If and how are Instagram’s top male makeup influencers shifting the beauty norms & beauty representations in a female oriented industry

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore if and how men performing makeup can shift the beauty norms and beauty representations for women. The shift is studied in the context of Instagram- a photo and video sharing social media platform, where individuals with large followings are called influencers, whereas their presence is qualified as influence. The study looks into how the influence of two of the top male makeup influencers is measured and manifested, and if and how their influence can generate a shift for female beauty norms. To understand if and how a shift can be produced, I focused on analyzing the metrics, the posted content and the interactions and opinions of the followers. This tri-dimensional approach focuses on the elements a shift around Instagram’s male makeup artists involves: influence, which in the context of Instagram is measurable (metrics); the representations the shared content embodies (i.e. images and text), and the feedback given by the followers on their interaction with the accounts. Understanding and studying how these merge together helps getting a sense of what impact the male makeup influencers are potentially having on female beauty norms through Instagram.

The key findings uncovered that the two male influencers are a source of inspiration for women, whilst also teaching them how to perform makeup in terms of techniques, products and tools. The influencer- follower relationship is strong enough to make women follow their advice and even proceed to buying products suggested by the male makeup artists. More so, women no longer find it unusual for men to perform makeup, and see makeup related content suitable for both men and women. These findings highlight the role men play in changing beauty norms for women on social media while they perform female assigned beauty practices.
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1 Introduction

In 2015 a 16-year-old boy posted a picture of him wearing makeup on his Instagram, a simple picture that received overwhelming positive feedback and encouragement. Shortly after, his YouTube makeup account and Instagram account have rapidly started increasing their audiences with thousands of followers. In a short time, he became well-known for his senior picture retake, where he brought in his ring light so his highlight “would be poppin”. The picture and his posted work received much attention from celebrities and companies, and in very little time he became the first male spokesperson for CoverGirl - one of the biggest brands in the makeup world. The CoverBoy, whose name is James Charles, is defined by the brand as a role model and a boundary-breaker that is redefining what beauty is (Puglise, 2016).

Just like James, in recent years, a considerable number of male makeup artists have taken the social media world by surprise with content where they perform makeup. Although coming forward as practicing makeup to unaccustomed audiences was hard, men performing makeup has become a common phenomenon supported by millions of people, and most importantly - women. Whilst makeup is commonly understood as a feminine practice, these men have become active in shaping how women use makeup.

Looking at the phenomenon of men entering feminine spaces is important because it raises fundamental questions about who shapes gender representations, and who builds and rewrites the beauty norms associated with masculinity and femininity. For a long time, studies have looked on how the media influences female behavior through the female representations spread across tabloids, TV programmes and magazines (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). These have explored how media images portraying women can impact ordinary women through creating beauty representations that they “should” aspire to. The norms of beauty and beauty representations were linked to tabloid women. In recent years, social media platforms, such as Instagram, have increased the rate and scale at which these types of images circulate, which has implications for the nature and formation of beauty representations.

Existing research has begun to consider the impact of social media on beauty representations, mostly focusing on how women, ranging from celebrities to ordinary
individuals, can impact other women. For example, Piyali Sur (2017) in his study discussed how content related to beauty and fashion distributed by women on different online platforms (such as YouTube and personal blogs) are encouraging women to take action to beautify their bodies.

However, little research has considered the role men play in changing beauty norms for women on social media while they perform female assigned beauty practices. With the contemporary occurrence of male makeup artists, it is worth considering their presence in feminine spaces, their involvement and their impact on beauty norms and beauty representations. This is because the rise of these individuals has the potential to disrupt the gendered dynamics of power of a traditionally feminine practice in ways not previously encountered. These men are able to build new female beauty representations without being women themselves, which puts women in a place of having the beauty norms constructed and shifted by both males and females.

The aim of my research is to explore if and how men performing makeup on Instagram have the potential to shift the beauty norms and beauty representations for women, this put in the context of Instagram as a platform and the notion of influencers. Drawing on mixed methods, the research focused on the elements that have the potential to generate a shift around an Instagram male makeup influencer, these involving the metrics, the content and the followers. For answering the research question, a broader background had to be built around all the elements that play a role in the question itself.

The structure of my thesis is as it follows:

**Chapter 2** introduces what makeup is and it meant historically, for men and women. It discusses the relationship between makeup and gender norms. This chapter also introduces the concept of social media platforms and algorithms, analyzing what influence is on Instagram. It places the subject of men performing makeup in the context of Instagram, and the potential of these men to shift female beauty norms through the infrastructure of the platform.

**Chapter 3** unfolds the methodology approached in this research, discussing the research philosophy and design, the data collection and data analysis methods, ending with the limitations and ethical implications of this paper.
Chapter 4 reveals the empirical findings acquired through the analysis of the collected data, whilst discussing their importance to the research question.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the research and highlights the key points of the thesis. It connects the findings to the practical implications, and presents the limitations and the ground it sets for future research.
2 Literature Review

From the history books children flick through in schools to new social media posts, makeup has been present for thousands of years. It has been part of the human grooming routine for a long time, manifesting and existing in different forms, gradually building an industry. Makeup applicability is linked with women, a connection that has been fed by hundreds of years of stereotypes and different social power systems. Throughout time, makeup served different purposes and had different meanings, these evolving along with the industry and the people engaging in the practices of makeup.

The following chapter aims to build the background for understanding the research question. The relevancy of treating and discussing all the subjects mentioned in this chapter is explained by the complexity of the research study which first questions *“If and how are Instagram’s top male makeup influencers shifting the beauty norms & beauty representations in a female oriented industry?”*. To answer how that is possible different parts of the research question have been explored to understand *if and how* men practicing makeup on Instagram have the potential to shift the beauty norms for women.

The first part that opens this chapter builds a background of what makeup is, what it meant historically, its relation to women and men, who practiced it and why it matters. The second part focuses on makeup and gender, as a sequel of the first part that unfolds that makeup is connected to gender roles and gender practices. It looks over notions such as femininity and masculinity, the practices assigned to those and how these are constructed. These are of importance because they speak about how makeup is labeled and seen as a practice, and what fine lines define where and whom it belongs. This section debates the importance of makeup practices to identity formation and forms of social distinction. The third part of the chapter discusses what social media platforms are and the affordances associated with these platforms that are able to shape beauty representations, with an in-depth focus on Instagram. It looks into the participatory aspects of the platform, the technical infrastructure (the metrics) and the emergence and presence of male makeup influencers.
2.1 Makeup history and the communication of status

The first evidence of use of cosmetics dates back to ancient Egypt. Initially, cosmetics were used for religious and then aesthetic reasons (Chaudhri and Jain, 2009). Egyptians discovered early the art of mixing oils and scents. They created dyes and paints and used those to subtly rouge the lips in red, cover their nails with henna and contour their eyes with the dark-colored kohl. Egyptians loved the “rouged cheeks and dramatic highlights” (Graham, 2012). There was no age or sex limitation to who can use it, and there were no limits to how much makeup was considered ‘too much’ (Chaudhri and Jain, 2009). The familiar black eye line along with the darkened filled eyebrows is said to have communicated status, amongst women and men (Graham, 2012). Makeup use was not favoring a gender in particular, it was a general grooming requirement build around socially constructed beliefs about beauty, whilst also serving a purpose of delimiting social classes.

The Romans had more conservative views on makeup, and was generally shaped around women. The amount of makeup on a woman’s face and body (and less so a man’s) carried meanings about one’s sexual morality, health and social status (Olson, 2009). As found in literary texts, the Roman society used makeup to accomplish beauty ideals, such as pale skin, rose cheeks and bigger eyes. Features like rose cheeks and red tinted lips were symbols of a fertile and healthy body. Most of the texts found on the topic of cosmetics are written by men, thus, the opinion on the meaning of makeup is one-sided (Stewart, 2016). The literature links makeup to women, makeup being a daily and a noteworthy adornment (Olson, 2009). Most makeup and skin maintenance recipes were addressed to women by men, such as Ovid, Pliny and Celsus (Ibid., p 300-301).

Amongst men, makeup was seen as an “immoral and effeminate” practice (Guazzarotti, 2010). The Romans appear to have shaped clear perspectives on what attributes each gender has, where gender is “the roles that people of each sex have in the society, describing all those characteristics that are attributed to males or females by the society or the culture” (Allana, 2014). For this reason, words as masculine or feminine were built through societal beliefs and adaptations of the terms.
In history men are mentioned to be using makeup to an extent established by the social rules and virtues of a community and the power structures and symbols leading these societies. Men practicing makeup was not an unusual phenomenon, but it was highly politicized by the institutions or people owning the power and their beliefs and views on makeup. As an example, the Elizabethan reign in England has proved that makeup practices and grooming was common amongst men. The pale skin and white bleached hair trends were beauty goals. These adored complexion preferences changed due to Queen Victoria I, as the queen “declared that the use of cosmetics and makeup was vulgar and impolite” where only courtesans and male actors were allowed to put on makeup (Graham, 2012). During Queen Victoria’s rule the word of the Church was considered to seed values and morals, to which makeup didn’t apply. As Graham continues expressing his opinion:

“Due to the stigma against men who use makeup during this period, the link between vanity and the feminine associations of homosexuality may have formed. The femininity of such may have besmirched the churches name therefore resulting in the ridicule of make-up wearing men.”

The Church, in the up-mentioned case, is the power institution that sets the social beliefs, interactions and people’s attitude on different matters, makeup being included. Graham’s statement also points to another sensitive side of this subject: the link between makeup and stigmas around gender and sexuality.

As the aforementioned section revealed, makeup is connected to gender and the representations that can be created with the help of makeup. It is also the tool for achieving culturally constructed beauty ideals and building new ones. In time, the association of makeup with men or women oscillated along with the socially constructed concepts and beliefs around gender and beauty. For which, makeup practices are strongly bound up with gender norms, gender roles, gender practices and gender representations.

2.2 Gender roles and Gender representations

The 21st century cosmetic industry is still generally addressed to women. As Lorber (1994) argues, beside the 5 letters which put together form the word woman, there is a gender identity which is culturally constructed through social interactions that attach
specific traits, roles and perceptions to the word giving it substance, while also creating a
general meaning of what a woman is and delimiting what femininity is and what it is not;
masculinity being the defining term assigned for men.

