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Men and Makeup: is this a practice of subverting masculinity?

Masculinity is still very much an inherent part of our society today, where men are socialized to conform to certain masculine ideals. However, with the proliferation of social media some men are able to resist these ideals. These men take social media like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as their protest sites, where they use make-up and beauty products as their tools to change the narratives of gender binary. Like women, they paint their faces with products like foundation, eyeliner, lipstick, and various pop color eye shadow to express themselves and their identities out in the public unapologetically.

As Foucault said, “where there is power, there is resistance,” similarly, these men in social media try to resist the power structures that society enforces on them. In the last few years, there has been more acceptance for men using makeup, so much so that various beauty brands have now started marketing their make-up products for men, which was traditionally confined and promoted for women only. Whether it is using make-up or wearing supposedly “feminine” clothes, men are attempting to redefine fashion and make-up as gender neutral.



Figure 1: Men take social media like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as their protest sites, where they use make-up and beauty products as their tools to change the narratives of gender binary
Credits: Instagram Id @wingitwithankush

“Make-up is for everyone,” Ankush Bahuguna, a social media artist and a digital creator who identifies as a cis-man writes in his post. He runs an Instagram account, Wing it with Ankush, where he experiments with make-up on himself, his family members and others. Media has

portrayed him as someone who is “breaking make-up barriers [CITATION Jah21 \l 1033],” but Bahuguna dismisses it by saying that “he is no revolutionary [CITATION Jah21 \l 1033].” He admits that he has not spearheaded this movement but the queer artists and other people from the community have done it way before him.

Bahuguna realizes the reason behind his visibility and appreciation is his cis identity. He is on spotlight because he is a cis-man. The LGBTQIA+ community has been practicing this art form a very long time, but they still face backlash for it. He says, “When members of the LGBTQIA+ community do the same, they are beaten, ostracized, disparaged and excluded. I am doing the bare minimum compared to this community. These double standards exist in society. I want to make my audience aware of this hypocrisy [CITATION Aks20 \l 1033].” While acknowledging his privilege, he also believes in the importance of amplifying the voices of the queer community. He says, “The queer community is the real torchbearer of this movement. Since the content they make has largely been undermined or pushed out of mainstream context [CITATION Aks20 \l 1033].”



Figure 2: Digital Content Creator, Ankush Bahuguna experiments with make-up on his social media account @wingitwithankush and believes makeup is for everyone Credits: Instagram Id- @wingitwithankush

Another digital creator and fashion stylist, Siddharth Batra, who also identifies as a cis-male, echoes a similar concern. He says while he is happy that he is being applauded for applying make-up in public, it is “equally tragic that many people are subjected to crimes and heinous activities for the same things he does [CITATION Nik21 \l 1033].” Batra shares how it is a struggle to not to give in to the societal standards set for men. He writes on one of his posts, “If make-up helps me to feel my best then I’d do it. On some days, I use products to conceal my dark circles and on some, my emotions. I just serve my own personal purpose every day. It

sounds easy, but it isn't. I try not to do things because I have to conform to societal standards; I do it because I want to. It is a struggle every day, but I will never stop trying." He also spearheads a popular hashtag called #GuyBeauty on Instagram where men post pictures of their make-up experiments and where people of different identities also come together to support and normalize the idea of make-up and men's beauty.



Figure 3: Digital Content Creator Siddharth Batra advocates for men's beauty and loves experimenting with clothes, that are predominantly considered "feminine" Credits: Instagram Id- @siddharth93batra

The mutually exclusive notions of masculinity and femininity are integral to gender hierarchy that govern the social and gender relations in our society. This hierarchy is maintained through various institutions which bolster the power relations between sexes. Religion, law, media, language, mythology are amongst some of the institutions that have been erected to police and control the gender hierarchies in society.

Being tough, emotionless, strong (read muscular), and protective (of "their" women) are some of the characteristics of masculinity that men are expected to play. From a very young age, they are socialized into cutting their hair short and are taught to behave like a "man." And if they fail to conform to these expectations, they are punished for it. Many men also share on social media their experiences of violence as a result of not conforming to masculine ideals.

A social media user on Instagram shares his story. As a young boy, he was bullied and laughed at for using "ponds powder." He writes, "I can't forget those days in college when I was bullied because of some skin care products in my closet. When people in my office found out that I use moisturizer, they exaggerated this as a joke and circulated it within their groups. I even remember the peculiar look of the lady in the cosmetics shop, where I was searching for a foundation for myself."



Figure 4: Instagram user, Jishnu S Shankar loves doing make-up. He shares how he came a long way from being bullied for using ponds powder to now confidently applying eye shadow in public **Credits: Instagram Id- @jishnu_s_sankar**

At the same time, this discourse of men trying to subvert the idea of masculinity through skin care and make-up is also highlighting the fact that there is a growing acceptance among women for the idea of men using make-up and beauty products. The boundaries of masculinity and femininity are therefore beginning to get blurred with these narratives. This acceptance from today's independent, confident and decisive women (who largely belong to the middle and upper class background) also play a key role in influencing gender relations in contemporary India.

