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Why We Blush: Metaphors Bound up in Cosmetic Packaging

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Abstract: Centering a visual rhetorical analysis of NARS Orgasm, a popular high-end blush product, this article illustrates how cosmetics in major retailers like Sephora use familiar metaphors and ideals of normative femininity in both product naming and packaging. By mobilizing ideas of cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985) and treating Sephora as a rhetorical ecology (Edbauer, 2005) where consumers align themselves with particular aesthetics and companies reproduce those aesthetics to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, we name five main metaphors at work: luxurious, salacious, innocent, artistic, and consumable. These metaphors manifest linguistically in product names (i.e., Orgasm, Virtue, Cloud Paints) and visually in cosmetic packaging, wherein the physical component can harmonize with the name (e.g., Virtue, an innocent-coded blush, having a light-colored, bubble-like packaging) or domesticate transgression, as is the case for Orgasm. As we conclude, the process of developing, buying, and using these blushes is always already rhetorical and a site of ongoing identity-making despite the linguistic brevity of their names.

Keywords: affect, beauty advertising, cosmetics, inductive coding, material rhetorics

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Introduction

Blushing is a physiological response tightly tied to affect. To blush is to be excited, stressed, aroused, shamed, attracted, or unsettled, but never unaffected. Blushing is, as Elsbeth Probyn (2005) describes, "the body calling out its interest" (p. 28). The physiological response lasts moments, but with cosmetic blush, the flush of interest is designed to last all day. So, the application and wearing of blush is an inherently rhetorical act in that it communicates an enduring interest (or at least the appearance of it), and the cosmetic products themselves carry concise rhetorical claims in their naming and packaging. These claims often explicitly reference the cause of blushing—like our central example, NARS Orgasm—as well as implicitly invoke an image of normative femininity, especially when the blushes at issue are carried by major retailers.

This exploration identifies five main metaphors at work today in the blushes at Sephora, a French multinational beauty retailer common in North America: the Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable. These metaphors are built from the branding of the product (both its name and packaging), and index neatly onto the hegemonic ideal of the feminine—which we define here as white, cis, heterosexual, young, thin, conventionally attractive, and upper middle class. We also add chaste and submissive to this list despite how cosmetics use sexualized branding because, as our analysis of NARS Orgasm explores, references to sensuality are necessarily domesticated within the confines of Sephora to appeal to their assumed (normative) customers.

Little scholarship in the field of rhetoric has interrogated how cosmetics themselves help propagate an ideal of normative femininity through their naming and packaging. Interdisciplinary research centers largely on how the use of makeup helps construct identity, wherein both wearing makeup *and* not wearing makeup clearly communicates something about the wearer. Merskin's (2007) textual analysis of lipstick naming ar-

gues that the act of wearing lipstick, of donning a particular color with a particular name, constructs femininity. This illuminates an intersection between capitalism and cultural hegemony where "cosmetics [are] viewed as tools designed to gain women's consent to their own (hegemonic) oppression" (p. 592). Cosmetics have, historically, been used as a mechanism for social control and judgement, and while Merskin's analysis of lipstick naming addresses this salient point, it does so without exploring *how* this language and its accompanying packaging might act persuasively in tandem with existing cultural hegemony to reinforce ideas of normative femininity. The "appearance-based self" Merskin describes is produced by the experience of adhering to hegemonic and capitalist logics, and that expression cannot exist outside the confines of social, political, and cultural spheres (Plante et al., 2016). Makeup is simultaneously a site of self-expression and of hegemonic influence, and wearers often use makeup to subvert traditional constructs of femininity; notably, White's (2018) analysis argued that makeup tutorials "assert the relationship between beauty practices and feminist politics" (p. 153).