Femininity and masculinity are the products of years of historical changes made by
different people, in different contexts and cultures, that in a specific moment in time speak
about the expected behavioral patterns of the genders (Berger et al., 1995). What is
perceived as feminine or masculine in a society is reflected in the creative/abstract,
informational and material things a culture produces (as writings, advertisements, pictures,
traditions, celebrations etc.) (Connell, 2012). For this reason, as Bocock (1993) explains,
the traditional differences that shape the feminine and masculine genders, are attributes and
stereotypes that come across early in the stages of our lives through cultural contexts;
whether this is through the toys children play with, the characters from the stories read
before bed or simply the absorbed attitudes and behaviors of other people of the same sex.
The daily representations of these stereotypes set the stage for the social understanding and
interiorization of genders.

Common traditional media representations of men portray them as active, strong,
successful, rebellious, and having a dominant presence, while women are seen as
dominated figures that seek approval and attention from men, most often looking thin,
presentable and being responsible to take care of the household and the man (Wood, 1994).
Even traditional fairy tales put men in the savior position, underlining their masculinity as a
fighter, being brave and strong, while women are the gentle ones in need to be saved, or
prove their worth and beauty to be given a higher rank (becoming a princess) (Neikirk,
2009). For example, Doyle’s (1989, p.111) study found that children’s programmes
streamed on TV represent men as "aggressive, dominant, and engaged in exciting activities
from which they receive rewards from others for their ‘masculine’ accomplishments."
In contrast, women are represented as devoting "their primary energies to improving their
appearances and taking care of homes and people" (Wood, 1994, p. 32). Because they are
portrayed as being more focused on their appearance rather than other accomplishments,
makeup was for a long time directed to female consumers. This is one of the reasons why
beauty and cosmetics are mainly linked to females and female gender norms (Ibid., p.36).
Claiming that makeup is a female practice seems like a natural thing to say considering all
the stereotypes and representations that have portrayed how women resort to cosmetics as a weapon to pursue perfection and ‘win the man.’ Even the names given to makeup products, such as “Hot Mama”, “Goddess glow”, “Curvy Cami” (Radzi and Musa, 2017) insinuate that they are directed towards women. Makeup has been built around females because it sustained the societal views and beliefs of women. It supported the idea of women needing to constantly improve their looks, because their beauty was the tool to achieving something and be given attention and appreciation.

2.3 Men & makeup: Men transgressing male beauty norms

Makeup historically was and is still used to an extent by a number of male individuals (Thomas, 2017). For the past few decades, men around the world have started developing a more image-conscious identity, increasing their interest in their self-presentation (Hall, 2015). In modern cultures, gender norms are in constant fluctuation, where masculinities and femininities have softened the strict limits of their assigned traits. Gender identities and roles have fused and because of their new blurred nature, new kinds of femininities and masculinities have emerged (Kimmel, 1996).

For example, sociological studies demonstrate how men are confronting gender-role standards by featuring feminine rituals. These new male practices have been argued to be the result of a change in the labour market where managers, due to a political-economic change, have commodified the male figure (Miller (2006, 2009) as cited in Hall, Gough and Smith, 2012). This transition was also stimulated by the rise of Hollywood and the branded masculinity in the media of different famous men (singers, fashion, sport stars and generally men in the entertainment industry).

For a long time, men who groomed themselves were described as effeminate or categorized as homosexual and previous research has linked these practices with male gay community (T.Edwards, 2003; Pillard, 1991; Haslam, 1997) Different studies highlight that “gay men differ from same-sex heterosexuals on measures that assess the male-versus female-typicality of their interests and occupational preferences” (Bailey, Finkel, Blackwelder, & Bailey, 1996; Lippa & Arad, 1997, as cited in Lippa, 2001). Since makeup is normatively understood to be a feminine practice, when it is practiced by men it is
typically associated with homosexuality, where gay men are conforming to the roles, behaviours and looks of both men and women, which situates them as an intermediate version between the two genders.

For the last twenty years, an increase in men’s grooming has been noticed and the shift in men adopting feminine practices has become subject to scholarly attention. Carniel (2009) describes this phenomenon as ‘hybridisation’, which is used to refer to men’s integration of performances and norms that are assigned with “marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p.246). Another term that is an extension of the hybrid masculinities principle is metrosexual- “new, narcissistic, media-saturated, self-conscious kind of masculinity” (Simpson, 2004, p.1). Metrosexuals are challenging the traditional norms of masculinity by embracing feminine practices, roles and behaviors to a bigger extent than just hybrid masculinities (Simpson, 2002, 2004). They are indulging into beauty practices by investing time and money to achieve the desired physical appearance (Simpson, 2002).

From this angle, a ‘modern man’ is not necessarily gay because he practices and wears makeup. Considering that products, whether these are material or conceptual, are known to carry gender symbolism (Levy, 1959), giving men a sense of identity to which they can aspire and put effort to become, normalizes the nature of these gender transgressing practices. Companies have started to rename makeup tools in order to assure men that makeup can be a male practice, for which notions such as manscara and guyliner have been invented (Jankowski, 2018). Men using makeup is a way of constructing their masculinity based on their own interpretation, while adhering to femininity as a resource that gives them more tools to build their identity.

During the past decade, masculinities and femininities merged together and built new gender representations. Partly, this was possible because of the technological development that allowed everyone through complex platforms to be vocal and share their opinions and interpretations on life in general (Hall, Gough and Smith, 2012). The new level of communication that has progressed into a virtual kind has occurred as a result of the invention and evolution of the Internet, the Web and the plethora of platforms that have emerged afterwards.
Giving makeup a historical background and detailing its use and purpose, illustrated the connection between makeup, societies and gender. The aforementioned sections demonstrate that the practice of makeup is shaped around societal norms, whereas, the norms are strongly bound to gender, gender roles and gender practices. However, these debates overlook the potential of social media as a “power voice” that can shape gender practices and gender representations. For this reason, the next section will detail on the emergence of social media and social media platforms, with an in-depth discussion about Instagram and the affordances associated with it that have the potential to shape beauty norms: the participatory aspects, the metrics and the emergence of male makeup influencers. To be able to discuss about Instagram as a space for gender transgression that has the potential to shape beauty norms, it is of importance to put it in the bigger picture of the Internet, the social media and the platforms online.

2.4 The Internet and The Web

The Internet has been available to the public for over 25 years now. Terms such as the Internet and the Web are often used as synonyms, although there is a difference between the two. The Internet is a global system for networks: “It connects millions of computers together globally, forming a network in which any computer can communicate with any other computer as long as they are both connected to the Internet” (Beal, 2017). As Beal explains further the Web is an “information-sharing model that is built on top of the internet”. On the Web we have access to Web documents called Web pages which contain texts, graphics, pictures, audio files etc.

In the early stages of the Web, only specialists with technical knowledge distributed their material and information in a very simplistic form, which also meant a monopolized unidirectional type of communication that did not account for the feedback of the receiver (Dijck, 2013). With the development of Web 2.0 users could be on both ends of the communication process, where individuals could share their opinions and publish their own content publicly. The alternatives that emerged transformed the limited universe of self-expression into an open network of actively participating individuals (Fischer, 2011). Gradually real-world subjects were integrated and adjusted to the standards of the online
setting. Words and terms have started to emerge, more so, new concepts have arisen, one of which is social media.

2.5 Social media

In simple terms, social media is the electronic version of the traditional media. However, the latter has shifted from the unidirectional traditional mass media to a multidirectional form of it, where the public can manifest their reaction and opinion towards the posted material. The traditional media censorship faded and a new possibility for people to connect without too much control has occurred. On social media the users decide whether something is relevant, important or insignificant (by choosing to interact with a specific piece of content and leaving feedback afterwards). The world has entered an era of broadcasting their thoughts and imagination.

The field of social media still doesn’t have extensive knowledge to what this subject is or isn’t about as it’s constantly evolving and changing its guidelines. The field of Media Studies is currently lacking specific explanations addressing what social media genuinely means and where the limits lay. A general meaning is most often assumed and to many it is not definite what social media refers to (Lovett, 2011). The newness of this field makes it “hard to pin down” because of its “slippery character” (Anderson, 2012). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 60) addressed social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” This definition addresses social media from a functional perspective, omitting the relational angle on it, the term relational referring to the participatory activity of the individuals connecting with each other through social media.

Anvil Media defines social media as “An umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words and pictures.”. This explanation covers three important elements that describe how the exchange of information and representations is happening on social media. People are constructing meanings and representations, which they later share with the online
community through online social interaction, whilst having the technical infrastructure of the platform as a space where the interaction and exchange happens.

With the emergence of social media, more people are starting to be information distributors sharing and exchanging their interests, thoughts and self-created content without having programming skills. The online space doesn’t have demographic, racial or social barriers and limitations. Concepts, representations and information can travel at a speed and distance not previously encountered, whilst people are also “engaging with culture via these new media forms as they enchant, distract, entertain, reveal and occupy” (Beer, 2013).

As Dijck and Poell (2013, p.2) argue, the “social media platforms have penetrated deeply into the mechanics of everyday life, affecting people’s informal interactions, as well as institutional structures and professional routines.” These platforms are shaping the way mass communication functions. It is constructing day-to-day meaning, that is also setting a model for social interaction of the real world. The authors highlight the impact and implications social media has in our lives, whilst also supporting the idea of social media generating shifts in everyday life interactions. As they further discuss:”Far from being neutral platforms for everyone, social media have changed the conditions and rules of social interaction” (Dijck & Poell, 2013) Because of the duality of the online and real world, we have come to be no longer only who we are in the physical world, but also the person who interacts online. Therefore, we carry a virtual and a real-world identity that fuse together into one bigger character. The virtual and physical world co-exist, are complementary and impact each other.

