "an extraordinary effort to get a specific look—that look is middle American, it's young, it's fresh, it's clean, it's vibrant." By the late 1960s, that look had narrowed to blonde hair and light skin, typified by celebrity models Cybill Shepherd and Cheryl Tiegs. For many years Cover Girl offered only seven shades of foundation, which suited the complexions of most white women but few women of color. Interviewed in 1991, normally eloquent advertising executives mainly voiced discomfort about discussing the racial implications of the look they had created, a look they knew had alienated a number of black consumers.[48]

Under increased pressure from women of color—and in hope of securing their business—the cosmetics industry translated the political demand for inclusion and diversity into a strategy for market expansion and segmentation. Major white-owned mass-market firms entered the "ethnic" cosmetics field after 1970. As they had in the 1920s, they often masked their identity behind an African-American facade: Alberto-Culver introduced TCB (Taking Care of Business) hair preparations, while Revlon adopted packaging similar to black-owned Soft Sheen, leading Operation PUSH to initiate a boycott of the company. Revlon also introduced Polished Ambers makeup in 1975 specifically for black women, but it did not sell well.[49]

Avon pioneered what proved to be the most successful strategy, extending existing product lines to include a wider range of foundation shades and makeup colors. Market research indicated that most women of color "didn't want to be singled out" with goods identified by race or ethnicity, but preferred to be approached "as an American." Avon also hired African-American sales agents and produced Spanish-language catalogues to improve distribution. By the 1980s, magazines and advertisers had begun to perceive multiculturalism as a fashion aesthetic. "Everybody's all-American," *Vogue* suddenly discovered. "The face of American beauty has changed to reflect the nation's ethnic diversity," the magazine exclaimed. "It's a new ideal . . . and it's big, big business." After the 1990 census revealed that one in four American

women described themselves as nonwhite, Prescriptives' All Skins and Maybelline's Shades of You, each with an expanded range of foundation tints, appeared on the market.[50]

Critics with a politicized understanding of beauty often condemn the market, but they do not live outside it. Ironically, the cosmetics industry's parade of products and looks in a time of identity politics has fostered a newly anarchic attitude toward self-display. "In the bombardment of new female images," writer Marcelle Clements comments, "it has become impossible to hold on to a unified esthetic."[51] In recent years, the political aesthetic of the natural has yielded to an intense and multifaceted reconsideration of appearance, not only among women but also among men.

Even as market researchers continued to uncover "closet moisturizer users" who secretly applied Nivea and Oil of Olay, skin treatments specifically for men began to sell well in the 1980s and represented about one-sixth of male toiletries sales overall.[52] Stepping up their efforts to align cosmetics with masculinity, Clinique started to market Skin Supplies for Men in the mid-1980s, with skin-care products similar to their women's offerings but packaged in steel gray and renamed in "simple, direct, clear language." Thus an exfoliating liquid became Scruffing Lotion, the men's moisturizer, M Lotion. Designers at Macy's renovated the men's toiletries department "to create a separate identity . . . a strongly masculine feeling." Manufacturers sought alternative sites for distribution—health clubs, gyms, and sporting goods stores—in a misplaced attempt to avoid a "gay image." Some companies even tried to masculinize rouge or blushers by calling them "bronzers." Guerlain's Terracotta for Men replaced the women's compact with a container shaped like an Apollo spaceship; an ad promised "natural color, so matte and transparent, you'll be the only one to know." Marketing No-Color Mascara to women, Max Factor found that the shiny colorless gel was being purchased by men "who want eye-definition without detection."[53]

Although men's cosmetic practices, particularly involving face makeup, still remain largely hidden from view, there are signs that some cosmetics use may be becoming a more accepted part of male identity. A *Gentlemen's Quarterly* survey in 1989 reported men's awareness of the advantages of a "more polished appearance," and ascribed it to the influx of women into business and the professions; indeed, young professionals constitute the largest market for men's high-priced toiletries and fragrances. The increased visibility of the gay community has also influenced masculine appearance. Vivid feminine makeup styles continue to appear in the ongoing gay tradition of camp and drag. More generally, however, many gay men purchase and use cosmetics as part of a regimen of maintaining physical health and attractiveness. The short hair, muscular body, and attention to skin care adopted by many gay men have been widely promoted by high-style men's magazines, models, and fashion designers. "A man still has to be a man," a fragrance manufacturer insists, but being one—and looking like one—now definitely involves preparations and practices once shunned as unmanly.[54]