Just as the act of wearing makeup is a rhetorical performance that communicates aesthetics (and allegiances, considering the at-time-of-writing recent Republican makeup discussion on TikTok), cosmetic naming and packaging are also always already rhetorical and often play into familiar narratives about femininity. For example, it's no accident that Carolina Herrera's Good Girl perfume is a glass facsimile of a stiletto heel. As a recognizable symbol of femininity in a readily accessible beauty retailer, the perfume's name and form circulate normative narratives, thereby maintaining them. This maintenance is powerful because, as Claire Colebrook (2008) observes, "if there is a biological and evolutionary basis to aesthetics, this is not because works of art bear a timeless value, but because they are composed in response to the brain's recognition mechanisms" (p. 53). So, cosmetics companies invoke familiar narratives through metaphor, and consumers implicitly accept those narratives when they buy from that constrained selection. Beauty retailers work hard to imply abundance and variety, but their offerings index onto only a few familiar (acceptable) identity expressions, a frequent feature of consumer culture (Rancière, 2009). Sephora as a rhetorical ecology (Edbauer, 2005), therefore, sits at the confluence of cosmetics companies looking to efficiently sell product by mobilizing metaphors about beauty, and consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, repeatedly encounter those metaphors when they purchase and use the products. To illustrate this, we begin by defining these metaphors (as well as the methods we identified them with) and discussing how they're expressed in products. We then turn to NARS Orgasm as our central example of how cosmetics can simultaneously be overtly sensual in name and yet domesticated through packaging, and conclude by suggesting how this research can be taken up and extended.

The Main Metaphors of Blush

Introducing the Metaphors

To identify the five metaphors—Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable—we started by coding blush names inductively in a large Sephora in the Twin Cities area. The relatively small sample on display allowed dominant trends to stand out, like how "berry" and other fruit names occurred not only

in the same display but also in neighboring blush lines. We observed the same phenomenon with sensually-coded names as well as references to luxury, innocence, and artistry. While these trends occurred in different proportions, one or more were reliably present in every display, and this held true when applying our codes to the wider selection available at Sephora online.

Following our coding efforts, we define these metaphors as:

1. Luxurious—invoking common markers of elegance and exclusivity like gold and silver accents, weighted packaging, branding, and literary devices in naming
2. Salacious—using sensually-coded terms or double entendre to reference sex, pleasure, or other "transgressive" behavior
3. Innocent—employing references to positive, aspirational states (both affective and physical) or child-like play commonly linked to goodness, purity, and youth
4. Artistic—referencing or recreating the look and feel of art supplies, or leaning on the notoriety and expertise of professional/celebrity makeup artists
5. Consumable—using edible or floral naming to suggest freshness, delicateness, decadence, beauty, or sweetness

Our examination of packaging found that it, too, largely followed these metaphors. While the expression is not bluntly one-to-one (we found no blushes shaped like berries), blush packaging (and sometimes the imprint in the product itself) either amplified or mediated the naming.

Figure 1: Glossier's Cloud Paint in Wisp (left) and YSL's Make Me Blush in Berry Bang (right)

To illustrate, Glossier's Cloud Paint (Fig. 1, left) aligns fully with the artistry metaphor—right down to its visual presentation, which mimics a tube of acrylic paint. The name and packaging amplify each other. As a counterpoint, the name of YSL's liquid blush line (Fig. 1, right) commands the user to be affected, and the individual shade name, Berry Bang, is a double entendre that also mobilizes the Consumable metaphor. This

sensual coding is mediated by the packaging, which prominently displays the YSL logo in gold, emphasizing the product's luxuriousness.

Figure 1 also exemplifies another durable pattern in blush packaging—component color as tone. More serious, mature, or sensually-coded products like those of YSL (and NARS) often employ rich colors or black, while lighter, more aspirational or playful products, like Glossier's, are more likely to use white, cream, or pastels. While there are exceptions, this pattern was so prevalent in-store that it often functioned as visual shorthand.