Social media is an environment that generates different meanings and possibilities that impact both the physical and the virtual world. However, this is not accomplished only by social media itself. The technical infrastructure and the human participatory aspects are of big significance when talking about the potential of social media to generate a shift in relation to our research question. They are strongly interconnected and decide the direction a certain idea or subject will take, for which, it is important to discuss their implications.
2.6 Platforms and algorithms

The notion of technical support in the context of social media, besides the coding, refers to platforms. This section is important because our interaction in the virtual space is shaped and supported by the way platforms are constructed.

The research question aims to answer if and how men makeup influencers are able to shift female beauty norms through performing makeup on Instagram; Instagram being the platform chosen for this study. To understand the potential of Instagram as a space and technical support for a social shift, we first have to understand what Instagram is as a platform, what category it belongs to, the nature of it and how it functions.

Social media is a big network of platforms that co-exist and co-develop. Platforms are dynamic virtual spaces that are optimized to their users’ needs but also to the larger economic and technological field that they comply to and through which they improve (Feenberg, 2009). Although all platforms have interaction at the core, they don’t have the same design, functions and outcomes. Claudia Wyrwoll (2014) classifies platforms in eight categories: microblogs, blogs, forums, location sharing and annotation platforms, media sharing platforms, question and answer platforms, rating and review platforms, social networks.

One of the fastest growing is the media sharing category. By definition, media sharing stands for “platforms where registered users can upload their content and share it with friends or provide it to the public” (Wyrwoll, p. 22, 2014). This category acts as a source of news, entertainment and socialization, for which, it is very often a mixture of media sharing with integrated social networking features. Media sharing platforms generated a new approach to content creation, representation, and communication (Dijck, 2013). The nature of the content posted on media sharing platforms is usually constituted of audio, textual and visual elements, therefore, it is a combination of video, photography, text and audio. Media sharing platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram have changed the way people interact with the world, while creating new stereotypes, standards and expectations of the world (Christakis and Fowler, 2009). To be noted, one platform’s success depends immensely on how interested are people to interact with the content and the tools integrated on the platform. Keeping people engaged on the platform is
partly the merit of the nature of the content posted and existent on the platform, and partly the merit of the algorithms.

As Dijck (2013, p. 29) describes it, a platform is as “a mediator rather than an intermediary: it shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them”. The word shape in the above mentioned definition is not aleatory. Although a platform is the technological infrastructure that supports the online activity of its users, that does not mean it is passive or neutral. It is an automated system that tracks and codes into algorithms the online activity of its users, where algorithms are- “a list of rules to follow in order to solve a problem” (BBC, 2014). In computer science as Pedro Domingos (2015) explains, an algorithm gives the instruction on what to happen next with the objective to fulfil the user’s experience. Based on the information about people’s desires, choices and likes, the platforms “develop tools to create and steer specific needs” (Dijck, 2013, p.12) Our coded sociality supported by the algorithms is then manifested by personalizing our experience on the platform with what the algorithms recorded as being something we most likely want to engage with. This is the explanation to why some certain ads appear as suggestions, why some profiles are recommended after we searched others from the same category etc. Every platform has its algorithms that are pre-established to fulfill the aim of the platform.

The relationship between the user and the platforms is mutually adjusted and continuously performed. Consequently, the public’s taste throughout the last decade has shifted, finding ourselves in the era of audio-visual mania (Conner, 2016). Platforms that incorporate features such as images, videos and text are leading the social media market, as audio-visual content is easy to digest, interactive, entertaining and informative. The top five leading platforms in the social media world in 2018 are: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter, as per number of active users (Statista, 2018). The youngest on the list and the fastest growing platform is Instagram- “the quality photo sharing social channel” (Quyenberry, 2017). Its continual growth speaks about the public’s interest in the content found on the platform, as it speaks about the user-experience that satisfies the expectations. Having in mind the notions about platforms and algorithms, it is worth discovering what Instagram is and how it functions, in a way that would explain how its design and features can create the environment for a potential social shift.
2.7 Instagram

Instagram is a photo and video-sharing platform with incorporated social networking features. To be able to use the application one must create an account. Accounts can be public or private, thus, the content posted is either available to the wide public or only for those accepted as followers. A follower is a user that voluntarily subscribes to the account of another person with the intent of seeing its content regularly in their feed- a separate page inside the application where the posts of all the followed accounts can be seen. A person with a large following is called an influencer, their influence being a coded concept, which is not only quantifiable but also manageable. Posts are pictures or videos published by a user on their account. The esthetical qualities can be edited in terms of brightness, contrast, saturation and other photography editing technical values, while also adding color filters- a feature Instagram is highly known for. Each post can be given a description that users personalize to their reasoning and taste. If one likes the post of another person, he can simply give his satisfactory approval by “hearting” the post. A heart is a numerical value that expresses a positive evaluation on a specific post, done by double tapping the post (as in smartphone mode). As Dijck (2013, p.13) states in his book, the pieces of content that are highly liked “have the potential of becoming trends”, which is also reason why influencers are considered to have an impact. The follow and heart options are buttons with a popularity boost mechanism built in, as their popularity is directly proportional with the growth of these numbers. Besides the already mentioned features, users can also comment and reply. By design, Instagram’s search tool is based on hashtags, which are “words or multi-word phrases preceded by the # symbol” that “categorize content and track topics” (Grauschopf, 2017). In order to find a post relating to a subject, the content’s description needs to contain hashtags that would best describe the piece, thus, be identifiable under different criteria.

Just like other platforms, Instagram has a set of algorithms that manage how the platform functions. When users register on the platform they agree to comply with the parameters and format coded by the creators. Therefore, they’re guided into the general direction of what their content could be like and the nature of it. The platform dictates the type of content posted, whereas the algorithms decide how the content is shared. The
dynamics are established by the users while being controlled by the developers. In this case, Instagram sets the rules for how people are going to interact and post.

2.7.1 The Algorithms of Instagram

Instagram also has its set of rules that dictates how the platform operates. What every user is able to see in their feed is not aleatory. Because of that, when talking about influencers and their impact, it is important to know that the way these platforms are designed and function favor some processes which explain how trends are happening, or how some people manage to become popular on the platform.

In 2018, Instagram has released an explanatory list of the updated algorithms. It appears that the algorithm is based on six factors that are taken into consideration when choosing the posts. The three core factors to be considered first are: interest, recency and relationship, followed by the secondary category: the frequency, the following and the usage (Constine, 2018).

**Interest:** After accounting all the files one interacts with in a period of time, the algorithm identifies the categories these posts fit with (ex: music, fashion, sport). The identification is done by hashtag data collection. The category a user engaged with most will appear first in their feed. It automatically selects the type of pictures that are of more predicted interest to one particular user, and it doesn’t elect bigger accounts over small ones. As it has been stated “ranking of Instagram posts is not a popularity contest. Posts with less engagement that are more relevant to you can still appear right at the top of your feed” (Read, 2018).

**Recency:** The algorithm re-arranges the new posts between the time one visited last and one’s new log in. The posts that were published in between these two time limits are sorted and filtered through the other factors mentioned in this section.

**Relationship:** The algorithms identify the accounts people are connecting mostly with as in hearting their pictures, commenting, messaging or searching. These are selected and shown first out of all the recent posts. The aim of the developers is to keep its users longer on the platform, thus, showing the people one cares for and is interested in is a priority.
Moving on to the secondary factors, depending on how often one opens the app, the feed is personalized with the things that algorithms decide are more relevant to an individual based on what he likes. If a person only follows a few people on Instagram, the feed is going to have more posts from the few people he follows, which is opposite when one follows multiple accounts. Algorithms also calculate how much time we spend on Instagram. If one visits for shorter periods of time, the first content that is likely to come up is the most relevant. On the other hand, for those visiting and scrolling for longer, the most recent posts are shown first.

These are the core criteria algorithms function by, yet, the complexities of the algorithms do not stop here. As the Instagram community has grown steadily, the number of interactions on the platform is extensive. When searching something on the platform, in order for the algorithm to select what is best for one user out of millions of posts, it first scans the hashtags of the posts that fall in that category. The algorithm then scans and compares the number of hearts, comments and shares a post has. The three terms altogether classify as engagement, because these notions describe and prove whether other users engage with someone’s content. After calculating the engagement rate per post, the posts with a bigger engagement are shown first.

The formula for calculating the engagement rate is:

\[
\frac{\text{number of likes} + \text{number of comments}}{\text{number of followers}} \times 100\% = \text{Engagement rate}
\]

The selection based on the engagement rate done by the algorithms eventually rank accounts too as they filter the engagement of the content. For this reason, some accounts show up first in the search bar. It’s a game of power in between the numerical values of an algorithm and those who can play by the established rules. Once the engagement rate of one piece of content is increasing, the algorithms increase that content and account’s visibility to other people interested in that category of posts. The more people see that account and its posts, the bigger the chances of having more followers, thus, have your messages and representations seen by more people.
2.7.2 Influencers and their activity

Influencers on Instagram are considered to be the individuals who have a large following number. Influence in the context of Instagram is, first of all, a coded and quantifiable concept. It is represented in the numbers the metrics calculate. However, for an account to accumulate followers and grow into an influencer, there has to be something captivating and interesting on their account that would make people follow it. The key element for which people follow an account is the content and the representations shown in it. One can become an influencer for various reasons: good or viral content; being a source of inspiration, motivation and entertainment; a charismatic presence etc. As defined by the Influencer Marketing Hub (2017):

"An influencer is an individual who has the power to influence the purchasing decisions of others because of his / her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his / her audience, who has a following in a particular niche, which they actively engage with. These individuals are not simply marketing tools, but rather social relationships assets with which brands can collaborate to achieve their marketing goals."

The definition comprises an evolutionary side of being an influencer. The status of an influencer has become more than a content-distributor. Because of their persuasive presence on the platform, influencers are said to be able to impact another user’s choices, thoughts and buying decisions. They are ordinary people that have grown to be known for their diverse assets and their raw and un-commercialized. Although followers see influencers as models, they don’t carry the tag of a celebrity. The “aura” of an influencer is bringing more honesty, simplicity and truthfulness. For this reason, they have become marketing tools as people would trust them more for their opinions, because they can relate to the influencers. The theory behind followers supporting influencers is quite simple: unlike celebrities, influencers don’t have the financial resources to hire a PR team, thus, their authentic self has to win over the attention of thousands of strangers. Influencers earn
from partnerships with brands, which is directly linked to how many followers have taken action in regards to the brand’s offer through the recommendation of the influencer. This way, influencers have to first build a strong and trustworthy relationship with the followers. Anything below the expectations of their followers, or not worthy their trust is penalized and the influencer loses his audience engagement and exposure.

