

Special Feature

the criticism continuum

by Eve Levy

DISCLAIMER: Mentions sensitive topics such as eating disorders and suicide.

Living in the age of social media, one cannot help but be surrounded by perfect faces and features. Every single one of us feels pressured to look and dress perfectly, which is only exacerbated by the constant stream of images we receive on a daily basis. Mass marketing only worsens the issue, as it plays on our insecurities to persuade us to spend more. We have been conditioned to focus heavily on how we look, even when we were young. This is the direct result of corporations intensifying our fears of incompetence as children, and capitalizing on sexism.



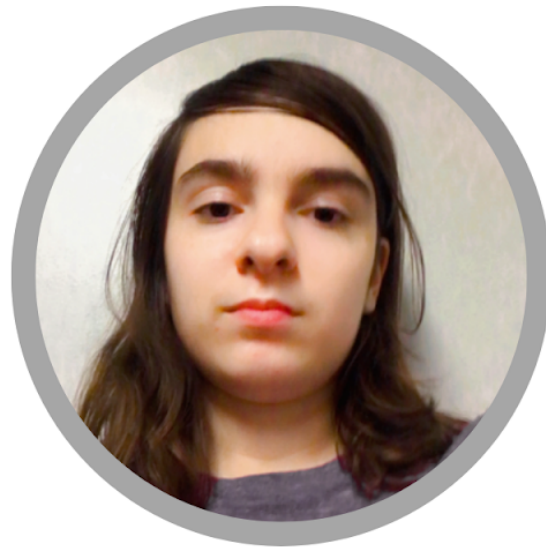
The Big Issue

Social media sets the standard for the ideal look. Since the advent of filters that alter one's natural features, and the posts utilizing said filters getting thousands of likes, there is an even greater pressure to recreate these looks without digital alteration. As Jia Tolentino details it in The New Yorker's article "The Age of Instagram Face," "Snapchat...has maintained its user base in large part by providing photo filters, some of which allow you to become intimately familiar with what your face would look like if it were ten per cent more



conventionally attractive—if it were thinner, or had smoother skin, larger eyes, fuller lips. Instagram has added an array of flattering selfie filters to its Stories feature. FaceTune...promises to help you ‘wow your friends with every selfie.’” It’s always a very specific appearance that people go for, as most filters gravitate towards one singular set of features. “It’s a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly,” Tolentino continues, Not to mention white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, only further setting white people as the beauty standard.

The tactic is rooted in sexism, too. Commercials claim to help women “love the skin you’re in” by persuading them to buy products to make them appear conventionally attractive. Being attractive does pay off, though; thinner women are paid more than those of an average size. Most male CEOs agree that requiring women to wear more revealing clothes at work would be advantageous for their company. Women are led to believe that objectifying themselves and spending big dollars to alter their appearance is liberating because it is profitable. In reality, it accomplishes just the opposite since it only plays further into what rich male CEOs want: for women to be submissive to their demands, and for men to profit off of it.



My face with an Instagram filter. Note the pale skin, lighter hair, smaller nose, round eyes, and more saturated lips.

This is heavily driven by advertising, playing on insecurities and creating new ones, seen in magazine covers that promise to help women “lose weight faster” or “improve your skin overnight.” These covers boast heavily edited images of young, white, blond women with smoothed-over skin and exaggerated curves, as if such an appearance is feasible for the masses. While corporations see it as an expert way of gaining revenue, it has real-world impacts on the consumers.



"Negative-calorie foods"? Seriously?

Impacts on Society

The constant pressure to look perfect can be detrimental to the mental health of a generation. Jean Twenge makes note of this remarkable shift in the 2017 Atlantic article "Have Smartphones Destroyed A Generation?". "Psychologically, however, they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It's not an exaggeration to describe [Gen Z] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones." Twenge continues to give statistics about the direct correlation between screen time and levels of unhappiness. Much of this can be attributed to the constant comparison between oneself and the pages and pages of retouched faces staring back. Eventually, one can acquire serious stress and depression, and in extreme cases, develop eating disorders or become suicidal.



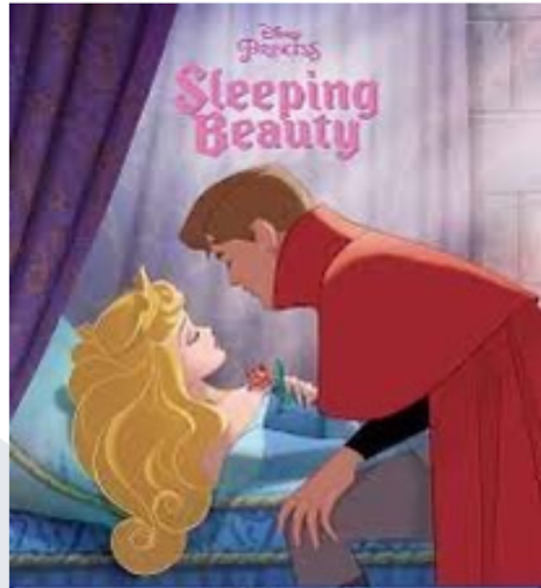
Kids are taught from a young age that their looks need to be improved.



