

How has the media's representations of beauty changed since 1950?

In the 1950's, women were stereotypically classed as 'the second sex'; housewives, caregivers and caretakers of their family, their purpose in life was to present themselves well, find a husband and raise children. *"They live for their children, they had no interests beyond home, children, family or their own beauty"* ¶ With that being said, in this personal investigation I aim to probe the conceptual aspects of beauty and how this is reflective in past and present media outlets. Moreover, inquiring if relevant prejudice and sexism still plays a role in society and if such issues are still being captured in photography and advertisements; how this notion is portrayed.

The stereotypical interpretation of the ideal life for women in the era is shown in Figure 1, an advertisement for Palmolive soap. The chosen colour palette in the figure is limited, muted and soft, such a colour scheme could seemingly reflect society's attitudes towards women in this time period. Even dating back to 1755 when the first English Language dictionary was created by Samuel Johnson, the definition of 'feminine' contained words such as 'soft, tender, delicate' claiming they 'belong to women'. The woman in Figure 1 is smiling softly, with muted makeup, echoing this archaic definition of 'feminine'.



Figure 1

Figure 1 denotes a cropped viewpoint of a man and woman. The representation of the woman featured in the image is of a fair complexion. The colour palette is very limited showing a flawless complexion showing a lack of depth. This use of such hues could be representative of marital related expectations young women were foreseen to obtain in the 1950s. Periodically it was normalised that individuals would wed at a very young age, *"Marrying young was like getting to a sale on the first day... the marriage prescriptions of the 1950s could be summed up in one sentence: It was mainly a woman's job to foster a happy marriage and steer it away from divorce."* ¶ A youthful marriage meant setting and establishing the rest of their lives at an early stage,

especially for the woman of the house *"The fact that the young bride now seeks in her marriage complete "fulfilment", and she now expects to "prove her own worth" and find all the "fundamental meanings" of life in her home"*. ¶ This lack of depth and definition could be a depiction of the woman's role and lifestyle as she is expected to take a give up any of her ambitions once married. Her face is vacant of hard lines, suggesting that she is free from responsibility. The woman lacks power in the household much like the woman in the image lacks power; the advertisement is for women's soap, however the

male still has this dominance and control. The man appears to carry more of a tanned colour on his face which subjectively could represent his presence outside more, leaving the house to work, being free to hang out with friends and colleagues whenever. Where as, the woman in Figure 1 appears to have a paler exterior arguably representing her increased time spent in the house, cooking, cleaning and doing other household chores. *"But I don't know how to do anything. My husband doesn't believe in wives working."* ¶ Additionally, the colour choices create depth, building a stronger structure for the man's face, characterising him as the stronger character, not only in the image but in life in the 1950s.

The woman has been adorned with a string of pearls and elaborate pink fabric. The style of the woman's clothes suggest that she is from a wealthy, well respected background, maintaining a classic and feminine look. *"Pearls symbolise wisdom acquired through experience. They are believed to attract wealth and luck as well as offer protection...The pearl is also said to symbolise the purity, generosity, integrity, and loyalty of its wearer."* ¶ The application of such expensive fashion captures a sense of the idealistic lifestyle for a woman in the era, as Palmolive is an American consumer company creating health and hygiene products, we can see that the image is also attempting to acquire the commercialised 'American Dream'; *"Dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone..."* ¶ Therefore, not only does the figure portray a sense of absolute perfection of femininity in the time period, but perfection of class and lifestyle through the representation of selective clothing and accessory choices in the image.

Alternatively, figure 2 completely juxtaposes the meanings and stereotypical representations of the female conveyed in Figure 1. Figure 2 is a photograph of Paris Hilton by David LaChapelle in 2000 for Vanity Fair. This controversial shoot consists of multiple pictures of Hilton half naked, exposing her body and posing with profanities. Quite the contrast to the PG headshot of the upper class woman smiling positively in Figure 1. Paris shows hints of femininity with pink gloves, pink skirt and high heels; the colour pink traditionally connotes *"a delicate colour that means sweet, nice, playful, cute, romantic, charming, feminine, and tenderness"* ¶ However, the harsh hues of fuchsia *"inspires confidence, assurance and maturity, a more responsible and controlled nurturing and love"* ¶ The ironic use of the bold pink tone in such a delicate, soft setting suggests Paris is attempting to rebel and break away from her privileged, feminine, princess persona. There is a sense of empowerment conveyed within the image as a huge



Figure 2

media personality, seemingly seeking the take back power and owning who she is as a woman, and as a person of the public eye.