It has to be taken into consideration that the present social media space is highly saturated with information and content, thus, societies can’t avail all of it (Bush, 1945). The more people start using the social media space, the more overloaded this virtual world becomes. This way the truthfulness and quality of the materials posted in the online space is questioned and the visibility chances of one’s content are getting smaller. For this reason, it is harder to get noticed nowadays and those who do, the influencers, are the result of continuous work and progress, for which they get the attention and admiration of their followers.

2.7.3 Instagram as a space for gender transgression and influence

In connection to the research question, transgression refers to the change in which men are challenging the gender norms and embracing makeup as their own practice. As Judith Butler (1990) argues, gender perceptions are rooted culturally, are performative and dynamic qualities that are transforming in time and space. A transgression in the interiorisation of these gender norms is seen to be slowly happening, where men and women are challenging the default criteria of the socially established gender roles by adapting them individually. The transgression process in one’s self expression of their gender after adapting its own traits from a cross gender-exchange. For this neutralization of the genders to occur, a lot of elements and factors have had to come together, one of which is social media and platforms such as Instagram.

Instagram as a space for communicating representations is a balance between pre-established stereotypes and transgression. The platform’s users establish what are the accepted norms and also the users decide what goes further than that and can be challenged. As a result, gender and gender roles online are built through the content of the members.
Visual content allows the millions of users to be creative and explore with different styles and types of content. The posted content is beyond incredible and stimulating, not only because of its design and layout, but also because the representations can be culturally challenging due to the big number of worldwide users and their diverse backgrounds. Instagram is a virtual space where different cultures, passions, visions, ideas and lifestyles coexist. Through Instagram, a tremendous number of pictures are exchanged at a worldwide scale, over 40 billion pictures and videos altogether (Lister, 2018). By engaging with other users and their content on the platform, people are building new trends, new concepts, new norms and standards.

From a metric point of view, transgression on Instagram is happening through the number of people a piece of content reaches to, because the more people it reaches, the more have been introduced and interacted with the message and idea of that piece of content. Transgression is happening at a different amplitude if the phenomenon behind a piece of content is practiced by a user with a big following, which also explains why Instagram influencers are said to have an impact over their audiences. Algorithms have better results on the accounts that are already well established and have a good engagement, because that means they only push the accounts further to more people.

This is what makes Instagram influencers distinctive. ‘Influencers’ are not new, as for a long time there have been actors - cultural intermediaries is a common term used - who influence how cultural goods, experiences and ideas are mediated to others. They shape what cultural goods are considering to be ‘worthy’, legitimate, ‘ethical’, ‘cool’. Such actors are cultural critics, radio djs, celebrities, magazines etc. Instagram influencers are distinctive and worthy of our consideration because of the rate and scale at which they operate. The technical affordances of the platform and the ways in which social interactions are coordinated by the company means that “influencers” can reach more people, whether or not these people actively sought out the influencers’ message. This is significant because influencers with established trust have the potential to shape gender representations and beauty norms at a rate and scale not previously encountered.
2.7.4 Male makeup influencers on Instagram

Throughout time, makeup proved to be a form of expressing social status, health conditions, concealing imperfections or act as an enhancer (Holman, 1981). It is argued to be applied to build a pleasing self-representation within a social setting (Pfeffer, 2005), and also acts as a tool through which one expresses his self-consciousness in relation to the outside world.

Just like women, men online started performing makeup using it as a tool for self-expressing themselves. The phenomenon grew to be one of the most popular transgressive gender practices of the past two decades. Its popularity is linked to the increasing number of men using makeup, and the spotlight taken in different magazines, websites and more so in makeup brand collaborations.

Men entering a female oriented industry and competing against the makeup-privileged gender-women, is a step that is opposing established gender-assigned practices. This is one of the reasons why this subject deserves attention. Just by challenging gender norms whilst they are performing makeup, these men are sharing with the world different representations of makeup and the beauty norms built with makeup. Because makeup and makeup looks are associated with women, the beauty representations created by men performing makeup raise the question of whether these representations are able to influence the beauty norms for women although performed by men.

In order to address this gap, I engage in empirical research which explores the activity of two male makeup influencers on Instagram, looking at how they perform makeup and the representations they create. I study their content, their messages addressed to their audiences and the feedback. I try to answer if and how these men are able to produce a shift in the female beauty norms by considering all the elements that account what influence is in the context of Instagram and how that reflects on the female followers engaging with their content.

The next chapter elaborates on the methodology I adopted for answering my research question, focusing on all the elements that were taken into consideration when conducting this study.
3 Methodology

This chapter will unpack the research approach and design that shaped the process of my data collection and analysis implemented for the purpose of answering my research question.

I begin with discussing my research philosophy, followed by the research design and methods. I then explain my case selection and data collection, ending with the limitations and ethical implications section.

3.1 Research Approach

Defining the research question through the ontological, epistemological and methodological systems, the research philosophy of this study has the pragmatism paradigm as its foundation. This paradigm stands for using the most suitable methods and tools for researching the phenomenon, while human behaviour is studied and explained from a pluralistic viewpoint, available through the incorporation of multiple methods applicable to the study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The paradigm allowed me to find what was best suited for addressing my research question without restricting the research design and methodology. Moreover, from a pragmatism philosophy perspective, there is no single reality, because each individual has his particular interpretation, whilst the individual in relation with other people is constantly negotiating and debating what reality is (Salma, 2015).

The research is built on the theoretical framework of gender as a social and performative act, aligned with Judith Butler’s work (1988) and media affordances theory based on the work of Jonassen, Campbell & Davidson (1994).

Butler described gender to be an identity constructed in time through the stylized repetition of acts, thus, gender being a performative act. What is seen as the gender are “the various acts of gender” that “create the idea of gender” (Butler, 1988, p.522). These “enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988, p.519). These enactments include from body movements to clothes and belongings.
that one chooses to express himself, or a society assigns to represent a set of expectations. The performative aspect of gender is both offering an individual to have the freedom to express himself, whilst also adhering to socially constructed meanings of the gender. This theory is related to the social media field through the implications of social media in offering space for alternative images to be spread along with the symbolism and representations these carry, which contribute to the construction of gender, gender roles, gender practices and gender norms. This framework helps to understand makeup as being part of a performative act that is used to shape a specific gender. Although contemporarily makeup is assigned to women, in the practical part of this paper makeup is treated through the lenses of being a performative act that is flexible between genders. This perspective allowed to observe how the male research subjects communicate beauty norms through practicing makeup- a feminine gender assigned practice, whereas makeup in this context becomes a performative gender practice able to shape beauty norms.

The affordance theory has its origins in Gibson’s ecological study that generally supports that "the medium of any environment possesses a rich set of affordances to the occupants of that environment” (Jonassen, Campbell & Davidson, 1994, p.37). Social media is an environment that "affords attributes, which afford cognitive learning activities which afford thinking which affords learning” (Ibid.) This also means that each of the affordances, at any point of this negotiation sequence, can impact the learning results (in the context of this paper, the learnings about beauty of the followers). This is an important take on the research and findings because regardless of the affordances associated with the platform and the generated content, only the users (learners) are responsible for what they learn out of them. Through this framework, aligned with the research philosophy, the impact of the chosen research subjects is not studied from a definitive perspective, as the actual learnings of the participants are subjective due to their different interpretation of reality, content and their learning outcomes. Therefore, the research can only answer whether the male influencers have the potential to shift female beauty norms.

The approach chosen to conduct this study was inductive reasoning combined with a mixed methods research design allowed by the research paradigm. This approach “involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns through series of hypotheses” (Bernard, 2011, p.7). The
The inductive approach is known to focus on observations in order to shape a conclusion, starting from an outcome-oriented question. It was best suited in this case because the research question of this study started from general observations of patterns, resemblances, and consistencies of the Instagram phenomenon, that later on received data support; whereas the theoretical framework was more for creating a background for exploring the complexity of the research question and understanding the nature of it, rather than answering the research question itself (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The inductive approach allows the data to bring insights for the research question outside the already constructed theories. This option gave me more space for analysis and interpretation of data. Generally, the inductive approach is known to be applied for qualitative data collection methods. However, the pragmatism paradigm supports the flexibility of tool choice and method combination (Research Methodology, 2018), the following approach has been adapted accordingly for data collection and analysis using mixed methods.

3.2 Research Design

The research design involves the use of mixed methods and study of two critical cases. Because the research question aims to answer if and how male makeup influencers on Instagram are shifting the female beauty norms, the chosen research methods had to take an approach that would try to conceptualize what impact and influence are in the context of Instagram, and how that can be measured and explained. To do so, I combined qualitative and quantitative research methods treated from a threefold perspective: from a metric point of view which uncovered what the metrics consider influence to be, as in engagement; visual and discourse analysis that helped observe what patterns are repeated throughout the posts of two Instagram accounts; thirdly, I conducted a survey with 20 followers of two male makeup artists: James Charles and Bretman Rock. Surveys enabled me to explore the perspectives of people who engage with these influencers every day, which enabled me to explore the nature of their influence in an inductive manner. The opinion of the followers enabled me to have a new perspective on their interaction with both or one of the accounts, and have another view on the notion of impact. The metrics were collected both from personal research and analysis, as well as from a third party named Klear, an influencer
marketing database and software program. The company was contacted due to the lack of information, for which, a collaboration was established to help fulfill my research goal. Using mixed methods enabled me to triangulate key findings. Triangulation helped to bring more consistency to the research and create a clearer understanding of the phenomenon by combining diversified data and sources (Thurmond, 2001).

3.3 Methods

The study was carried by analyzing two male makeup influencers on Instagram, therefore, the research method applied for online environment studies is netnography. As Kozinets (2002, p.62) defines it, netnography is “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks.” In addition, netnography is studying computer-mediated communication oriented to understand consumer behavior. I used this method because the subjects to my study are performing and engaging with audiences online. It allowed quick access to both influencers and followers, without any geographical limitations. Instagram allowed access to unlimited time for observations and it offered a permanent and stable database for content analysis. The flexibility of the method allowed switching in between different phases of data gathering and interpretation.