Applying the Metaphors

As shown above, these metaphors often overlap, and a consumer would be hard-pressed to find a blush in the 150 or so lines listed online at Sephora that didn't mobilize at least one or two. These metaphors harmonize with each other, working to amplify or mediate (as we explore with NARS Orgasm) a blush's overall presentation. The reason for these metaphors' ubiquity is that they neatly index against familiar feminine performances and aesthetics—like the girly ingénue in pink and the vamp in reds and burgundies. For example, Rare Beauty's Soft Pinch blushes (Fig. 2), typifying the Innocent metaphor, name their shades after aspirational states, like Love, Hope, and Happy, and come packaged in softly colored tubes and rounded compacts. Styled like bubbles or buttons, there's not a hard edge in sight, and the packages and names work together to suggest that the blush (and those who wear it) are just as positive and bubbly. To sell their product, Rare Beauty invokes visions of soft, unthreatening beauty which is valued because of its purity. This reference carries deep-seated moral judgements about how purity is linked to cleanliness, to goodness, and, further, to normative (i.e., white, cisgender, heterosexual) expressions of femininity. And other shade names in the same line—Faith, Worth, and Virtue—make the moral connection explicit, claiming through these objects that there is a "good" way to blush. But because these products exist in a sphere often considered frivolous, the work they do in the maintenance of patriarchal ideals can go unnoticed. After all, they're *just* blushes.

Figure 2: Rare Beauty blush marketing from Sephora's website

In reality, the metaphors bound up in the naming and packaging of these products function as *enthymematic* arguments that all draw from the same *doxa*—the patriarchal conception of normative femininity. This *doxa* is an unspoken "matrix of rules, rituals, and conventions" which benefits from the appearance of being

natural (McGee, 2016, p. 54), because in being perceived as natural, it becomes entrenched in the culture, and then is enforced as cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985). These products use both familiar linguistic and visual metaphors because they're already so entangled with the aesthetics of normative femininity, where pink and consumable cuteness come to represent an "agreed-upon" version of gender performance. In fact, these ingrained visuals act as *doxicons*—where their very presence suggests a cultural narrative (Cloud, 2006). The added layer suggested by these blushes is that the aesthetic qualities of identity performance, say innocence, can be purchased and worn.

Four of these metaphors exist as spectrums: from shy girlhood to unrestrained femme fatale; the elegant exclusivity of fashion houses to the wildness of an artist's studio. The only dominant metaphor to buck the spectrum format is the Consumable because its opposite would be the inedible, poisonous, or disgusting. While not found in Sephora, the opposite pole does exist in indie makeup whose aesthetics often skew more counter-culture (for example, Lunatick Cosmetics' death-themed products, and SushyGlowCosmetics' viral Bloody Tints, which emphasize the cracks in the wearer's lips). Owing to a long history of describing femininity in terms of flowers and fruits (the process of budding, blooming, blossoming, ripening, withering, and expiring), the Consumable metaphor is extremely common, and often pairs with the Innocent (e.g., Huda Beauty's Bubblegum) and Salacious (e.g., YSL's Lavender Lust). In being so prevalent and so tied to commodification, the Consumable metaphor gives the whole game away: all of these metaphors refer to consumable, commodified aesthetics.

The Innocent—Salacious and Luxurious—Artistic spectrums intersect and pair so reliably that blushes can be plotted against these aesthetics, as shown in Figure 3. The combination of these metaphors, as well as the presence of consumability (either directly, vis-à-vis "Bubblegum," or obliquely as in the consumable nature of cosmetic blush), amplifies or mediates the overall presentation. For example, Charlotte Tilbury's Cheek to Chic blush names—Pillow Talk, Ecstasy, Sex on Fire, and Walk of No Shame—are frequently salacious, but the brand's over-the-top emphasis on packaging that mimics vintage, keepsake cosmetics from the 1950s and 60s "pulls" the blushes' overall effect to the luxurious side of the graph.