For many women, there has been a striking reassessment of the links between identity and appearance. When the Noxell Corporation, maker of Noxzema and Cover Girl, studied the impact of feminism on consumers' views in the late 1980s, they found that "cosmetics still play the same roles in their lives that they've always played." As an advertising executive explained, "It's what allows them to get out the door in the morning, it's what allows them to feel good about themselves, it makes them feel dressed." But if women still sought the pleasures of makeup, they were increasingly suspicious of the therapeutic view of cosmetics. They stressed a new need for personal and financial control in their lives, a striving for security and independence. They criticized beauty advertising—the Cover Girl happily posing for the camera—for failing to reflect the aspirations and looks of "real people" like themselves. When women were asked to invent an obituary for the Cover Girl, they expressed both cynicism and hostility toward her flawless image. As one stated, she "died from too much oil control makeup." To

these women, perfection "was something someone else looked for in them, as opposed to what they looked for [in] themselves." Their stated desire to look attractive, now expressed in the language of feminism, had been subtly redefined.[55]

This reassessment has occurred especially among women outside white middle-class culture. It is not that women of color have rejected beauty wares: Indeed, African Americans spend three to five times more on personal-care products than do white Americans. The explanations they offer form a continuity with views expressed decades earlier. "If you're black," said one woman, "you are trying your very best to make sure there is no reason you might be disregarded or thought less of." But in addition, they have begun to question both the mass media's normative beauty ideals and the dominant feminist critique. Latina, Asian, and other women of color have joined black women in exploring the meaning of self, community, and appearance. Long stereotyped as exotic, or excluded altogether from beauty representations, they have announced their refusal to portray white women's "other" and called instead for commercial images in which they could recognize themselves.[56]

The multicultural look, and the self-congratulatory tone of its promotion, has been censured by such critics as bell hooks as a new form of exploitation masquerading as inclusion. Commercial media, in her view, cynically depict racial diversity to profit from a liberal image. African Americans still do not control the terms of their representation, she emphasizes: Models with light complexions and hair weaves still signify African-American beauty in magazines and on television, while those with dark skin or African features are often stereotyped as hypersexual or primitive. Although equally critical of advertising and media, other writers have begun to explore the creativity and pleasures of beautifying among women of color. They have come full circle, recalling the straightened hairstyles and hairdressing rituals of their youth with great poignancy: the smells of hair pressing, the movement of hands expertly applying oils and combs, the talk and laughter of black women in the kitchen or the beauty parlor. "Was it an enactment of a

degradation inspired by a bitter inferiority," asks critic Gerald Early, or "a womanly laying on of hands where black women were, in their way, helping themselves to live through and transcend their degradation?"[57]

Women from all walks of life now express an awareness of complexity and ambiguity in the culture of beauty. In Los Angeles in the early 1990s, women of color interviewed by sociologist Natalie Beausoleil attacked both the beauty industry and moralistic white feminists and professional women who insist on "natural" makeup. Students and secretaries alike described the rejection, anger, and self-loathing they have experienced over features that did not match the white, blonde ideal. Yet they also proudly fashioned their looks by drawing upon traditional aesthetic practices and by inventing new styles. Working-class Latinas cherished visible makeup and the art of applying it as part of their cultural heritage. A new sense of choice seems to have surfaced. Some black women wore cornrows, while others who straightened their hair denied that their beauty practices implied white emulation. When asked by the *New York Times* why she dyed her hair blonde, an African-American college student explained, "I just wanted to see how it looked, not because I was trying to be white." This "freeing up of style," as Alvin Poussaint has called it, has incorporated looks formerly despised as inauthentic and suspect into an aesthetic that expresses both individuality and cultural identity.[58]