As a researcher, my position was to observe the makeup practices and the activity around the content posted by the influencers. A total of 323 posts were analyzed for a period of 8 months, starting with the 1st of January, along with the hashtags and descriptions used in order to identify patterns and trends they have followed or created, and how they addressed beauty to their followers. The decision of following the last year was based on the premise that trends are ephemeral and can dissolve quickly, while social media is dictating what is worth the attention or not (Abnett, 2015).

The period of eight months was chosen according to the start of a new calendar year up until a week before starting my data analysis. Because of the constantly changing nature of the posted content, as a researcher I have taken the commitment to keep observing the longest possible period the research timeframe has allowed me. This way any changes that occurred could be noticed and taken into consideration.
The pictures shared by the two influencers on their Instagram accounts have been examined through visual analysis. The qualitative aspect of visual analysis has allowed a detailed examination of the elements that constitute the content posted. Hence, by engaging with the posted material a narrative of the phenomenon could be developed, as decisions about their significance and message had been shaped along the way (Rose, 2016). The captions used by the influencers to describe their pictures have been examined through discourse analysis. The two methods were complementary in their aim of enriching the insights about the activity of the two male makeup artists.

The posted content on Instagram is mainly of photographic or videographic nature (with a one-minute time limit), photography being its strongest and main feature. The choice of platform was justified by the high number of active users, a number of 1 billion active people on the platform as of June 2018 (Statista), and the status of the platform as being a great influencer marketing tool that claims influencers are trusted tastemakers able to impact the decisions and behaviours of their followers due to their authenticity and trustworthiness, which ultimately leads to decreased resistance to the influencer’s message (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012).

### 3.4 Data collection

The empirical data collected for this study was built around the content posted by the male influencers, which involved metrics, feed analysis, which are observations based on their posted pictures, and a survey that aimed to collect the opinions of the followers. This three-dimensional approach is necessary for a better judgement of what influence is. Only after understanding how influence is achieved online we can begin to consider an *if* and *how* the male makeup influencers are able to shift the beauty norms and beauty representations for women.

In what follows, I explain how I collected my data, unpacking how I proceeded with each method and the ethical considerations associated with them.
3.4.1 Choosing the influencers

The choice of studying two illustrative cases was based on 1. have a comparison that would strengthen and broaden my insights, 2. the cases and the data collection to be manageable.

The representatives chosen for this study were selected purposively based on three criteria. First, these had to be influencers self-identifying as men; secondly, these had to be men performing makeup in their content, makeup being their main niche; thirdly, the accounts of these men had to be classified as influencers, which in the context of Instagram is interpreted as accounts with a large number of followers and good engagement rate: many hearts, comments and shares (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). The accounts of Bretman Rock and James Charles have been found through researching online material. Choosing the male makeup influencers was strategically accomplished through finding articles and platforms that are ranking the influencers objectively by their niche and follower number. The purposive sampling method allowed choosing the subjects that would bring complexity and diversity to the insights (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In what follows, a short description of the two makeup influencers is given to connect the subjects to our research question. Different aspects related to their online presence will be described, giving an understanding of their role and activity.

James Charles

James Charles is a 19-year old makeup artist that first launched on Youtube (an online video-sharing site) in 2015 and shortly after he created his Instagram account. He has a following of 8.1 million people on Instagram, with a total number of 653 posts as of the moment writing this statement. He is the first male spokesperson and ambassador for the CoverGirl magazine. The influencer is a self-taught makeup artist who started creating and posting content online as a high-school student. Generally, in his Youtube videos he is showing how he achieves a specific look by using makeup, while in his Instagram pictures, he is showing the professionally-photographed and edited final look. In his posts, he gives advice on makeup and tricks his followers could try. James identifies himself as a gay man and thinks of makeup as art (Beck & Valenti, 2016).
Bretman Rock

Bretman Rock is a 20-year-old male makeup influencer who started gaining fame as a teenager. At only 13 he started creating content and posting it on Vine (a 6 second video sharing service) and Youtube (Dixon, 2018). His Instagram account has grown the fastest, and by the time he reached the age of 17, he was already followed by millions of people. Currently, Bretman has 10.5 million followers on Instagram, his photos gaining millions of likes as well. At the moment writing this, Bretman has posted 1,259 pictures. His Instagram feed is a combination of videos related to different subjects and pictures that feature makeup in different contexts and to different degrees. His “How to contour” video brought everyone’s attention to his makeup skills. Openly identifying himself as a homosexual that’s “just a boy who wears makeup”, Bretman thinks of makeup as of a tool to gain confidence that’s giving people a new attitude to face the world, an exploration of the self (Vasquez, 2016).
3.4.2 The survey: Choosing the participants and connecting with them

The participants chosen for the survey were women, as women are the main audience in makeup consumption, makeup being currently a female-oriented industry (regardless of the flexibility of the practice for both men and women in the past). Due to its contemporary female orientation of the practice, and its long traditional association with women, the research questions aims to answer how the opposite gender (male) can impact the beauty norms of the assigned makeup gender- female, through performing makeup- a male gender atypical practice. Therefore, the participants are women that I found in the follower lists of the two influencer accounts. They were messaged through the Instagram direct message option. The participants had to be females with public profiles, this assuring
me that 1. I am targeting the audience that I am studying in my research paper- women; 2. The public- profile option was one less barrier in the way of messaging these people without needing the permission from them to do so, as Instagram has a policy of “send a follow request” to the accounts that are private, which only if accepted allows you to send a direct message.

The participants were explained how and where I found their accounts and why I was messaging them. I introduced the subject of my research paper, explaining to them the purpose of it and my data research. Subsequently, they were asked whether they would like to participate and give some insights on their interaction with the makeup influencer’s account. The messaged participants had been informed on how their names and responses would be used, which in the context of this thesis is only for research purposes and not for public use or exposure.

3.4.3 Collecting the data: The Metrics

Under the term metrics we classify all the “parameters or measures of quantitative assessment used for measurement, comparison, or to track performance or production” (Investopedia, 2018). Generally built around numbers, metrics help understand, measure and quantify the progress and success of a subject, in this case- the influencers. For this study, elements as average likes per picture, average comments per picture, engagement rate, the total number of followers, maximum likes per picture, post frequency, gender ratio and the average age of their followers have been taken into consideration. The information in regards to this was obtained both through personal research and also from a collaboration with Klear, an online database and influencer marketing software program that agreed to share their data and metrics on the two influencer accounts. The engagement rate of the accounts has been calculated using Phlanx and Tanke, two online marketing platforms that encompass an engagement calculator tool.

The explanation to why these elements are important is simple: Algorithms work with numbers, the more likes, views and comments they have- the easier they are found and suggested online to other users, which then brings attention to them and
the chances of them being liked by others are increasing. The more attention they have, the bigger the chances for them to gain followers that later on are going to be active and engage with their content. The bigger these numbers get, the bigger their influence and worth are considered. For this reason, the engagement rate establishes how active and engaged are the already gained followers. High engagement rates talk about an interested audience that is looking up to the content posted. It is the equivalent of people exchanging their time to listen or look to what the influencer has to say or show. This is the main reason why influence is seen through numbers, because these numbers, at the end of the day, speak of how much time people spend on looking up to these artists, thus, absorbing and relating to what they post.

3.4.4 The Survey

The survey was constructed to encompass three different aspects: the nature of the engagement and interaction of the followers with the accounts; what they have learned from engaging with these accounts (the learnings) and the participants’ perspectives and views on the influencer. The purpose of the survey was to have a first-hand account from someone who interacts with one or both of the accounts. Obtaining information on how these females perceive the content, what do they like about it, if they learnt anything since they started following these accounts, was crucial to understand whether the two influencers have an impact even in the slightest way. By having the personal experience of these followers, an understanding of influence and change could be shaped. The survey had more open-ended questions that gave the opportunity for the participants to express their thoughts and opinions on the topic according to their own judgement. This way, instead of giving leading questions and limiting response-categories, I relied on open-ended questions, and close-ended questions with the option other where participants could add their own point of view. An example of the survey is attached in Appendices (Appendix 1). The survey was conducted using the online tool Typeform, which is a tool for collecting data that allows personalizing the layout according to the survey topic. The collected results were put in an Excel sheet by sections: engagement, learnings, and opinions, that were later analyzed individually and coded accordingly to my best knowledge.
3.4.5 Coding the data

For the coding part of this research paper a number of analytical strategies were used, including thematic analysis, visual analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis. The coding categories were established based on the type of data and findings gathered. The tables related to the different categories are shown in the different sections of the analysis chapter.

The thematic analysis allowed identifying patterned meaning throughout the studied Instagram pictures. The inductive way of approaching the thematic analysis meant coding the patterns found across the data collected from Instagram. Visual analysis proved to be the most suitable method to comprehend the abundance of the visual content. The images were studied for the purpose of observing what patterns they are following throughout their content, as through patterns we could observe regularities this giving us an idea to what they support, believe in and promote to their followers in terms of beauty and makeup. It was a study of observing visual meanings of how they used makeup as a tool to represent and send a message. Moreover, in order to grasp the different levels of the posted content, I pursued with content analysis and discourse analysis which allowed me to manage a large number of images and other elements as textual descriptions and hashtags.

The discourse analysis was conducted to discover the motives for using makeup, observing what they communicate to their audiences about beauty and makeup, how they address the two subjects in their descriptions, and if they’re promoting any concepts in relation to those. In addition, the descriptions are also giving an understanding of who they communicate the messages to, whether they refer to only women, men or both.