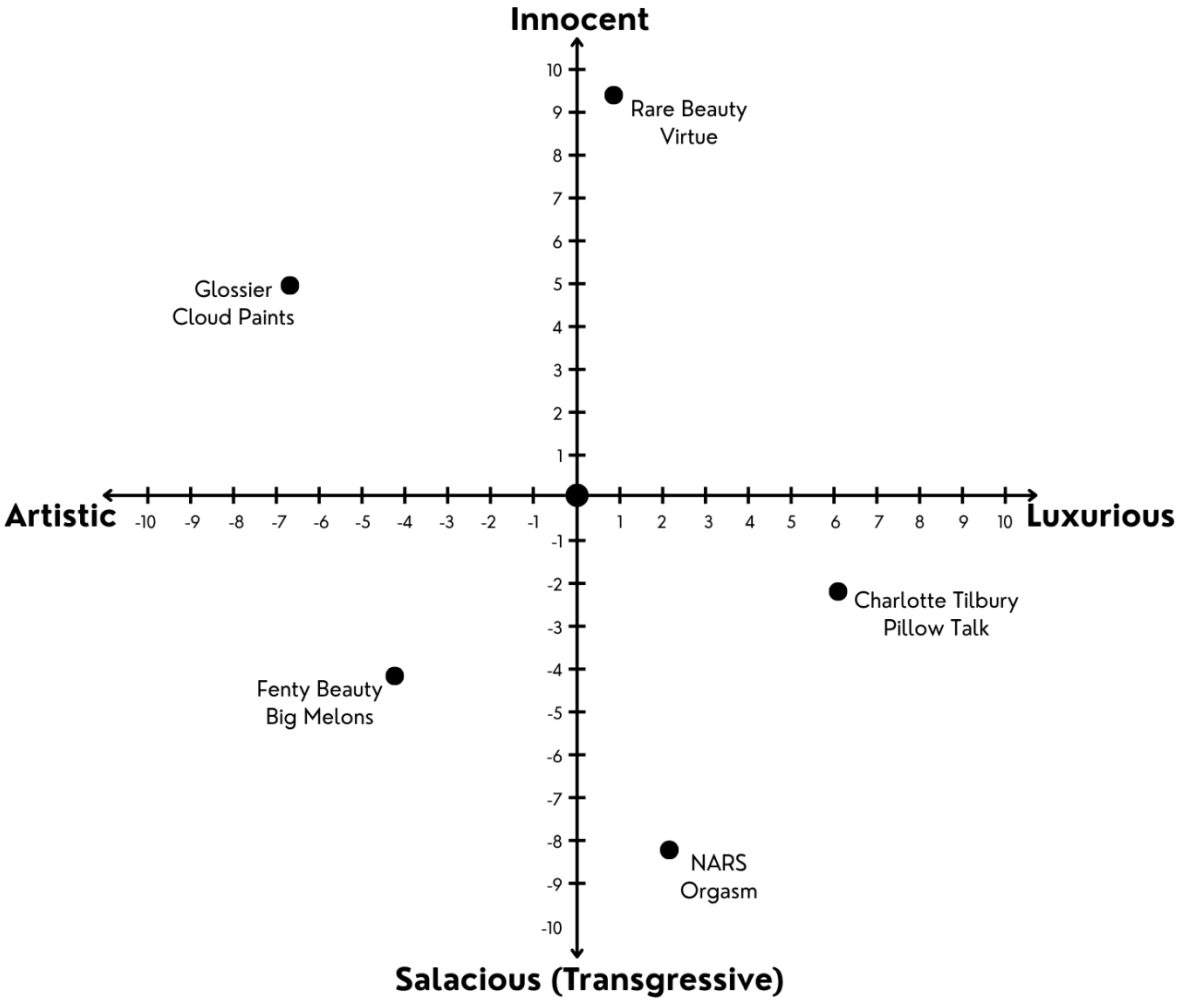

Figure 3: Blushes plotted against the metaphors

Likewise, brand tone can have a similar mediating effect, especially when it's tongue-in-cheek. Most of the blush lines in Sephora "read" earnestly, like how higher-end blushes often follow literary trends in using high language and French (Westman Atelier's Minette, Coquette, and Bichette, for example) to imply luxuriousness. In this sense, Fenty Beauty, created and owned by Rihanna, is an outlier.