Additionally, in figure 2, Paris Hilton wears minimal and extremely revealing clothing, a hot pink mini skirt and a see through mesh vest without a bra beneath. Her choice to expose herself in the photograph could arguably represent how women in the modern era are taking back power over who they are, their bodies and how they present themselves to the world. *"The last two years, especially with the emergence of the #MeToo movement, have demonstrated the enormous power of finally speaking in loud and unapologetic ways about the things we've been taught not to speak about it."* ¶ Female nudity, even in this time period is still a taboo and controversial topic *"When a woman does it (talks about or shows her naked body), the thinly veiled slut-shaming is immediate."* ¶ However, in this instance the viewer can interpret how Paris is using nudity and showing her naked body to the world to empower herself and others. Hilton seemingly makes a statement that women do not need to be decently dressed and classy to be feminine and beautiful, a woman can show off or cover as much as she wants.

Not only does her lack of clothing present this influence on society, but her pose in a 'power stance' draws attention and creates a notion of her importance. Paris stands tall, legs spread open as one arm is open wide, as the other arm is forward and presenting the middle finger. *"Human beings communicate greatly on a non-verbal level. It has now been proven that your posture alone not only affects those surrounding you..."* ¶ Paris visually dominates the image as she captivates viewers with her outrageous fashion choices and the stance of her body, doing both truly portrays her capability as a woman. Contextually, the composition is framed with Paris Hilton in the centre and foreground, being the focal point of the image, doing so forges a sense of empowerment; all attention and eyes draw to her. She positions herself in a stereotypical male power stance, photographers typically pose males in this type of pose as *"While posing women we usually try to accentuate curves, when posing men the opposite holds true. A man's body is not about curves, it is about angles and raw power."* ¶ The purpose of the image is to represent Paris Hilton as a strong female in a rebellious state. The photograph was directed and shot by male photographer, David LaChapelle. It could be argued that the ironic use of a male photographer detracts from the power of the image. Rather than showing an independent powerful woman, the scene is actually false and in fact a visual representation of a rebellious woman from a male perspective. Therefore drawing closer links to Figure 1, where women continue to be dominated and instructed by men.

Figure 1 represents women to be soft, delicate and respectful house wife types, as an image from the 50s, such a media publication was relevant within the time period

however would definitely not have a place in modern society. Alternatively, Figure 2, the photograph from 2000 represents women to be rebellious, daring yet influential, the image was captured nearly 20 year ago but is subjectively still relevant in today's society. The controversial lack of clothing may be offensive to some women as this could still be considered a form of objectification, however the message and symbolism behind the image appears to lie closer to women having freedom with their bodies, minds and place within society. Both women, in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are beautiful in their own ways, Figure 1 portrays the notion that women could take on the world solely with their looks, as Figure 2 may initially say the same about female bodies, the photograph is brutally honest with Paris' raw form, she has no shame in who she is. It could be suggested in this current time period, women would appreciate the intention behind each figure, as women have a right to wear makeup, dress classy or dress provocatively. However, the presence of the male in Figure 1 and the (directional photography) direction of a male photographer in Figure 2 may not be as common today, *"We don't need [men] to survive or be valid functioning members of society. [Women are] representing themselves in a new grown-up demographic that's probably quite threatening to what we've always known."* ¶ Women in the current era would prefer to not lean to men for assistance, proving themselves to be strong independent women.

Furthermore, the subtlety yet refined colour in the woman's appearance in the Figure 1; blonde, blue eyes, rosey cheeks, red lipstick and a small amount of eyeliner which mirror the priorities of household women in this time period. *"Middle class country and suburban women rarely kept up with makeup trends, instead using minimal makeup applied in a natural fashion."* ¶ From looking at figure 1, a viewer can reflect on this idea that women in the 1950s still wanted to look their best, however may be more focused on their suburban, family lives than experimenting with their beauty regime. Moreover, the advertisement has tactically chosen limited makeup, to present the look of softness and femininity. If the figure included a woman with harsh, dramatic makeup such as; dark eyeshadow, dark lipstick, drastic blush and eyebrows, more attention would be drawn in a negative manor. *"Perfectly match her lips and eye shadow to her purse...A perfectly coordinated head to toe look was always the ideal."* ¶ Contrarily, Figure 2 shows Paris Hilton wearing bold and bright pink lipstick and oversized reflective silver sunglasses instantly displaying a 'Diva' look. The large sunglasses covering her eyes could be used as a guard to hide her emotions or alternatively to hide the innocence and attractiveness that can be perceived through looking into one's eyes. *"Science has demonstrated that men are usually attracted to large eyes, with higher eyebrows, and larger pupils, while a separate study confirmed that bigger eyes and thin eyebrows on a female are highly desired traits."* ¶ Thus the photograph demonstrates that she doesn't need to show her face and the beauty of her facial exterior to be beautiful, empowered