Nowhere has this "freeing up" been more pointedly rendered than in the lesbian community. In the 1970s, many lesbian feminists adopted the natural aesthetic, simultaneously rejecting the look of heterosexual femininity and the tradition of butch-fem role-playing. By the mid-1980s, however, a new appreciation for camp and drag, and a fervent debate over sexuality, caused a reassessment of androgynous looks. As gay theorists in their academic writings condemned notions of the natural, "lipstick lesbians" appeared all made up on the street. Did they destabilize dominant ideals of beauty and sexuality, or were they sellouts who passed as heterosexual?[59]

Women, gay and straight, claimed self-fashioning as a political right in the 1980s and 1990s. African-American women wearing corn-

rows and beads, fired from their jobs for not conforming to the corporate image, sued employers for racial discrimination. A few college campuses and municipalities imposed regulations against "lookism" or "looksism." After a boisterous debate, the city council of Santa Cruz, California, passed an ordinance in 1992 barring discrimination based on appearance in employment, housing, and public accommodations. "Because I have a tattoo on my head, I'm treated like a cretin," testified one young woman, protesting employers' refusal to hire her. High school students, sent home from school for appearing in "costume style makeup or hair colorings," also claimed their constitutional rights had been violated. "This is a freedom of speech issue and an issue of identity," said one mother defending her pink-haired daughter.[60]

Even Mary Kay's corporate identity could be turned on its head, albeit briefly, by a zealous Cincinnati distributor calling herself FeyKay, whose Go Grrrrl! Cosmetics for Queers, "the first lesbian on-line cosmetics service," surfaced on the Internet in 1994. FeyKay claimed she was "the only out gay girl in the organization" to serve transsexuals, transvestites, and lipstick lesbians. Stating "we are here, queer and fabulous," FeyKay attacked "the heterosexual hegemony of the make-up industry" that had identified the made-up woman solely with the pursuit of men and marriage, rendering gay men and lesbians invisible. She redefined the Mary Kay home party as "a place for glam slams, insights, and good beauty advice with the possibility of a political cutting edge"; a percentage of the profits would support AIDS research and activism. Significantly, FeyKay did not reject cosmetics but played upon a notion of makeover promoted decades earlier: "Cosmetics are fun, they are about creating identities, representing our ideas about ourselves to others." This view admitted no state of nature: In a society in which looks, display, and goods are pervasive and inescapable, beauty standards could only be disrupted from within.[61]

The public debate over cosmetics today veers noisily between the poles of victimization and self-invention, between the prison of beauty and

the play of makeup. The feminist argument continues to be widely heard. Naomi Wolf's recent best-seller *The Beauty Myth* recapitulated the 1960s critique for contemporary women. Beauty standards, Wolf argued, are a "political weapon against women's advancement," a "violent backlash against feminism." Through them, a capitalist and patriarchal "power elite" controls modern women who have begun to make political and economic gains. Women who are beautiful or who achieve beauty according to the imposed standards are rewarded; those who cannot or choose not to be beautiful are punished, economically and socially.[62]

Certainly this critique has increased women's skepticism toward the beauty industry, but it has hardly stopped them from buying cosmetics, reading fashion magazines, trying out new looks, and sharing makeup tips with friends. The connections between appearance, identity, and consumption, forged initially by women beauty culturists at the beginning of the century, have inexorably tightened at its end. Moreover, the cosmetics industry has hastened to absorb and profit from the challenges mounted against it, even as it produces the normative ideals of beauty for which it is criticized. If image and style have long offered women a way to express cultural identities, now those identities offer business a new set of images to sell.

Still, the power of those commercial beauty images and the vigorous critique directed against them obscure the many forces that shape the cultural practice of beautifying. Employers make appearance a job requirement; families and peer cultures socialize girls into the necessity of maintaining a public face; differences in social class, region, and ethnicity mark themselves on eyes and lips. But the culture of beauty has never been only a regimen of self-appraisal and surveillance. Women have used makeup to declare themselves—to announce their adult status, sexual allure, youthful spirit, political beliefs—and even to proclaim their *right* to self-definition. As in the past, cosmetics offer aesthetic, sensory, and psychological pleasures to those pressed by the obligations of home and work. And women still perceive beautifying as a domain of sociability, creativity, and play.

When women put on a face, they continue to express ideas of naturalness and artifice, authenticity and deception, propriety and danger, modernity and tradition. Making up remains a gesture bound to perceptions of self and body, the intimate and the social—a gesture rooted in women's everyday lives.