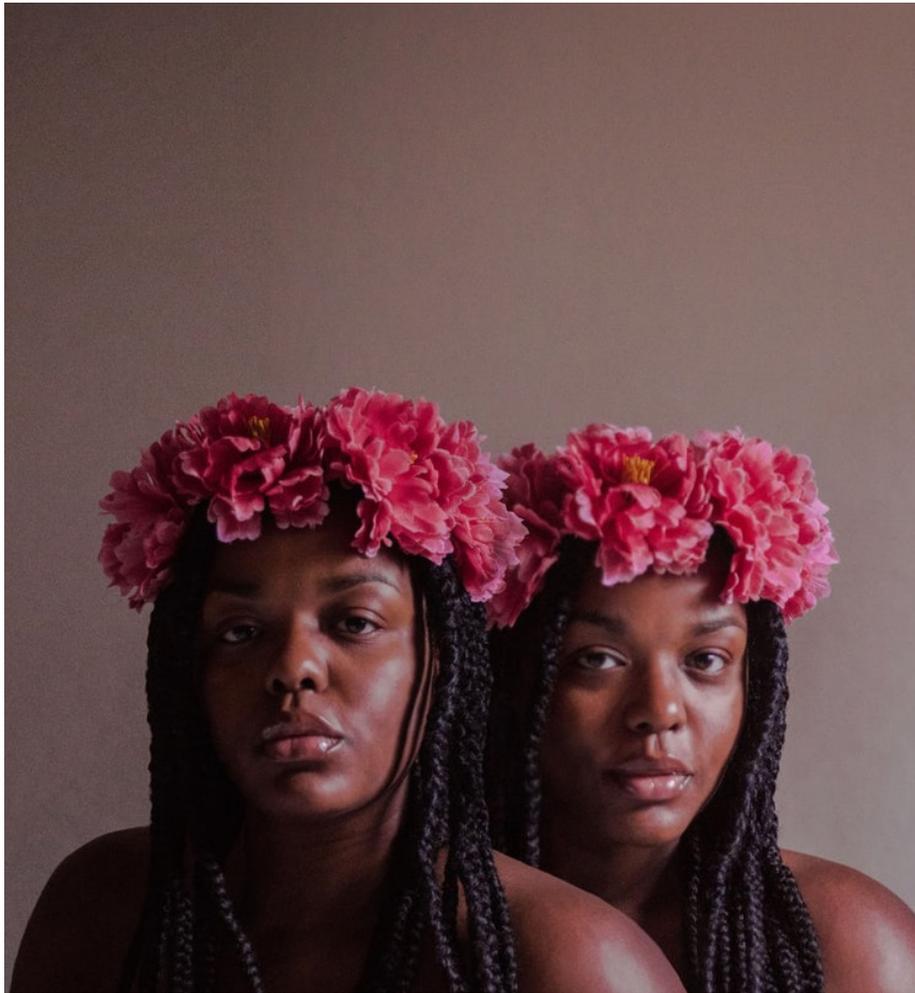# REINVENTING FEMININE BEAUTY FOR A POST-EMPOWERMENT WORLD

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Women living in the US today are incessantly told through advertisements, magazine covers, and social media to "embrace their imperfections," "be themselves," or "just do you." At the same time, they are subjected to the perfectly curated Instagram lives of peers and influencers who plug products that promise to erase imperfections, achieve the perfect beach wave, make your nose look smaller, or your lips appear bigger. The cognitive dissonance women must shoulder and carry on a daily basis is nothing short of maddening.

The dominant paradigm of female beauty confronts women with an impossible contradiction: Accept yourself fully but be perfect at the same time.

This contradiction is the result of a confluence of various socio-cultural drivers: the self-acceptance paradigm has been born out of fourth-wave feminism (and its focus on bodily autonomy) in addition to a more general cultural shift towards celebrating radical authenticity. The conflicting demand for aesthetic perfection, on the other hand, is a reflection of a performance- and self-promotion-driven society, which has yet to fully drop its "traditional" views of what a woman is supposed to look like in order to get ahead.