At first glance, Fenty's Cheeks Out Freestyle Cream Blush appears to follow the metaphors as earnestly as the others mentioned in this exploration, but the overt linkages of consumability to sensuality and frequent puns make it clear that something more self-referential is going on. Set against similar products that forward the Consumable metaphor with sensual undertones (say, YSL's Berry Bang), Fenty stands out with shade names like Big Melons and Raisin Standardz which call attention to the practice it participates in. At the same time, its white octagonal packaging doesn't announce anything subversive or salacious. So, while Fenty and NARS both ostensibly follow the same sensual playbook, Fenty's tone is notably lighter, naming their blushes with more of a knowing wink.

Figure 4: Fenty Beauty's Raisin Standardz

NARS Orgasm, then, as both an earnest expression of the Salacious metaphor and a popular blush famous online for its naming, becomes a fruitful point of analysis for our exploration since it represents a baseline of the practices described in this section.

Case Study: NARS Orgasm

Our analysis uses NARS Orgasm as a case study, both because of its success (even ubiquity) as a product and how it fits neatly into a long tradition of sensually coded cosmetics. That is, naming cosmetics like lipsticks and blushes for sexual experiences and with suggestive metaphors is especially easy since the redness of lips and cheeks is tied to physiological arousal (Merskin, 2007). From NARS Orgasm's debut in 1999 to Urban Decay's Pocket Rocket lip glosses in 2009 to Isamaya's short-lived line of phallus-shaped lipsticks in 2023, cosmetics companies have become, on the whole, more willing to explicitly reference sex, a trend that parallels cultural attitudes about women's empowerment (in a "girl boss" sense, at least). However, to be carried in Sephora, a mass-market beauty retailer, these products can't go too far. The goal, as it were, is to shock and delight potential customers, but not offend them, because causing offense would narrow the audience for these cosmetics and run counter to the overall goal—to sell products.

Orgasm sits well with that tension because it references the most satisfying part of sex without opening the door to messier, less socially acceptable imagery. The argument that consumers can apply the appearance of an orgasm as easily as using this product also speaks to well-circulated frustrations of the normative female experience, thereby appealing to Sephora's (and NARS') imagined normative female audience. The naming of Orgasm is aspirational in the same way that Rare Beauty's Virtue or Charlotte Tilbury's Pillow Talk are—they all reference what is valued or perceived to be missing, whether that's satisfaction, purity, or emotional intimacy. These names are affectively charged, which speaks to their rhetorical power relative to their linguistic brevity. Additionally, these are products designed to take up space in the routine of the con-

sumer, meaning that they'll come into contact with the product's name and packaging repeatedly, creating a kind of echolalia which reinforces the aesthetic the product promotes.

As discussed in the section above, NARS Orgasm primarily mobilizes the transgressive, Salacious metaphor through its naming, while invoking Luxuriousness through its physical packaging. The pairing of these two metaphors mediates the overt sensuality of the name Orgasm, allowing the blush to be transgressive while still being appropriate to be sold in stores. In this case, the packaging does a lot of that mediating work.

Figure 5: NARS Orgasm, opened compact, promotional image from NARS

Orgasm's sleek black compact (Fig. 5) pairs a soft-touch, velvety surface with hard, squared corners. Compared to its affectively charged name, the packaging is minimalist, and a consumer would need to physically turn the compact over to see the label (though neither is it hidden). The haptic experience of holding and using the blush is also made to feel luxurious, with the brand's name in white raised letters on the front and the soft-matte touch coating smooth and silicon-y. The choice to wrap the hard, rectangular plastic case in this velvety texture is rhetorically suggestive of the contradictions in normative femininity, where the feminine is simultaneously self-assured and vulnerable. The velvety slip of the packaging also vaguely suggests a sensuous quality, like the touch of skin on skin. From the way it sits comfortably in the user's palm to its modern, minimalist aesthetic, the blush is designed to be desirable and claims to make its user desirable in turn.

