

The Cultural Impact of Gender Fluid Imagery in Cosmetics Advertising

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Abstract

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the performance of gender this thesis analyzes images culled from the Anastasia Beverly Hills marketing campaign featuring pop-culture personality Patrick Starr¹ as a cosmetics model. Core questions propelling this research include the following (1) "How does the employment of a male cosmetics model impact normative gender expectations?" and (2) "How does this advertising phenomenon fit with recent ideas surrounding gender fluidity/ambiguity and towards what end?"

Introduction

There was a time when cosmetics were used by men and women alike as a sign of status—a visual and material indicator of social standing. However, this hasn't been the case for the last one hundred years, when cosmetics usage shifted, coming to emphasize (and even stand for) key attributes associated with normative female sexual attractiveness. It has only been within the last few years that the lines have started to blur. Men wearing makeup outside of the theater and music world are not being met with quite the same societal resistance they once were. There is not yet an outright cultural acceptance, but the cosmetic world is expanding whom it includes, and this shift is most obvious in the advertisements that feature cosmetic products. Companies are beginning to feature men as the canvas for their product. This is groundbreaking in that ads, especially cosmetic ads, tend to sell a lifestyle just as much as a product. The social media campaign used by Anastasia Beverly Hills for marketing their lip palette employs many female models, but more notable is the ad collection hosting the social media personality Patrick Starr. Patrick Starr is an interesting choice for many reasons, though the fact that he is biologically male is the most obvious. While Patrick Starr identifies as a gay man, he takes on many personas traditionally thought of as female through exaggerated performance in drag.

One subculture, however, celebrates makeup use as a strategic mode of self-expression and creativity: namely, those who follow a “beauty guru,” someone who makes videos and blogs about makeup for the love of makeup and education of those like them. It would be rare for someone not intensely interested in the world of cosmetic transformation to ever seek out these videos. Beauty gurus have taken something aimed at attracting the heterosexual male gaze, and broadened its appeal to also address use by a growing group of males, thus challenging and making salient a sort of celebratory critique of Western gender assumptions. What's even more groundbreaking is that some of the most popular online beauty gurus are men. While the

cosmetics world has typically been open to more fluid gender definitions, it still isn't common to see men not only talking about makeup much less wearing it or teaching its application to diverse audiences.

During the last 75 years the cosmetics industry has primarily targeted women. Hence, the models displayed within marketing materials were also female. This is what makes the use of a man in such ad campaigns, even one dressed as a woman, so striking. It's worth noting however that this practice has quite recently become a bit of a marketing trend within the cosmetics world; brands like Maybelline and Makeup Forever have also recently employed images of models challenging hetero-normative fashion ideals. Thus, Patrick Starr, who is featured in the Anastasia Beverly Hills lip palette ad campaign represents a totally new kind of model. It's also clear that the company is using his large social media following as a way to create hype around this product, but what is compelling is that they could have used a less risky approach and chosen one of the female cosmetics experts who have just as many followers. The choice to work with Patrick Starr sets Anastasia Beverly Hills apart as relatively innovative and unique. But what is even more interesting is what these ads have to say about increasingly fluid gender boundaries and dispositions.

Literature Review

As one of the leading voices in gender studies, Judith Butler has written and lectured extensively on the subject. Much of her work has been applied to advertising, a business that often has the most overt and even stereotypical representations of gender on display. Her work, and much of the work on gender studies, fails to cover the effects of men in historically female advertising roles.

Butler's *Undoing Gender* is an excellent collection of her scholarship, covers many areas of gender studies including specifically the production of gender norms and the possible repercussions they can have. She points out that gender norms are not a rule or law but something that is socially practiced as well as collectively enforced.² Butler demonstrates how culturally deep the concept of gender goes. A key question suggested by her research is "What happens when one defies these acutely ingrained social norms; do they somehow still exist on a lesser level?"³ In "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality," Butler discusses the importance of communication, pointing out that recognition is an important aspect of communication.⁴ These two ideas are significant to better understanding the impact of the Patrick Starr ad campaign. Advertisements are a form of largely visual communication. Moreover, the primary mode of communication is visual. In order to sell the product to the consumer often overt and even extreme gender stereotypes are employed. This is where Judith Butler's critical theory fits so well with the Patrick Starr ads; it's a mixing of the typical forms of advertisement communication with images challenging such gender norms. Ads like this haven't been analyzed before because they haven't existed until recently.

Also relevant to this research is Butler's formative text *Gender Trouble*. It's in this work that she shares her views on performance. When it comes to cosmetics, exaggerated performances of gender abound. This makes sense when looking at something that is rooted so

deeply in social conventions and routines—for example, the repeated act of cosmetics application as a widely adopted ritual of “doing” gender.⁵ Ads can even be considered a form of performance, as the model steps into a ceremonial replaying of cultural stereotypes. Patrick Starr as an individual fits under much of what Judith Butler has theorized about performance. One primary difference, however; he doesn’t fit the expected biological profile presupposed by the targeted viewer, possibly throwing off the whole “act.”