Over the last few years, brands specifically targeting young women have extensively tapped into the language of self-acceptance. Within fashion and beauty, in particular, advertisements championing authenticity and body positivity are the new norm. Marketing campaigns from Billie, Thirdlove and countless other female-focused beauty brands assert that being yourself means not altering the way you look in any way. The campaigns dovetail with social media trends such as #nomakeupselfie or #freethepimple, which ostensibly advocate for radical authenticity.

Concurrently, new beauty benchmarks for young women have arrived in the form of perfectly curated, deceptively effortless looking Instagram feeds of celebrities and influencers. Saturated with tutorials, tips, tricks, and prescribed habits, women can feel like they only have themselves to blame when they inevitably fall short of perfection.

In practice, this means that while well-intentioned, "self-acceptance" messages tend to simply add to a long list of expectations that women are confronted with on a daily basis – rather than freeing them from those expectations. Women now feel that they need to prove that they fully accept themselves and their bodies, by looking as natural and effortless as possible. But since they also seek to keep up, they often navigate this conflict by opting for products and procedures that perfect their appearance while hiding their traces; explaining, for example, the fact that Botox injections among women below 30 are on the rise.

Moving beyond male-defined paradigms
This is a world in which women can't win. Nor can brands that target women. The reason for this is that both "self-acceptance" and "self-perfection" live within the same male-defined and outdated system of beauty – although they respond to it differently.

The basic assumptions of this system are: 1) The aim of female beauty is to satisfy the male gaze and 2) That feminine beauty is exclusive to cis women.

The time is ripe for brands to purposely shape and celebrate a positive vision of feminine qualities, without alluding to women's insecurities or struggles.

Within this system, perfecting your body or putting on eyeliner and red lipstick is a pragmatic choice for women. Some could say it is empowering; not necessarily in a feminist sense as it doesn't address the underlying social issues but in a more basic, literal sense, because playing along with the rules of the "beauty system" provides more immediate rewards than not doing so.

It also makes sense that within this system, wearing makeup as a man is risky business – because in a world that devalues feminine culture and identity, opting for overtly feminine modes of expression threatens the patriarchal belief in male superiority.

Self-acceptance, on the other hand, is a direct rejection of this system, without transcending it. The problem is that this strategy in its most dominant form, which is based on a "0-transformation-policy," offers no valid alternative. It doesn't have a point of view on aesthetics, self-improvement, or social change. It tells women to give up some of their power without offering clear opportunities to regain it. It promises empowerment but doesn't deliver.

Moreover, the word "empowering" itself is unhelpful when talking about subverting traditional beauty because it implies that women don't have power to start with – that it needs to be given to them. It reflects and reinforces the reality of a male-centric system.

Reframing feminine beauty
To resolve women's self-expression dilemma, beauty needs to do more than empower them: it needs to express their inherent power. This development feels

inevitable as female power is undeniably on the rise.

The growing population of voting age women and women engaged in the political process is having a critical impact on the political landscape; while at the same time the growing population of college-educated women and women working outside of the home has contributed to a surge in purchasing power, with women now controlling 51% of the wealth in the US.

Meanwhile, archetypal and stereotypically feminine traits such as emotional intelligence, collaboration, intuition, and nurturing have and continue to become more valuable in a complex, knowledge-based economy and a world in crisis. Emerging female (as well as male) leaders are using them to their advantage, instead of defaulting to traditional, male-defined visions of power.

And finally, the idea that feminine or masculine traits are necessarily tied to physical gender is being increasingly challenged – by younger generations in particular. In a world heading towards a future in which femininity and masculinity supersede biological sex and femininity is as "valuable" as masculinity, feminine modes of expression can and should be positively reframed.

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There is a clear opportunity for brands to help shape a new paradigm of feminine beauty by moving away from an empowerment conversation that provides women with competing and conflicting strategies of persevering within a male-defined world and towards celebrating behaviors, aesthetics and traits that are traditionally understood to be female, while acknowledging that femininity, in essence, is a state of being, unbound from the body and physical sex.

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