The Role of Children's Media

One of the most cruel aspects of sacrificing the well-being of the masses for the monetary gain of the few is how societal practice consistently targets children, especially young girls. Most channels just for kids, such as Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, have ad breaks for child-targeted commercials. Many of the products featured in the ads involve makeup, hair tools, and fake accessories. They typically involve little girls smiling while wearing the product, saying something like, "I look so much more beautiful now!" Kids are taught from an early age that their looks need to be improved, that changing your appearance to look better is an innocent game. Even our favorite movies to show our children

contain subtext relating to capitalizing off appearances. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective's comprehensive guide *Our Bodies, Ourselves* cautions against the dangers of the hidden message behind the classic fairy tales reworked by corporations: "In the world of Disney, 'Sleeping Beauty' waits to be awoken (and saved) by her prince, 'Beauty' falls in love with the man behind 'Beast,' and Cinderella becomes transformed into a princess, thanks to a makeover of hair, makeup, and clothes, despite the efforts of her 'ugly' stepsisters. The recurring theme is obvious and simple: Be beautiful and have access to material possessions that help you to be beautiful."



This message translates into the real world as well. In much the same way as these fictional characters magically become princesses, today's celebrities and influencers undergo a similar transformation, or "glow up," in which their successes parallel their appearances. Today, many famous musicians— especially women— are pressured by their labels to change their style with each album, not only musically, but also in how they dress and present themselves. Peggy Orenstein comments on the similarity between fairy tales and real-world expectations of celebrities: "Though the end point may be different— marrying the handsome prince has been replaced by cutting a hit single— the narrative arc is equally predictable... they grow up to be women— and commodities." The way we address young girls and comment on how they look is a large part of this message.



Case Studies: Instagram and Children's TV

Recently, I found an old Instagram account from my middle school, titled “[school name] compliments.” It featured pictures of kids in my school, between the ages of 10 and 14, and captioned them with positive remarks about them. The most recent post was around five years ago. But one thing that stood out to me was how gendered the compliments were. Just look at these two captions:

██████████.compliments @██████████, You are lit!! (Jk)
You are such a talented soccer player, and I heard you got a medal this year! Keep up the good work. You always know how to make people laugh and made class much more entertaining, even when the teachers got mad at you for yelling. 😂 You are such a nice person, and I hope to see you more in high school. 💙💙

██████████.compliments @██████████ let me just say you are so pretty. I wish my eyebrows slayed like yours. You are so funny and you can make almost anyone laugh. You look amazing in all of your pictures. You could easily be a vogue model. Your pictures are so artsy as well. You should do photography. I hope I become better friends with you in years to come. You Go Girl! 💕💕💕 Go follow her



The main characters of *Super Why*.

**Girls were
complimented for their
looks, and boys for
their skills and
personality.**

In other words, girls were complimented for their looks, and boys for their skills and personality.

Children's media is littered with gender stereotypes and expectations. Between ad breaks where companies further convince kids that their looks need to be improved, many shows describe people, especially girls, gaining some kind of magic power or special privilege once they turn beautiful. In the PBS Kids show *Super Why*, the male characters Super Why and Alpha Pig transform into superheroes. The girls Wonder Red and Princess Pea turn into a skater girl and a princess, respectively. Also note that Princess Pea is the only character of color in the series. Overall, female characters almost always wear sparkly or eye-catching outfits, while male characters wear clothes more practical for their role in the show. It teaches young girls that their main focus should be on how they look.

Already we can see the effects of such pressures. Teenagers are developing severe mental health issues such as depression and eating disorders at an alarming rate. It is especially prevalent in communities of color, in which their appearance will always be viewed as less attractive than those of white people, regardless of how much they buy. The sad reality is that large corporations will do nothing to stop this as it gives them revenue. I personally have heard multiple people, especially young women, complain that they “couldn’t live without [insert certain beauty product here]”. Celebrities are under pressure to promote such insecurities as it rewards them with big dollars, too. We must take a closer look at those most vulnerable to societal expectations: children. Then we have to consider how they are being pressured to look a certain way, and how we were taught the same when we were young. To nip the issue in the bud, we must focus on children and their susceptibility.

Eve Levy is a student at Emerson College. Born and raised in and near Salem, MA, Halloween is their favorite holiday of the year. When not studying, reading, or dancing, they can be found wandering the Boston Public Garden, or eating some good pumpkin pie.



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