and feel like a woman. As previously stated, similarly both Figure 1 and Figure 2 portray the beauty of women, although different in approach, clearly representative with composition, frame, colour choices in the images, It could be implied that both are an objectification of female looks and form. Nevertheless, Figure 1's objectification was subjectively intention, being from the 50's and a sales advertisement this is not surprising. On the other hand, it could be inferred that Figure 2's objectification was not intentional, the shoot was conducted to show Paris Hilton in a new light, to entitle herself as more than just another rich, blonde woman. With the progression of female identity, it could be indicted that a feminist audience would appreciate that any woman has a right to wear makeup, dress classy or provocatively, be a stay-at-home-wife or a dynamic influencer.

As mentioned, both figures have an installation of pink within the images, the variation of the tone of pink in each reflects the difference in daringness and individuality the two women obtain. The woman in Figure 1 has a sophisticated light pink fabric draped across her shoulders, while in Figure 2, Paris Hilton wears deep yet bright pink gloves and skirt. Stereotypically, light pink symbolises and connotes *"gentility, femininity, elegance and refinement, the pink rose also carries additional meanings depending on its hue. A deep pink conveys gratitude and appreciation, while paler shades connote grace and gentleness, admiration and happiness."* ¶ The overall composition and harbinger of Figure 1 is delicate and gentle, family-friendly. The muted colour scheme within the woman's appearance alone conceives this notion, as Figure 2 juxtaposes this setting entirely creating a completely different perception of beauty *"We (Sara Landas and Holli Rae, filmmakers behind 'Shine') have both personally experienced the damaging effects of trying to fit into society's body image mold, and we believe that every 'body' deserves to be seen and appreciated for their individual beauty, talent, and light."* ¶ Impressively, Figure 2 mirror this viewpoint simply through variation of colour and tonal range of hue.

Referring to my previous statements and argument, Figure 2 is a subjective representation of the 21st century woman taking back power and control over their own bodies. However, controversially this empowerment shoot is still objectifying Paris Hilton's body, meditative of how still to this day, the media defines a woman by her appearance and attractiveness. In March 2017 a 'Daily Mail' front page article declared "Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!" attached to a photograph of Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon and British prime minister Theresa May. The Guardian reported on the article including quotes from other politicians, *"The 1950s called and asked for their headline back."* ¶ As a subliminal reference to the advertisement of Figure 1 and the media's representations of women in the time period, the quote mocks the article for subjecting the women to objectification. Paris' half naked appearance being the sole,

exclusive focus of the image, leaving nothing to the imagination as she embodies a confident, unaffiliated attitude. However, rather than be completely taken seriously for her role as a woman in society, this image opens a debate of whether revealing all to the world ultimately contradicts the message that women are more than just their beauty. Although, not unveiling, the direct spotlight on female beauty was normalised media behaviour in the 1950s. In this time period, an advertisement such as Figure 1 would not be seen as sexist and old-fashioned as it would appear today, however the looks and overall exterior of the woman would appear desirable, eye catching and intriguing to an audience, arguably succeeding in its purpose to sell the product.

As formerly stated, it was not uncommon for women to obtain roles of minimum power in the 1950s *"Women might have had the vote on the same terms as men since 1929, but for most that was pretty well the limit of their equality: working women were paid much less than men and despite the responsibilities and sheer hard graft many had endured in wartime"* ¶ That being said, the lack of seriousness society associated with women resulted in (their value being accountable of looks rather than their career or achievements. Such notion is reflective in Figure 1, as a bright light seemingly shines on the lady's face, furthermore her face covers the majority of the frame and composition, displaying her beautiful and desirable exterior. Subjectively, with Figure 1 there is still some relevance in representing women, even in 2019. Although females today do not feel they always need to wear make up, there is still a huge market of the beauty and cosmetics industry, *"A recent survey done by beauty e-tailer SkinStore, showed that women in the United States spend about \$300,000 just on their face during their lifetime."* ¶ Even though the representations of a woman's values may be slightly archaic in Figure 1, it is evident that women in the 50s accepted their role within society was to look their best, this self assurance and self expression is still very relevant and current in today's modern society.