3.5 Limitations and Ethical Implications

The study is only able to answer whether the two makeup influencers have the potential to shift beauty norms because 1: the survey participants are not enough to make a definitive claim, 2: the participants are individuals with different backgrounds (cultural,
social classes, beliefs etc.). From this perspective the study is limited, as it cannot answer about the extent these women have their beauty norms shifted for. One can say that has leant to countour her face, yet, performing the act itself doesn’t entirely express what level of importance it carries for the performer. Aesthetic beauty has different meanings and purposes in different countries and cultures, more so, for each individual. Makeup, as a beautification practice, is given different levels of importance in shaping what beauty is depending on, as mentioned, the different cultures and backgrounds women have. It is rightful to say that this study would be more concise to be conducted in cultures that use makeup primarily as a beautification tool and it is of high importance.

Another encountered limitations was the change of the data privacy policies which has been updated on all platforms. Due to this update, different applications that before had allowed to track different Instagram accounts and have general information regarding their activity were no longer accessible, thus, collecting the data was possible either from having insights from the influencers themselves or from a paid platform that collects this type of data. This had implications in the ease of collecting my data, and justifies my collaboration with Klear for achieving the necessary information.

Based on the assumption that the followers understand English to some degree as the influencers are native English speakers, I structured my interview in English. However, because the followers are from different countries, thus, speaking different languages as their primary one, asking certain questions in English can be considered as a limitation, as the decoding process of the meaning behind my questions could have resulted in different interpretations. Considering this, I tried to be concise and use common terms for creating my questions, whilst also offering my help to the participants in case of confusion.

The timeframe of the research can be considered a limitation as well, as the study is comprising a short period out of a long and consistent influencer activity. Nonetheless, the analysis aimed to bring to the surface a few observations that would allow to make a statement and have an understanding, even if it only refers to a moment in time.

Using netnography as a research method means complying with the fact that the online space is also a space for private and public content, for which some rules apply. Instagram is a public platform where users have the option of setting their accounts as private or public. Considering the latter, the accounts that I have studied are voluntarily
posting their content making it accessible for the public, for which the informed consent of the influencers themselves wasn’t needed. Both influencers are adults and had put their profiles to be available to the public, for which providing anonymity wasn’t crucial element as the research question would not cause harm, defamation or disclose sensitive data.

Convincing unknown online users to complete a survey wasn’t an easy task. Most people avoided sending a reply. This is probably due to lack of interest, benefit or the fear of being dragged into a scam. Having more participants would have benefited the study as these could have given the chance to shape a more accurate conclusion.

In the next chapter, I begin presenting my empirical material that starts with the metrics and the information connected to them; it then focuses on content analysis and the results from the survey.
4 Data analysis and Discussion

The following analysis of the collected data focuses on treating separately the three sections: metrics, feed/content analysis and surveys, and connects the interdependence of the sections. The three sections explain why these men are considered to have an impact on women, and how that is possible, hence, each individual section looks at the activity of the two male makeup influencers trying to connect the dots to explain how these men have the potential to shift the beauty norms for women. To do so, studying the subjects and their activity was essential to answering the research question.

Each section has its individual take on what influence means, because the aspects that have the potential to influence the followers is what produces the shift, whether that is in numbers or representations. This three dimensional approach (metrics, feed analysis and follower feedback) aims to track the ways a shift can happen or is already happening, how it’s defined and what favors it. The influencers’ content was studied to observe the patterns they follow individually and also have in common. The patterns are giving a better understanding on the representations the influencers create that people see and are interested in. The survey is then connecting the observed patterns and aspects that are considered to play a role in the equation of influence with the participants, that are also followers of the two accounts.

4.1 The Metrics

The reasons why metrics matter for answering our research question are the following:

1. It provides real data on what influence is in terms of numbers, which is essential for understanding what impact is in the context of Instagram (the engagement rate)
2. It gives information on the demographics and gender ratio, giving insights on who the audience is, thus, who can be influenced

The metrics shown in Table nr. 4.1 encompass concrete numbers of James Charles and Bretman Rock’s numerical influence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total number of Instagram followers</th>
<th>Engagement rate</th>
<th>Average comments per picture</th>
<th>Average likes per picture</th>
<th>Maximum likes gained per picture</th>
<th>Audience demographics: Gender ratio</th>
<th>The average age of their followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Charles</td>
<td>8.2 million</td>
<td>18 %</td>
<td>25,577</td>
<td>1.33 million</td>
<td>2.2 million</td>
<td>85 % women</td>
<td>25 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bretman Rock</td>
<td>10.5 million</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>8,749</td>
<td>645,683</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
<td>83 % women</td>
<td>26 years old</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.1:** The metrics about James Charles’ and Bretman Rock’s accounts

As shown in the table, the difference between the people who followed James or Bretman’s accounts with those who engage is considerable. The involvement, so to say, can be seen in the number of likes and comments that reveal the average number of people actively engaging with the content, comments being considered the highest form of interaction because they take more time and thought to write. To be noted, just because others are passive in regards to liking or commenting, it doesn’t invalidate the fact that they are still seeing the posts. The algorithms, however, will rearrange the feed so that there will be less of the accounts one unlikely interacts.

As mentioned before, algorithms take into consideration the engagement rate of every account on the platform, for which, algorithms push the accounts with bigger rates to be visible for others that are possible interested in that account’s niche. This can only mean a bigger reach for the accounts that are already succeeding with the algorithms, which also applies to James and Bretman’s accounts too.

The above table also gives us an understanding of who is the audience, in terms of gender ratio. As shown, James and Bretman have over 80% of their audience being women, with 85% and 83% ratios accordingly. This means over 6.97 million women are following James and 8.7 million women are following Bretman, while their average age is 25 and 26 years correspondingly.

The influencer status given by the nature of the platform in accordance to the aspects that qualify the male makeup artists as such, is dominantly the result of the
predominantly female engagement happening on these two influencer’s accounts. On account of this, it is only reasonable to assume that a potential shift in beauty norms and representations is mostly involving women, even if for now it’s only from a metric point of view. Another important aspect is that the metrics are the affordances of Instagram, that later on define what influence is. As Jonassen, Campbell & Davidson (1994, p.37) affirm, if „the eyes afford sight” and “the ears hearing”, then the metrics in the context of Instagram afford the notion of influence, because without the metrics- the notion of influencer would be inexistent. Therefore, in this first stage of the analysis it is worth inferring that shifts are produced from a metric point of view and that influence is defined by the numbers an account reaches through gaining followers, an accumulation decided partly by the algorithms and partly by the elements building the pieces of content, these being the affordances of the platform that allow the platform to create the notion of influencer, a notion that is learned and has a different meaning and role to each user. More so, the affordances can impact the learning outcome of the users, because they play a role on how the content (and representations) is shown.

4.2 Visual analysis of the content

In the search for understanding how a shift is produced, the question “What are these men posting in their content that can be generating a shift in the female beauty norms and representations?” had arisen. It is one thing for the platform to give support for a shift to evolve (by spreading the piece of content and having a bigger reach), but it’s another thing from where it starts. It can’t be assumed that the algorithms made others follow an account in the first place. Algorithms lead by suggestions, but they do not take the decision to follow an account or not. The algorithms guide the user based on his recorded preferences. For this reason, what is found on one’s account is what hooks a visitor for the first time. It has to be taken into consideration that what is actually posted and seen by other users is subject to interpretation, as the content is the affordances to representations, but not the learnings themselves.
By identifying the recurring elements in their posts, the approach on makeup and beauty was established, and the aspects the two men focus most when using makeup. As it follows, these are the findings based on the content analysis:

**Table nr. 4.2** : James and Bretman’s approach when using makeup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>James Charles</th>
<th>Common elements throughout their content</th>
<th>Bretman Rock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artistic makeup; Extravagant makeup;</td>
<td>Perfectly shaped and filled eyebrows</td>
<td>Festive makeup Professional elegant makeup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themed makeup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nude lipstick colours (generally) the</td>
<td>Highlighted cheekbones, nose, inner</td>
<td>Dark and vibrant lipstick colours, the focus isn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>focus being shifted towards the eyes;</td>
<td>eyebrows/ eyebrow arch and cupid bows</td>
<td>directed to one particular facial part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye makeup patterns and designs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigmented and colourful eye shadows</td>
<td>Face contouring, face baking, full face</td>
<td>Warm and more natural eye shadow colours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>makeup (they do not leave the beard area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>untouched as other artists prefer to due to the hairs), multiple- step procedures and tools for applying makeup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 is giving a brief description on James and Bretman’s take on makeup. The difference between the two male makeup artists is that James has an artistic approach on makeup, creating themes for different posts, whilst Bretman seems to use makeup to create professional makeup with an elegant touch. Both men take their eyebrows seriously, while also having a weakness for highlighter and perfectly built up and contoured face.
Naturally, the two men have their preferences with the colours they apply. James and Bretman generally use makeup on their faces.

Figure 4.1 is a collage of the styles and preferences the two influencers have. The amount of work the two men put in creating their looks and building a makeup influencer identity around the makeup looks they perform can be easily seen, they each have a particular vision and approach. Their Instagram posts, however, aren’t just a portfolio of their work. Both of them post content from their daily lives that defines them individually and gives a sense of their personalities.

**Figure 4.1**: A collage of Bretman Rock (top row) and James Charles’ (bottom row) Instagram pictures

Whilst they are wearing makeup in their pictures, in some cases, these photos aren’t just a profile picture capturing their faces. They post pictures of them wearing makeup while doing different activities and being in different social contexts (**Figure 4.2**). As it follows, the representations in these pictures are shaping different meanings and learnings, which captures the interest of the audience. James and Bretman don’t present makeup only as a
practice they are passionate about, these individuals have integrated makeup on their daily basis as a self-grooming routine. For them it’s a lifestyle that shapes not only their creative work, but also their identity. In this context, makeup becomes a performative act that transgresses between the genders.

Figure 4.2: Day-to-day entourages of James (top) and Bretman (bottom) wearing makeup

4.3 The Survey

The survey followed to see how James and Bretman’s female followers engage with their content, and whether they have motivated them to do, think of beauty or makeup differently or change something about themselves; because by followers doing so we can understand how these male makeup influencers are able to make a shift. The research question aims to see if and how men such as James and Bretman are shifting the beauty norms, beauty representations & makeup through their presence and work. Consequently,
as the research question is oriented on their impact on makeup and beauty, it means those who are having the beauty norms shifted for are participants using makeup, which in the context of the present day makeup industry are women.