In yet another essay, Judith Butler reflects upon Simone de Beauvoir’s classic of Liberal feminism, *The Second Sex*. This is another work where she further explores the cultural meaning of gender. The work advances the idea that gender is directly linked to culture and the cultural interpretation of the body.⁶ This opens up gender to a great number of possibilities if pushed. Unfortunately, such ideas haven’t been explored very aggressively within the fashion industry, in that companies have only recently begun to use models challenging typical gender norms. While Butler and other theorists have written much regarding the performance of gender, cosmetics culture is rarely, if ever, discussed directly.

Judith Butler suggests that the “doing” of gender is an active process of interpreting and reinterpreting cultural possibilities. But what does “doing gender” mean for someone like Patrick Starr, who subscribes to a number of sub-communities offering sometimes-conflicting definitions? Similar to her essay on the Second Sex, Judith Butler offers a snapshot of her work on gender performance with another essay on representations of gender. In this article she calls gender identification an identity through a stylized act of repetition.⁷ This brings up an interesting point regarding Patrick Starr. A large part of his job is to not only talk about makeup, but to apply it to himself and then teach that art to others. This could be considered a repetitive act of ritual femininity traditionally defined by mainstream society as belonging to those classified biologically as “female,” thus further undermining presumed gender distinctions. Here

then, is a company making a man (albeit quite “feminized”) the marketing “face” of their product. It is said that gender is an agreement to perform and produce what is typically held to be your gender.⁸ Patrick Starr is not doing this and neither is Anastasia Beverly Hills in collaborating with him.

The effect of masquerade within the ad campaign can also be addressed by filtering these images through Eric Zhang’s work on drag and performance. The idea of mimicking women to give the illusion of a lifestyle you lack makes sense if you know Patrick Starr’s background.⁹ However, this possible framework for understanding is somewhat lost within the ad—thus those who might benefit the most from such unconventional casting may miss the deeper cultural significance of utilizing specifically Patrick Starr as a model.

There has also been extensive scholarship on the relationship between men and advertising, particularly fashion and cosmetics advertising, and the responses to these ads including, “Does Sex Sell?”¹⁰ and *Women Can’t Park, Men Can’t Pack: The Psychology of Stereotypes*.¹¹ Scholarship also exists on the pervasive impact of the male gaze in works such as Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”¹² and “Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the “Normatization” of the Female Body in Western Culture” by Diane Ponterotto.¹³ However, my research indicates a lack of scholarly material addressing the cultural effects of a male performing as a female in contemporary advertising. Although, recent scholarship addressing this topic as it applies to work by artists such as Sylvia Sleigh (who put a feminist spin on genre painting by recasting the classic figure of the Odalisque as male) may prove valuable to unpacking these somewhat similarly functioning advertising images.

Research Question

How does featuring the image of a male cosmetics and fashion celebrity (in drag) within a major Instagram advertising campaign impact definitions of gender normativity and fluidity?

Methodology

This paper will apply a critical-theoretical approach to the analysis of the Anastasia Beverly Hills cosmetics marketing campaign. More specifically, I will analyze images from the promotion featuring the well-known YouTube personality, Patrick Starr as filtered through Judith Butler's work on gender performance and social normativity.

Cosmetics are deeply rooted in social and cultural norms in the same manner as gender, hence linking the two in a complex way. Gender can only be described in terms that are given to us socially; without a social construction of gender it cannot even be described.¹⁴ This provides an interesting dilemma for someone who doesn't subscribe to socially normative parameters: bringing even basic definitions of gender identity into question.¹⁵ This is exactly the issue made salient by the Anastasia Beverly Hills images of Patrick Starr.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler makes the statement that gender is a regulatory norm that aids in other kinds of regulations, mainly sexuality¹⁶. Given this assertion, how does the choice to feature a man in "drag" within a cosmetics ad challenge such cultural assumptions? It's an interesting marketing tactic. If an ad's main purpose is to sell the consumer something through modes of visual communication and subject identification, how does this message come across when socially these images are still viewed as highly problematic?

Breakdown of Chapters

Chapter 1: Performance of Gender and the Impact of Celebrity on Shifting Concepts of “Glamour”

The women in cosmetics advertisements tend to be dressed in some form of trend fashion, often mimicking celebrity style. This all adds to the illusion that purchasing the product can help transform you into the glamorous individual before you. This is even more relevant with the rise of the “beauty guru” within the cosmetics world. Within this subclass of the beauty empire such personalities have also become celebrities. As one of these fashion luminaries, Patrick Starr’s image has come to stand for a specific form of allure.