To conclude, the 1950s was a time of high gender equality, women were expected to be housewives, caregivers and caretakers of their family, although a charming exterior was also expected *"Putting on makeup wasn't just about attracting a husband, but keeping herself as his eye candy after marriage, too."* ¶ This is representative in advertisements and media outlets as women were dressed with pearls, light, elegant and smart clothing to demonstrate themselves as a respective wife. Accompanied with simple and classy makeup, this ideology would sell in the era as such a look would portray the idealistic family lifestyle in the 50s, especially in America. However, this being said, it could be inferred that Figure 1 may not be completely negative, every time period in history has different trends in beauty, fashion and lifestyle, *"A lot changes in 100 years, including the space on and around women's eyes. From the first part of the 20th century to now, trends have ping-ponged between extremes"* ¶ Figure 1 is very relevant to the 1950s

and although trends and times have changed, as stated previously, make-up is still being used by women everyday. In response to my personal investigation the purified representation of the female form has inspired my practical shoots. The harsh lighting and the pastel tones used in my shoot create a pristine representation of the female form. Digital enhancements of proportions create a flawless response similar to the 1950s stereotype.

Figure 2 demonstrates the start of the 21st century, as equality is slowly and gradually being put into place with feminist movements fighting for equality and challenging societal and institutional ideas of what a woman should be. *“Third-wave feminism is an iteration of the feminist movement that began in the early 1990s United States and continued until the fourth wave began around 2008...Fourth-wave feminism is a wave of feminism that began around 2012 and is characterised by a desire for the empowerment of women and its reliance on the internet.”* ¶ Although it is evident women are fighting to be taken seriously by society and be treated the same as men, there is unfortunately still sexism in the media. News and pop culture outlets continuously use female beauty and ideals of ‘perfection’ to sell products. However, with women taking a stance and using their beauty as a platform, as Paris Hilton’s publicises her untouched body in Figure 2, women are becoming increasingly influential and taking back power that has previously been taken from them. With this in mind, my own personal exploration investigates three varied sides of beauty and the lengths women will go to be accepted by society; how this effects their emotions and well-being. Furthermore, my project delves into whether makeup and cosmetics enhances a woman's beauty or hides who she really is. Within my photographs I wanted to highlight how strong women are against the harsh society surrounding them and ultimately allow not only a female audience to relate such expression upon themselves. My work is a modern representation of beauty standards focusing on the younger generation, although both Figures focus on slightly older, adult women they are both conclusively portraying powerful ideals of changing societal norms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY - BOOK/INTERNET REFERENCES

Quote	Writer/Publisher	Year	Website Link
-------	------------------	------	--------------