All 20 participants that had agreed to take part in the study are using makeup, the difference being in the frequency of applying it. Generally, the participants are frequent makeup users with 13 women using makeup everyday, 4 women using it a few times a week and 3 women using makeup almost every day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Do you use makeup?</th>
<th>How often do you use makeup?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>almost every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>a few times a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Estelle</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nicolle</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>a few times a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Freja</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Karol</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ditika</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>almost every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Katheryn</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>a few times a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Dajana</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Veronika</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Miaelly</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>a few times a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jess</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>almost every day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.3: The list of participants: general information, demographics and the frequency of makeup usage*

The most common reasons for which the participants are using makeup were: aesthetic purposes, creative purposes and self-expression (as shown in Figure 4.4). A total of 11 women use makeup for aesthetic purposes such as enhancing their facial and body features, 5 of them use makeup for creative purposes (makeup art) and 4 of them answered they use makeup to express themselves. This can be considered as part of what they are looking at while scrolling through the profiles of the male makeup influencers. Their influencer following being guided by their interest too.
Figure 4.4: A chart representing the reasons for which the participants of the study are using makeup

Why do the participants use makeup?

- Self-expression: 20.0%
- Aesthetic purposes (for enhancing facial/ body features): 55.0%
- Creative purposes: 25.0%

A part of my survey was focused on how much the participants engage with the influencer accounts and why they do so. Both of them speak about their consideration towards what the influencers post. What is seen as engagement on the platform is the user activity through the platform’s affordances: the metrics and the content. As it follows, these are the results to the engagement section:

Figure 4.5: Participants’ engagement with James and Bretman’s accounts
The participants are highly engaging with the content posted by the two male makeup artists. As shown in Figure 4.5, 19 out of 20 people are hearting the posts, 18 of them are taking the time to comment, and 19 are also going on their accounts to look through the content, besides the feed. The rates for those who engage with their content are big enough to speak about the involvement of the followers, their curiosity and support. When asked why they have started following James and Bretman in the first place, the participants have given answers that could be comprised in three main categories: because of their makeup related posts (pictures and videos), because of the unusual man wearing makeup representation, and last but not least, because of their personality, humor, confidence and way of being.

As seen in Figure 4.6, the followers go on their pages for more than just makeup ideas; women enjoy getting a sense of their personality and online presence, confidence and personality being two of the most mentioned aspects. In addition, the subjects have been asked whether they feel inspired by the 2 influencers, where 19 out of 20 women confirmed they are. For this reason, the learnings section aimed to find out whether these accounts have inspired women to change their views on makeup & makeup practices, on beauty and beauty representations.

![Pie chart comprising the main aspects that made the participants follow James and/or Bretman’s account(s)](image)

The answers to the survey uncovered that 17 women out of 20 had practised at least one of the looks presented by the male makeup artists, although, 16 consider the makeup looks aren’t approachable on a daily basis, while 4 of them think some makeup styles can be worn daily. The participants were asked in an open-ended question whether throughout
their experience with the accounts they have learnt something. A total of 18 women confirmed to have learnt something, and their learnings are shown in Table 4.3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baking technique &amp; face contouring</th>
<th>Baking refers to the technique of setting the makeup for keeping the structure; contouring is a makeup technique that enhances and defines the bone structure while minimizing the features that are disproportionate (big nose, small forehead etc.). It aims to accentuate and give the illusion of different facial features.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyeshadow blending techniques &amp; ideas</td>
<td>Eyeshadow blending involves the different steps and brushes to achieve the blending of different colours on small proportions of the eyelid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyebrow shaping</td>
<td>Eyebrow shaping involves the different techniques that aim to achieve the proportionate and perfect shaped eyebrows according to one’s face shape. It includes: defining the eyebrow arch, plucking and shaping the eyebrow, trimming the length of the hairs, filling the eyebrow with eyebrow powder or eyebrow pencils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeup layering</td>
<td>The different steps to achieving a specific makeup texture on the face by applying different makeup</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the practices are related to makeup (more or less the eyebrow shaping as it also involves some trimming), but each of them has to do with the beautification of the face. As it follows, the female participants were asked if they have changed their opinions in regards to something related to makeup since they had started following the male makeup artists. For this question the answers were mixed, involving 2 aspects: makeup as a female gender-practice and makeup related opinions. Out of a total of 20 women, 13 mentioned that they initially didn’t consider makeup to be a male practice and that now they understand that men can wear makeup too; while also 18 out of 20 have answered that they have changed their opinions in regards with the way they perceive makeup: makeup as a form of art;
makeup as an enhancer, and makeup as a complex process that has stages of application, tools and steps that have to be considered. Later on, when questioned to which gender they think James and Bretman address their content, 17 answered that they think it is addressed to both men and women. When asked about whether the influencers had motivated them to buy makeup related products, 16 out of 20 women confirmed they were influenced by their reviews and recommendations. Their explanations to why they have been convinced to buy products were touching 3 main reasons: because they are performing makeup and they have knowledge and experience in terms of makeup quality and expectations, because they are honest and open in their opinions on different products, because they work with a multitude of products and their experience shaped them to be selective.

4.4 Discourse analysis

For a deeper understanding of how they communicate things, a discourse analysis of the picture descriptions was conducted as well. Studying the descriptions allowed having an understanding of what the influencers communicate to their followers about beauty and makeup. The filters through which the analysis was conducted were: makeup and beauty related suggestions and opinions, who they address in their descriptions and how they address their audience, top hashtags used and the patterns of attitude. Table 4.4 captures the essential findings of the discourse analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top hashtags #</th>
<th>How they address their followers</th>
<th>Personal Hybrid Gender references</th>
<th>Makeup related suggestions</th>
<th>Attitude patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>#makeup #mua (make up artist) #motd</td>
<td>Sisters- the word being used both as a noun and adjective to address the</td>
<td>James describes himself as a sister. In his descriptions he “so here lies this no face makeup only poorly blended blue and green</td>
<td>Profile description is: just a sister with a few blending brushes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#anastasiabeverly hills (makeup brand)</td>
<td>audience. He names his followers “sisters”, and also play a word combination to express emotions, situations, persons etc. (eg: we sister styled each other, a sister spy, hello sisters, sister sunset, sister slice (of pizza), happy national sisters day (celebrating his million followers hit etc.) He also calls them as guys, bitch and babes.</td>
<td>uses expressions such as “she’s a business woman”, “sister flashback mary” or “just being a natural woman”, “freckled boy”, “queen of being extra” etc.</td>
<td>halo eye selfie “my ice cream was melting but my makeup wasn’t” “I forgot to put on bottom mascara today but still feeling cute” “got bored and played with makeup a few nights ago” “getting more &amp; more confident in my no makeup selfies” “Liner sharp enough to cut a bitch... twice”</td>
<td>Regardless of his influencer status, James stays humble and mentions about the good and bad days that he has. He is always thankful to his followers and uses questions in his descriptions to interact with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude Examples:</strong></td>
<td>“guac is extra and so am I”</td>
<td>“no offense.... but my makeup looked amazing last night”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Bretman | #throwback  
#cute  
#lol  
#motd (message of the day)  
#feminist | **Bitch/ Bitches**- Bretman refers to himself as a “bitch”, “a bad bitch”, “science bitch”, using the term to also address his followers. More rarely he uses “girl” and “hoe”.  
He describes himself as a she “She’s in fight club she said”  
“My gayest dream is to be a merman”(as in mermaid) | “I’m trying not to be hoe”  
“The bad bitch that I am”  
“If God saw these pics he’d say - Yaaasss queen slay”  
“Ready. Bret. Go. Babe in Paradise is now available” (highlighter palette reference)  
“I highlight my ears  
“Highlighter- I got Mahu on the cheeks and your man in my Sheets” | **Profile description:**  
Doing the least, but looking the most  
Bretman has a very confident and in-control approach.  
His descriptions carry a lot of attitude giving a sense of very high self-esteem.  
**Attitude Examples:**  
“Please check your ass before you come for me.... don’t be teaching me how to do shit, when you should be...” |
“Eyes be schleep but eyeshadow stay WOKE”

“I don’t care if you disagree with me... I SAID WHAT I SAID “

Like this if you think I’m cute..

Table 4.4: Findings of the discourse analysis

The discourse analysis revealed two men with two different attitudes and approaches. Although both men are confident and embracing everything they do, James gave and overall sense of modesty and gratefulness, while Bretman’s presence is more dominant, self-centered and conceited. Both men use soft words such as cute and pretty, while also cursing or making sexual references. Along with their flexible use of words typically associated with female vocabulary (pretty, cute, glam) they also adopt other feminine mannerisms and practices as having their nails done and painted, wearing heels, posing in their pictures like women, wearing women’s clothes and many other. Moreover, they alternate in between using hybrid gender references, such as queen, sister, bitch, businesswoman, merman, woman, boy etc. It was noticed they do not have defined lines on gender norms, neither when they address themselves, nor when they address their followers. This gives a sense of gender inclusiveness, which allows their content to be all-gender oriented and relatable to a larger public, because gender becomes performative, thus, it doesn’t have fixed limits to who it addresses.
5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to research if and how Instagram’s top male makeup influencers are shifting the beauty norms & beauty representations in a female oriented industry. It aimed to look at the activity of two male makeup artists performing makeup on Instagram and their potential on shifting the beauty norms for women through their content. The word potential is not aleatory, and that is because the media affordances theory points out that the affordances can affect the learning outcome because these are attributes that can be manipulated and changed. However, only an individual is responsible for the interpretation and the knowledge construction act (Jonassen, Campbell & Davidson, 1994). This means the actual learnings of the female participants in this study are subjective and can not be considered accurate as a lot of elements and factors are coming at play in answering the research question. This is why this research studies the potential of the two influencers to shift the female beauty norms, rather than answering with a general answer. Moreover, it is defined as ”potential” because the research cannot answer the role of makeup in achieving the cultural beauty norms for each of the participants. The different cultural backgrounds women have offer diverse socially constructed views on female beauty, which place makeup to different importance scales. For this reason, makeup may or may not be a tool for beautification purposes, and if it is- it has different noteworthiness.