The clash between Orgasm's minimalist packaging and salacious name is telling of how brands like NARS domesticate sensuality and make it luxurious or artistic to be acceptable for a mass market, which tends to value purity and judge overt sexuality. In this way, Orgasm's salacious naming is balanced by its packaging and thus fits into the pervasive rhetorical ecology that is beauty writ large and Sephora specifically. This ecology of beauty circulates acceptable definitions of femininity through consumerism, giving the illusion through multitudes of products that there is a wide range of aesthetics, but in reality showcasing only a few. This "soft totalitarianism," as Jacques Rancière (2009) says of consumer culture, feeds into cultural hegemony

because it not only presents "classic" ideals of normative femininity but also domesticates and commodifies subversion.

Figure 6: NARS Promotional image showing current Orgasm blush range (and other salacious names)

This commodification is on full display with Orgasm. While using sensual theming to sell cosmetics has a long history, Orgasm in particular has been so successful at it that NARS developed an entire suite of products themed after it, including lip products, eyeshadow, and a widening range of blush options that bear the same name, since the original Orgasm is a light shimmering peachy-pink which can appear ashy or metallic on deeper skin, if it shows up at all (Fig. 6). While the additional (more richly pigmented) Orgasm shades ostensibly work to address this, the inclusion of these shades in one palette (the Orgasm Four Play Blush Quad, Fig. 7) suggests otherwise. That is, if the shade expansions are meant for deep skin, why are Orgasm, Orgasm X, and Orgasm RUSH in a palette that will likely be purchased and used by one person?

In widening the range of products from blush to other areas of the face, the connection to the physiological action of blushing is strained. That is, blushing is tightly linked to sensual acts, so having a blush named Orgasm makes sense. The same can be said of pink lipsticks and glosses, but it's hard to make the same argument when applied to an eyeshadow palette that contains mostly bronzes and champagnes (Fig. 7). Shimmery, bronze eyelids aren't a common aftereffect of sex, unlike blushing and full lips.