"They live for their children, they had no interests beyond home, children, family or their own beauty"	'The Feminine Mystique' 1963 by Betty Friedan		
"Marrying young was like getting to a sale on the first day... the marriage prescriptions of the 1950s could be summed up in one sentence: It was mainly a woman's job to foster a happy marriage and steer it away from divorce."	Kris Wolfe, Goodguyswag	2016	http://goodguyswag.com/dating-in-the-1950s/
"The fact that the young bride now seeks in her marriage complete "fulfillment", and she now expects to "prove her own worth" and find all the "fundamental meanings" of life in her home'.	'The Feminine Mystique' 1963 by Betty Friedan		
"But I don't know how to do anything. My husband doesn't believe in wives working."	'The Feminine Mystique' 1963 by Betty Friedan		
"a delicate color that means sweet, nice, playful, cute, romantic, charming, feminine, and tenderness"	Jennifer Bourn, Bourn Creative	2010	https://www.bourncreative.com/meaning-of-the-color-pink/
"inspires confidence, assurance and maturity, a more responsible and controlled nurturing and love"	Empowered by Color	2018	https://www.empower-yourself-with-color-psychology.com/color-pink.html
"Pearls symbolize wisdom acquired through experience. They are believed to attract wealth and luck as well as offer protection...The pearl is also said to symbolize the purity, generosity, integrity, and loyalty of its wearer."	Bellatory	2014	https://bellatory.com/fashion-accessories/pearl-myth
"Dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone..."	Adam Barone, Investopedia	2019	https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp
"The last two years, especially with the emergence of the #MeToo movement, have demonstrated the enormous power of finally speaking in loud and unapologetic ways about the things we've been taught not to speak about it."	Mandy Len Catron, The Guardian	2018	https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/23/women-reclaim-power-bodies-biological-realities-ladylike-pregnancy
"When a woman does it (talks about or shows her naked body), the thinly veiled slut-shaming is immediate."	Alia E. Dastagir, Stuff	2016	https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/77731456/why-america-cant-make-up-its-mind-about-nudity
"Human beings communicate greatly on a non-verbal level. It has now been proven that your posture alone not only affects those surrounding you..."	Paul Hudson, Elite Daily	2013	https://www.elitedaily.com/money/entrepreneurship/the-power-stance-the-most-important-step-to-becoming-an-alpha
"While posing women we usually try to accentuate curves, when posing men the opposite holds true. A man's body is not about curves, it is about angles and raw power"	Craig Hull, Expert Photography	2014	https://expertphotography.com/photographers-guide-posing-men-portraits/
"We don't need [men] to survive or be valid functioning members of society. [Women are] representing themselves in a new grown-up demographic that's probably quite threatening to what we've always known."	SZA for Ebony	2018	https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/szas-empowering-message-to-women-we-dont-need-men-to-survive/
"Perfectly match her lips and	Vintage Dancer	2019	https://vintagedancer.com/1950s

eye shadow to her purse...A perfectly coordinated head to toe look was always the ideal."

[/1950s-makeup/](#)

"Middle class country and suburban women rarely kept up with makeup trends, instead using minimal makeup applied in a natural fashion."

Vintage Dancer 2019

<https://vintagedancer.com/1950s/1950s-makeup/>

"Science has demonstrated that men are usually attracted to large eyes, with higher eyebrows, and larger pupils, while a separate study confirmed that bigger eyes and thin eyebrows on a female are highly desired traits."

Advanced Vision Care 2017

<https://www.advancedvisioncare.co.uk/attractive-eyes-what-the-science-says/>

"gentility, femininity, elegance and refinement, the pink rose also carries additional meanings depending on its hue. A deep pink conveys gratitude and appreciation, while paler shades connote grace and gentleness, admiration and happiness."

Teleflora 2019

<https://www.teleflora.com/floral-facts/rose-color-meaning>

"We (Sara Landas and Hollie Rae, filmmakers behind 'Shine') have both personally experienced the damaging effects of trying to fit into society's body image mold, and we believe that every 'body' deserves to be seen and appreciated for their individual beauty, talent, and light."

Kristina Bravo, TakePart 2014

<http://www.w.takepart.com/video/2014/08/17/shine-goddess-project-10-women-body-paint>

"The 1950s called and asked for their headline back."

Ed Miliband Tweet, quoted by The Guardian 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/mar/28/daily-mail-legs-it-front-page-sexist>

"Women might have had the vote on the same terms as men since 1929, but for most that was pretty well the limit of their equality: working women were paid much less than men and despite the responsibilities and sheer hard graft many had endured in wartime"

Juliet Gardiner, History Today 2015

<https://www.historytoday.com/reviews/story-women-1950s>

"Putting on makeup wasn't just about attracting a husband, but keeping herself as his eye candy after marriage, too."

Vintage Dancer 2019

<https://vintagedancer.com/1950s/1950s-makeup/>

"A lot changes in 100 years, including the space on and around women's eyes. From the first part of the 20th century to now, trends have ping-ponged between extremes"

Jane Bowen, Elle 2016

<https://www.elle.com/beauty/makeup-skin-care/q28604/best-eye-makeup-trends-every-decade/>

"Third-wave feminism is an iteration of the feminist movement that began in the early 1990s United States and continued until the fourth wave began around 2008...Fourth-wave feminism is a wave of feminism that began around 2012 and is characterized by a desire for the empowerment of women and its reliance on the internet."

Third Wave Feminism definition, Wikipedia 2019

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third-wave_feminism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth-wave_feminism