The research succeeded in answering that the two men have the potential in shifting female beauty norms, and it also uncovered what builds the grounds for a possible shift in the context of Instagram, which answered the how in the research question. The insights of this research revealed the nature of the potential impact on women, and the ways their influence is manifested.

The research was conducted using a netnographic mixed methods research design. It studied 323 posts of two male makeup influencers on Instagram, collecting insights and patterns that would help answer the research question. Adopting an inductive reasoning approach allowed exploring the data through a process of analyzing, coding and developing explanations. It combined both qualitative and quantitative methods, with the choice of
studying the data through discourse, visual and content analysis for a more complex analysis.

Applying the knowledge about how social media platforms function, how the technological infrastructure serves the users, brought an understanding of how interaction happens online. Therefore, with a background in how Instagram functions through algorithms, we saw that the influencer status (numerically speaking) is partly established by the algorithms and the platform’s infrastructure and partly by the individuals themselves. This brings light on the fact that the phenomenon of men performing makeup and its popularity is divided between the organic interest of the people and the technical infrastructure and affordances of the platform that lead people to these accounts. Knowing this, an explanation of the Instagram influence concept could be shaped and be further discussed to a social level.

Men practicing makeup has long historical records that prove males performing makeup is not a novelty, yet, the attention given to men performing makeup on Instagram is owed to the element of exoticism and rareness that a lot of women find when visiting their accounts, because men performing makeup is not classified as a male gender practice. This is an important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration when talking about the potential of these men to capture the attention of their female audiences, and the interest is given to them when they upload something related to makeup.

The metrics, which are part of the affordances of the platform, highlighted that the followings of the two men on Instagram are very big, although the number of people who organically engage is smaller. The demographics showed some young audiences, where most of the followers are women. For this reason, it is rightful to say that although James and Bretman don’t necessarily address their content to women, the dominant gender reached are females, therefore, the chances of them being influenced in any way are considerably bigger. The engagement in James and Bretman’s accounts and posts are what influence is defined to be in the context of Instagram, their metrics being a good example of what influence is on the platform and how supportive an audience can be. Influence on Instagram is the product of the affordances of the platform that shape what influence is.

The visual analysis discovered that the two male makeup influencers practice makeup both in their daily lives and for creative content purposes. Both men use makeup
mostly on their faces, with specific focus to eyes, lips and eyebrows. James and Bretman use makeup for beautification purposes. The makeup they perform is done on their own faces, which puts their activity into a more personal and transgressive perspective. Instead of applying makeup on female models, since makeup is traditionally addressed to women, they perform makeup on themselves. This is how these men are transgressing gender norms and practices, both through their day-to-day makeup lifestyle and through their creative work, because their representations make makeup seem a normal thing to do for a man. This way not only makeup becomes a performative act, but also gender. Gender norms become a performative act themselves, where the influencers shape them through their representations.

In their **descriptions**, the influencers speak about makeup as an empowering tool, that is always there to lift up one’s spirits and look “a little rainbow to start your monday off right” (about a rainbow themed eye makeup), “eyes be schleep but eyeshadow stay WOKE“, “early morning glam” (referring to a fresh morning makeup face), “am currently delusional trying to stay awake today but at least I look pretty while doing it”. They treat makeup as a boost and enhancement, being secondary to their personality, but always there to improve things for them on “rainy days”, “ugly days”, “sleepy days” etc.

Both James and Bretman use fluid gender terms to address makeup, to refer to themselves and their followers (bitch, girl, sister, babes, guys). Generally, their descriptions are not gender oriented, however, they use female related terms more often, which makes it more relatable to the big number of female followers. Their fluidity in addressing beauty and makeup becomes performative and adaptable to the content. Performing makeup, which itself is a contemporary female assigned practice, is a gender performative act, especially when it is performed by these men. By combining this act with the fluidity of the addressed terms, the gender norms around makeup are starting to dissolve the fixed lines, thus, address to a wider audience than just females only. As a result, more than half the women that participated in the survey have responded that initially they didn’t consider makeup to be a male practice, whilst after a while, when they were asked who they think their content is addressed to, the majority answered that they think James and Bretman’s content is directed to both men and women. These insights speak of acceptance and personal opinion transgression. If these females didn’t see men wearing makeup as a norm
when they first encountered with their accounts, they no longer felt that James and Bretman’s content was only directed to them (women) after following them for a while. Throughout their answers women admitted to take inspiration from James and Bretman’s accounts, and trust their opinions when buying products. Women admitted that they have learnt different lessons related to the beautification of the face. As seen in their responses, the male makeup influencers are not only teaching women how to apply makeup and the tools related to that, they also give a sense of what good eyebrows should look like, what needs to be enhanced or minimized in order to look better, what suits a face, what colours mix together etc. The participants take them as examples because the level to which James and Bretman perform makeup is seen as professional; women see them to be experienced with handling makeup products and makeup looks.

It seems these men are entering feminine spaces by performing their own version of makeup, whilst they are also challenging the concept of makeup and what makeup means to women, how women view and utilize makeup. The point that women gradually started accepting men performing makeup speaks about the acceptance of the new representations posted by the two men. Women not being accustomed to men wearing makeup speaks about the societal gender norms established in a lot of countries (as the participants were from different countries), where makeup is claimed to be a female practice.

The insights of this thesis build the details to a bigger picture of the phenomenon of men performing makeup. It uncovers how the phenomenon is a form of communicating gender and gender norms, of communicating beauty, and also of communicating a self image and the underlying beliefs and attitudes of the self. In addition, the insights underline how communication of the aforementioned aspects is done through one of the world’s leading platforms- Instagram. The findings bring light on how platforms such as Instagram can shape the way people interact with beauty, and how the taste of the ”beauty consumer” can be shaped whilst engaging with the content on the platform.

Currently, men performing makeup is still an exploratory form combining hybrid gender and beauty notions, because the gender fluidity seen in the analysed content illustrates a combination of feminine and masculine attitudes, practices and traits. For this reason it is rightful to say that the beauty norms communicated through the Instagram posts
are hybrid themselves, because although these are men performing makeup, they are still inputting their take on a female practice.

Influence can not only be seen through the numerical values on Instagram, as the research showed that on a personal level women do get motivated to try new makeup products or trends recommend by the male influencers, which speaks about a higher level of interaction and impact apart from the metrics. This does not prove that women would completely change their beauty standards just because they are following these men on Instagram, but this doesn’t deny they will not consider the beauty representations shown in the content of the two men.

The findings of this research do not aim make a general statement that men performing makeup have an assured impact on how women perceive beauty. The subjects studied and the participants involved are not sufficient to make a claim of such nature. This study has achieved the goal in answering whether men performing makeup have the potential of shifting the beauty norms for women, the number of survey participants being enough for answering if they have any form of impact on the way women see makeup and beauty and the elements related to that. Moreover, it wanted to discover how the impact is happening through the technical infrastructure and affordances of Instagram, what is contributing to its development and what elements play a part in the influence equation.

To conclude, the research found that men performing makeup on Instagram do have the potential to impact female beauty norms, as the participants to the study brought affirmative insights to support this statement. This study is not making a definitive statement on the impact of men performing makeup, as James and Bretman are only two members of the entire male performing makeup community. Because of the constantly evolving nature of the social media platforms and the interaction happening online, this research is applicable to explain and give a description on this particular case, in this moment of history and in the context of present Instagram interaction. The subject of men performing makeup and their impact on female beauty norms is an interesting topic that needs further research, as the nature of the topic is still unexplored and it is in its early stages of evolution, but it is certainly a growing phenomenon that is taking its position in societal changes.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Survey questions

1. Please write down your name if you agree for it to be known by me and if you would be okay with it being disclosed in the results of the study. To be noted: The dissertation will not disclose your name for the general public as it will only be viewed by the university examiners.

2. What country are you from?

3. What is your age?

4. Do you use makeup? (Y/N)

5. If you answered yes, how often do you use makeup?
   a) Every day
   b) A few times a week
   c) A few times a month
   d) A few times a year
   e) Other

6. Is makeup important to you?
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) other

7. If you answered yes to the previous question, for what general purpose do you consider you use makeup? You can pick more than one option.
   a) fashion and trends
   b) creative purposes (makeup art)
   c) dealing with a dermatological condition
   d) aesthetic purposes (for enhancing facial/body features)

8. Is makeup an important factor in your daily life?
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) to some extent
9. If you answered "yes" or "to some extent" to the previous question, please tell me shortly, what makes it an important factor in your life?

10. Which of the following Instagram users do you follow on Instagram? (Multiple selections are available)
   a) James Charles
   b) Bretman Rock

11. Which aspects made you follow them in the first place?

12. What do you find interesting about the account/ accounts?

13. Have you ever commented to one of their posts?

14. Do you heart (like) their posts?

15. Do you only see their posts in your feed or do you access their profile to see their content?
   a) I see his/their content only in my feed
   b) I go on his/ their profile(s) to see their content

16. What makes you keep following him/them?
   a) the content
   b) the personality
   c) both
   d) other

17. Would you describe them as an influencer? If so, why?

18. Does he/ they inspire you in any way? (Y/N)

19. Do you find their makeup style to be approachable on a daily basis?

20. Have you practiced one of his (their) looks/ tips? (Y/N)

21. Did James/ Bretman motivate you to buy makeup related products? (Y/N)

22. If you answered yes to the previous question, please explain: why have they motivated you to buy makeup related products? what is it about them that convinced you to pursue buying that specific product?

23. Do you consider to have learned something related to makeup from him/ them? If yes, can you tell me what that is?

24. Has he(they) changed your opinion about something related to makeup? If so, what did you change your opinion about?
25. Have you compared yourself to him/ them in terms of makeup? If so, what was the subject of your comparison?

26. Who do you think their content is mostly addressed to?
   a) women
   b) men
   c) both

27. What do you like about his/their makeup approach/ style? What do you dislike about it?

28. Can you relate to the makeup style he promotes (they promote)? (Y/N)

29. How would you describe him/them as individuals?

30. Do you think his/their sexuality plays a role for them having a passion for makeup?
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) to some extent

I am really grateful for honoring me with your insights, time and patience. Thank you for your collaboration!