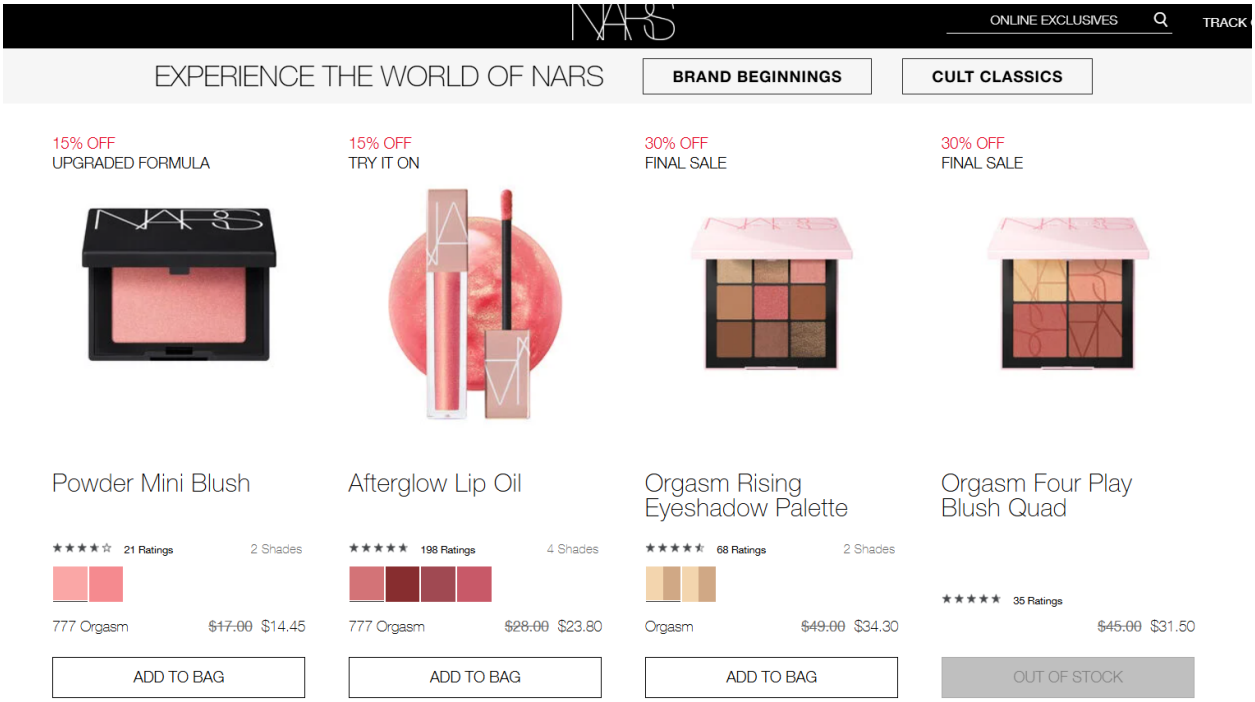

Figure 7: Screenshot of NARS Storefront, featuring Orgasm-themed products

It's here where the capitalistic game is given away again. The original use of orgasm as a single entendre is in a context where the name fits, but the further expansion of products seeks to capitalize on the blush's name recognition without the actual connotation to the physiological effects of sex that the blush implies. Whether by sleek, luxurious packaging or the titillation of their names, the goal has always been to sell products.

This additional facet of how Orgasm has been capitalized upon, extra-textual to the blush itself, reveals the way cosmetic companies like NARS use hegemonic ideals of femininity persuasively to make a profit, not necessarily because these ideals are correct or unchanging, but because they're *convenient.*

Conclusion

The act of purchasing and applying blush is inherently a rhetorical one, and because makeup is so often and easily trivialized, it may at first appear neutral—neither in service to nor in defiance of hegemonic frameworks. However, as our analysis of the linguistic and visual metaphors demonstrates, these blushes are using aesthetics to invoke deeply entrenched conceptions of normative femininity in order to sell themselves. Packaging also frequently works to amplify or mediate (especially in the case of sensually-coded blushes like NARS Orgasm) these expressions. In a neoliberal context where identity and consumption are linked, blushes like Rare Beauty's Happiness make concise arguments about the consumer's identity and what society values. As the blush is used, the consumer encounters that argument over and over, even if they ultimately reject the narratives their product suggests.

The five metaphors we identify here are persuasive precisely because of their familiarity; as part of often-repeated cultural narratives, they have the benefit of appearing natural and sometimes nearly invisible. For example, the blushes invoking the Consumable metaphor, with many references to candy and bright pink

packaging, seem innocuous. But when the connection between femininity, commodification, and the sweetness of candy is made explicit, we've seen more than a few people cringe in recognition.

We've found these metaphors and the inductive coding that led to them to be a fruitful approach because it allows us to efficiently analyze both the visual and linguistic dimensions of normally overlooked objects. In doing so, our goal is to investigate the continued linking of identity, performance, consumerism, and affect. But because this is a preliminary look at the rhetoric of cosmetics, there are doubtlessly more patterns and metaphors at work. In the future, this work will be extended to include indie makeup ecologies that often skew counter-culture, as well as into other areas of consumer identity-making.

Drawing attention to small objects and practices is where feminist rhetoricians shine, and these metaphors—Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable—can surely be applied to and extended through further research. So, to conclude, we invite other rhetoricians to join us in looking closer at the labels and shapes of small objects.

Biography

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