This small shift in the discourse of gender roles where men do make-up also highlights the reality of society in 21st century "consumerist" Indian society. Debraj Bhattacharya in his essay, *Men will be Men? The discourse on Masculinity in 21st century Indian Print Media* writes about how men in the new century are being represented in media. He maps out the discourse around men in various magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, where men are represented as or encouraged to be "aggressive, successful, consumerist and a great seducer." He highlights how advertisements of brands selling whisky or automobiles today are pushing men to be consumerist and self-indulgent as opposed to pushing the idea of men performing the roles traditionally associated with women.

The construction of this self-indulgent and consumerist masculinity can be understood as a contrast to the masculinity forged during the colonial India, when "the identity of the colonized men or middle class *bhadralok* men was formed from the stereotypes imposed by the colonizers." As the sexuality these men exhibited during that time were supposedly "deviant" for imperialists. Mrinali Sinha in her book *Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century* talks about how Bengali men were referred

and stereotyped as effeminate by colonizers as they, according to imperialists, did not conform to the normative masculinity. She points out how this concept of effeminacy was often equated with homosexuality for these men.

Bhattacharya in his essay also explains the importance of looking at the issue of gender with class. That is, how class forges the gender relations in a particular society. He says, masculinity cannot be studied or understood without taking into account the class aspect of it. Here, in this case, men in social media using make-up products largely belong to the middle and upper class as most of the beauty products are being consumed by people with greater purchasing power. These men are educated urban professionals who are either self-employed or employed in private or public sectors.

Does make-up really subvert the idea of the gender binary?

While we talk about men using makeup as their tool to defy gender norms and stereotypes, what is equally important to note is that beauty products still very much cater to the agenda of capitalism. The idea of men consuming beauty products opens up a new market for capitalists to thrive in. For instance, there are brands that earlier were catering to women users, they have now launched male-specific beauty products for men. It is interesting to note how these brands are using gender-specific marketing strategies to advertise their products. That is, by using these strategies, brands are reinforcing the gender binary that these men are essentially trying to defy.

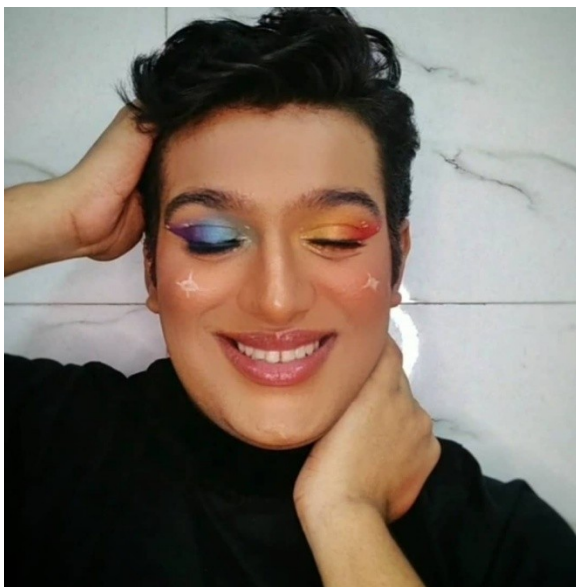


Figure 5: The growing acceptance for make-up among men has given a new market opportunity to make-up brands **Credits: Instagram Id- @rupakvashist**

Although, this discourse around men using beauty products open up conversations about art and gender, and begin to normalize beauty for men (which traditionally only women were expected to perform), it is equally important to understand that to completely subvert the ideas of

masculinity and gender binary, which are enmeshed with the realities of other structural inequalities, makeup, therefore, is not enough to defy the gender norms. Rather it can be understood as another imposition of capitalism that it uses for its own good.

There is also an unacknowledged reality that is enabling these cis-men to perform this masculinity. As Bahuguna and Batra explain, people from queer community, through make-up, have challenged the gender binary through the decades and they are still being criticized and ostracized for it. John Paul Brammer, a writer based in New York writes in *Oprah Daily* about “the difference between cultural appreciation and appropriation.” He says drawing a line between appreciation and appropriation of queer labor is tough. He defines cultural appropriation as powerful dominant group taking the customs or culture of the oppressed community without giving them their due credit. This, he says, is an “example of how the majority plucks the characteristics of disenfranchised communities for profit—without crediting or even acknowledging the creators [CITATION Joh18 \l 1033].”

Appropriating marginalized people’s customs and culture is also about power dynamics, Brammer says, “where a cisgender white heterosexual male —one who's statistically not as likely to be threatened for simply speaking in public—to use it. It's another for a queer person to do so; they could, quite literally, be putting themselves in danger.” While queer people are punished for practicing their customs, cis-men, on the other hand, adopts it to become “cool [CITATION Joh18 \l 1033].”



Figure 6: People from queer community, through make-up, have challenged the gender binary through the decades and they are still being criticized and ostracized for it Credits: Instagram Id- @alokvmenon

Alok Vaid-Menon, an American writer and media personality, who identifies as non-binary person, talks about the need for acknowledging the struggles of non-binary people. In a conversation with The Man Enough Podcast, they says, “Any movement that tries to emancipate

men and women from the shackles of gender binary has to have trans and non-binary people at its forefront.” It is important to acknowledge the reality that non-binary and trans people face as a result of non-conforming to the “heteropatriarchal and traditional gender ideology.” These are the people who trace and fight the very structures that define the ideas of manhood and womanhood and are killed for it.

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