As demonstrated within Figures 1 and 2, Patrick Starr as cosmetics model is shown dressed “on trend” purposively linking these images to a fashion mode typical of both contemporary and infamous young starlets. For example, in Figure 1 Patrick Starr is seen modeling his signature application of heavy mascara and liner, as well as sporting a bleach-blond bouffant hairstyle, thus bringing new life to a version of glamour long associated with such mythical figures as Marilyn Monroe and revisited by more recent starlets—underscoring pop cultural ideals regarding beauty.



Figure 1: Instagram advertisement for Anastasia Beverly Hills lip palette January 2017

Moreover, in Figure 2. Patrick Starr's demeanor signals intense joy as a means to demonstrate to the viewer the potential psychological/social benefits of being fashionable. Thus this image plays on a mode of advertising that has been quite successful since the 1950s. The effect of the image is also enhanced by offsetting the Figure of Starr with a pink glittery background typically associated with a very clichéd notion of the ultra-feminine. Thus, these images and others like them overtly trade upon the visual production of desire proliferating on contemporaneous fandom and social media sites. This chapter will examine the effect of this connection on current recitals of "doing" gender.



Figure 2: Instagram advertisement for Anastasia Beverly Hills lip palette January 2017

Much of the work within the field of gender studies has shown just how fluid gender can be. This is demonstrated by Simone De Beauvoir's famous quote: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."¹⁷ Gender is defined socially and culturally; this suggests that gender definitions should be more open to interpretation. Featuring the image of someone like Patrick Starr, who is so well known within the subculture of the cosmetics world, should help foster more open discussion. To identify as any gender is to subscribe to a complex web of cultural standards.¹⁸ Patrick Starr is a part of U.S. pop culture, but he also holds status within the cosmetics subculture. Thus another question to be addressed within this chapter will be "How do the boundaries within these two cultural strata intersect, compete, conflict, or reinforce ideas regarding gender?"

It has been proposed that our body is just a vehicle by which to experience things, making our interpretation of gender even more crucial for societal organization.¹⁹ We interpret our gender based upon specific culturally placed parameters reinforcing clear boundaries regarding sexual/social "difference." Patrick Starr clearly isn't subscribing to such cultural

demarcations. His image does not align with the signifiers of hetero-normativity we've come to expect from fashion advertising. We instead see a gay man deploying visual cultural signifiers associated with a rather excessive form of femininity much more aligned aesthetically with "Drag" culture.

Judith Butler furthermore has suggested that the body becomes a gender through a series of acts that are renewed, revised, and consolidated over time.²⁰ This is exactly what Patrick Starr has done. His job requires him to perform rituals closely associated with femininity—thus raising the question of whether the message these images are sending undermines or simply reinforces cultural stereotypes of femininity.

Chapter 2: Patrick Starr's Image and the Current Trend Towards Cosmetics as a Vehicle for Expressivity

Within the cosmetics subculture concerns regarding gender are often superseded by an even more pressing desire for personal expression. Hence the primary focus of this Chapter will be upon the creative possibilities of remaking one's own image. For example, in Figure 3, Patrick Starr is seen with forearms compressing his breasts to create the illusion and display of cleavage as he coyly smiles directly into the camera inviting both male and female viewer to accept his shimmering version of beauty as whole, complete, and even quite desirable.



Figure 3: Instagram advertisement for Anastasia Beverly Hills lip palette January 2017

Endnotes

- ¹ There are two spellings of Starr often found (Starr and Starr) Patrick Starr seems to favor the spelling Starr so that is what this paper will use.
- ² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg 41.
- ³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg 58.
- ⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg 132.
- ⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 2006, pg 186.
- ⁶ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's Second Sex," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35-49. doi:10.2307/2930225, pg. 36.
- ⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31. doi:10.2307/3207893, pg. 519.
- ⁸ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31. doi:10.2307/3207893, pg. 522.
- ⁹ Eric Zhang, "Memoirs of a Gay! Sha: Race and Gender Performance on RuPaul's Drag Race," *Studies in Costume & Performance* 1, no. 1 (2016): 59+. doi:10.1386/scp.1.1.59_1
- ¹⁰ Adrian, Furnham, "Does Sex Sell?" Psychology Today (blog). Accessed December 13, 2010. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sideways-view/201312/does-sex-sell>.
- ¹¹ Geoff, Rolls, *Women Can't Park, Men Can't Pack: The Psychology of Stereotypes*, London: Hodder & Stoughton 2010.
- ¹² Laura, Mulvey, "Visual and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. Oxford University Press.
- ¹³ Diane, Ponterotto, "Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the "Normalization" of the Female Body in Western Culture." *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 17, no. 1 (January 2016): 133-51. Accessed April 6, 2017. <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss1/10/>.
- ¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg 7.
- ¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg. 58.
- ¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg. 53.
- ¹⁷ Judith, Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's Second Sex." *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35-49. doi:10.2307/2930225, pg 35.
- ¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's Second Sex," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35-49. doi:10.2307/2930225, pg. 36.

- ¹⁹ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35-49. doi:10.2307/2930225, pg 39.
- ²⁰ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31. doi:10.2307/3207893, pg. 523.

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