

(Lip)Stick it to the Man: How YouTube Beauty Videos can Empower Women

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THE PROBLEM

- Thousands of women are creating and consuming the beauty video, which has a great deal of **potential to empower viewers (age 12-30) around the world**, but it does not reach that potential.
- Viewers do not understand these videos as feminist, empowering content due to the **ways beauty videos are being talked about** by scholars, media critics, and content creators.
- These discussions result in **superficial readings of beauty videos**, and can lead to **unhealthy comparisons and low self-esteem** among impressionable viewers.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- To demonstrate how critical reading strategies **can challenge notions** of the beauty video as stereotypical, sexist content and **empower viewers** of the beauty genre
- To **bridge the gap** between academic notions of feminism and popular practices of “girl power”
- To encourage viewers of beauty videos to **think critically about messages** in media

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Cyberfeminism in Relation to YouTube:

- Challenges existing power structures** and hierarchies by inviting space for marginalized communities
- Focuses on **female empowerment** and individual self-expression in the digital sphere
- Challenges traditional, Western notions of beauty

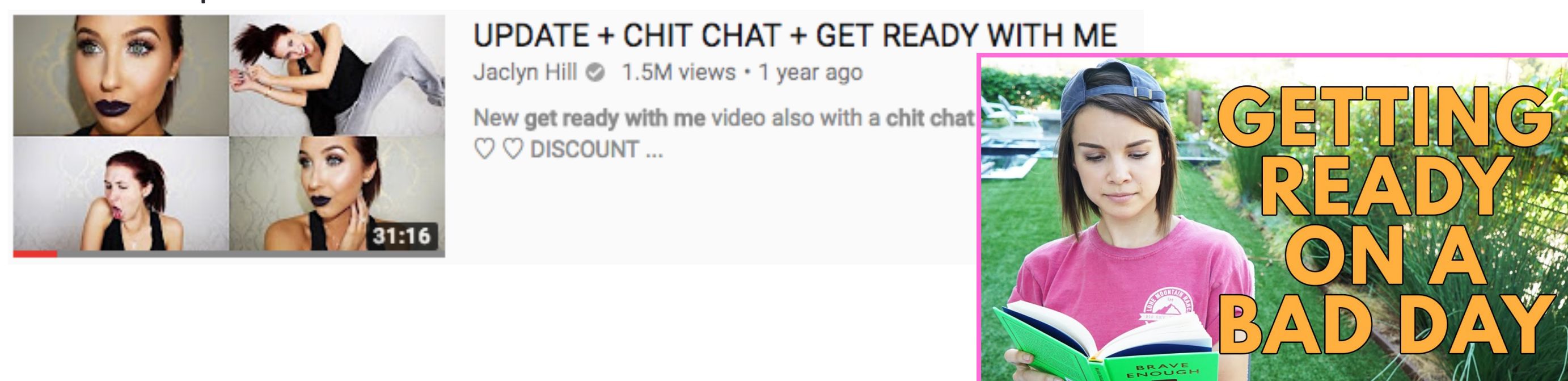
Feminist, Invitational Rhetoric Focuses On:

- Equality (**eliminated dominance** and elitism)
- Immanent value (principles that women’s **lives are worth** something)
- Self-determination (**agentive decisions**, woman in control of making own decisions)



DATA

- Chose the “Get Ready With Me” video of two of the most subscribed-to beauty gurus to represent what most viewers are watching: Jaclyn Hill (4,546,636 subscribers) and Ingrid Nilsen (3,926,974 subscribers)
- Analyzed viewer comments that were published up to a month after video publication



METHODS

- Conducted **close, rhetorical analysis** of each YouTuber’s two most recent “Get Ready With Me” videos, as well as viewer comments through coding scheme (see chart below)
- Close reading method informed by goals to highlight critical reading strategies
- Used **theoretical grounding to inform coding scheme** and to answer research question.

Research Question:

How can viewers of YouTube critically read beauty videos through a cyberfeminist and invitational lens?

Code	Description	Argument
INV	Invitation for audience participation, asking audience to contribute (typically via the comments section)	Focuses on agentive role viewers have in meaning-making
EMP	Empowerment of audience via women-first language and productive difference	Illuminates beauty work outside of the realm of solely cosmetic; begins to demonstrate worth of radical acts of self care.
STOR	Anecdotes; storytelling to portray a message	Uses narrative to bridge gap between teacher and learner and invite conversation; exposes marginalized issues in accessible ways.
RACE	Bringing up issues of race	Acknowledges intersectionality in cyberfeminism; empowerment outside of white feminism
SEX	Bringing up issues of sexuality	Invites difference, confronts top-down discourse with bottom-up activism, aligns with cyberfeminist goals
CLASS	Bringing up issues of class	Invites difference, confronts notions of affluent feminisms found online
EQUAL	Equalizing, “we” centered discourse	Breaks dominant, elitist hierarchies/boundaries; gives viewers a chance to be heard
IMMANENT	Emphasis on individual worth and self care	Gives marginalized communities/individuals a place to voice experiences; aligns with feminist invitational rhetoric
SELF	Language of self-determination: offering modifications, acknowledgment of difference	Quality of invitational rhetoric that invites difference, audience agency

FINDINGS

- Beauty gurus invite audience participation, bridging the gap between expert and learner. This incites **collaborative work** in which audience suggestions inspire YouTubers’ content/products.
- The dynamic encourages viewers to share their experiences as part of a marginalized community and to invite **discourse about intersectional issues**.
- Popular gurus use large subscriber base to discuss exigent social issues and to perform **activist work** (see image below).
- Gurus use **collaboration**, rather than persuasion, to create and to endorse products.
- Gurus encourage **community representation** and **individual self-expression** through beauty work.



SAMPLES FROM FINDINGS

Coded from Nilsen’s “How I Get Ready on a Bad Day”

Code	Example
INV	“I don’t know about all of you, but during times like this I tend to wake up really early in the morning...so if you have any tips for that, let me know in the comments because I could really use some help with that.”
EMP	“For me getting up and getting ready isn’t about masking what I’m going through; it really is an outlet for me.”
SELF	“This is what feeling good and safe and comfortable looks like for me, but for you, it might look totally different. So just keep in mind outfits that you know you feel good because that’s what’s really important at the end of the day.”

(See handout sheet for complete findings)

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

- Beauty video is collaborative work that **invites the voice** of both the content creator and the content consumer.
- There is room for scholarship to not just examine what content creators can do to embody feminist theory, but to **recognize what audiences can do** to read existing content through an empowering lens. .
- Existing feminist rhetorics can and should be applied to modern, digital texts in order to **empower women and girls outside of the academy**.