

Blind and partially sighted women's makeup: A narrative of practice, perseverance and empowerment

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Abstract

Social disabilities such as visual impairment hinder full participation in daily activities and society. This study uses a qualitative analysis of YouTube makeup tutorials to examine the practices and motivations of Blind and Partially Sighted (BPS) vloggers. Although makeup has been used over centuries specifically to support personal and social goals, its usage has grown in strength with the advent of social media influencers. Thematic analysis reveals that for them makeup application involves iterative learning through product familiarization, routines and practice. The experience brings them enjoyment, fun and increased confidence. Their motivation to engage with makeup and share vlogs appears at least partially driven by the desire to support others with similar disabilities and to challenge public misconceptions about disability. Amidst rising aesthetic standards and omnipresent social media, the BPS makeup vloggers' presence signifies their agency as influencers, whilst also pointing to the equally powerful shadow of social disability still present today.

Keywords: social disability, vloggers, aesthetic capital, accessibility, inclusion, makeup, influencers, agency

Introduction

The fields of fashion and beauty studies can be critiqued as biased toward visuality. That is, experiences pertaining to dressing or adorning the self predominantly assume visuality and the sense of sight (Ruggerone and Stauss 2020: 211). This bias obviously hinders understandings of nonvisual sensory and social experiences of individuals with visual impairment, whose perspectives are clearly under studied. In this article, we seek to address the dearth of literature in the study of Blind and Partially Sighted (BPS) people's processes of

body modification by addressing their use of makeup. Visual impairment and blindness can contribute to social isolation, lower participation in the workforce and a lower quality of life, with economic consequences to individuals as well as society. Makeup is used to modify facial features to achieve a desirable look in support to social and personal goal. Thus, we explore the practices and motivations of BPS makeup vloggers in the context of critical social, beauty and disability constructs, with an aim to raise awareness of the social disability barriers faced by the BPS community.

We begin by reviewing the general literature on cultural and feminist perspectives on makeup usage, the psychological effects of makeup, and the role and tactics of social media influencers in promoting beauty labour, including makeup application. We also review BPS people's engagement with visual aesthetics and makeup through the prism of social disability and equality. Our study utilizes a qualitative research methodology by analysing YouTube makeup video tutorials presented by BPS people, including professional vloggers. We aim to address the following research questions: 1) how does visual impairment or blindness impact makeup practices? 2) what insight can be gathered about the motivations of BPS vloggers to wear makeup and share makeup tutorials publicly?

Beauty and makeup as symbols of identity

Beauty is a concept that is socially constructed; physical appearance, social identity and self-identity are interconnected (Simon and Trötschel 2008). Beauty norms pertaining to different aspects of one's appearance, such as skin tone, hair colour and body shape, are strongly related to constantly evolving national, cultural and gender identities shaped by society (Elledge and Faria 2020; Li, Min and Lee 2020). Consequently, the pursuit of beauty is often influenced by how people conceptualize their identities and pursue a sense of belonging (El Jurdi and Smith 2018).

Human beauty as an aesthetic construct contributes to improved personal satisfaction and happiness (Hamermesh and Abrevaya 2013: 365); this does not imply that less beautiful individuals are unhappy. However, a growing trend towards higher standards for personal presentation, based on an increasing range of available products and procedures, has led to concepts such as aesthetic capital and beauty labour, which represent the value of enhancing appearance for social and economic gains (Anderson et al. 2010; Kuipers 2022). Several measurable attributes of the human face considered beautiful have been reported, for example: the presence of feature symmetry, averageness (in the context of genotypes), skin health and colour (Fink et al. 2005; Fink, Grammer and Matts 2006; Hong et al. 2017).

Makeup is often used to temporarily enhance these features to bring them closer to relevant standards, or to alter the perceived age of the wearer (Jones et al. 2018; Russel et al. 2019). But makeup also serves purposes beyond enhancing beauty. It can be wielded as a tool for challenging societal norms whilst, within mainstream culture, it can also be a medium for self-expression that may or may not relate to universal beauty standards (Malone 2014; Kodzoman 2019).

The use of makeup by women is not without criticism. Some feminist writers view makeup, alongside other beauty activities, as a form of oppression of the female body (Jeffreys 2014). While makeup is not as physiologically traumatic and costly as cosmetic surgery, its association with gender norms and excessive fashion consumption raises questions about the extent to which individuals should regulate their makeup use. Thus, the exploration of makeup's potential positive and negative impacts requires further research; disabilities such as visual impairment or blindness bring new, complex dimensions to these debates.

Psychological theories related to makeup usage

Most research on the psychological motivation for wearing makeup, beyond the purpose of signalling identity, has historically focused on women. Boosting self-image and coping with self-esteem pressure are common psychological goals modulated by anxiety status and various intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors (Korichi et al. 2008; Tran, Rosales and Copes 2020). In the field of experimental psychology, visual manipulation via makeup has been reported as boosting trust, self-esteem and cognitive performance (Palumbo et al. 2017). The application of makeup may also reduce the effects of mental stress in healthy individuals and increase quality of life in breast cancer patients (Richard et al. 2019; Póvoa et al. 2020). Not all studies report positive outcomes. The reliance on makeup can negatively affect body image for women (Fardouly and Rapee 2019); physical and psychological harm (undertaking surgery and body image anxiety) can be triggered by what is commonly known as a 'body-conscious culture' (Widdows 2021: 251). Furthermore, concerns are expressed that promoting facial camouflage may lead individuals with visible appearance differences to be less accepting of their natural appearances, potentially resulting in negative psychological outcomes (Gholizadeh et al. 2021: p11). The psychological motivations of people with visual disabilities are missing in beauty studies, but it seems reasonable to consider existing findings on sighted people pertinent, albeit unlikely to provide complete insight.

Social media and the beauty construct

The increasingly wider societal use of makeup is reinforced by social media and particularly by influencers specialising in fashion and beauty. Beauty vloggers cultivate the image of ‘ordinary experts’, thus differentiating themselves from fashion celebrities, makeup artists, etc. (Tolson 2010: 283). To gain popularity and commodify their status, ‘ordinary expert’ influencers generate content that presents them as having typical daily lifestyles and purposefully curate impressions of intimacy via sharing elements of their personal space and daily routines (Colucci and Pedroni 2022; Giles 2018; Rocamora 2018; Berryman and Kavka 2017). They also utilise this status to cultivate a sense of ‘aspirational realness’, making products and desired aesthetic outcomes seem attainable for the average consumer (Findley 2019). A specific distinction of beauty vlogging is that it offers some aspects of beauty labour performance in front of the camera. This is especially relevant to makeup tutorials that rely on specific strategies such as half-face makeup or ‘before and after’ snap shots. It follows that visually impaired or blind people could develop their own virtual personas and gain influential status by offering tutorials to their own communities, as well as able-bodied audiences, in order to tackle social barriers.

Disability

Disability studies have contributed towards understanding disability not only as a medical issue, but also as a social construct. The concept of social disability emphasizes the shifting focus from addressing medical conditions and physical limitations to improving the impact of the environment and culture on individuals with disabilities (Barnes 2012; Couser 2005). This concept aims to eliminate barriers that hinder disabled individuals from participating in daily activities and connecting with others. The modern prevalence of digital media offers a potential avenue to address public misconceptions of disability. However, Foster and Pettinicchio (2017) reported that while online fashion content and discussions about disability were garnering support for disability representation, consumers were often responding to limited and sanitized images. More recently, fashion and beauty media outlets such as *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* have initiated critical conversations about disability representation and equality (Chitrakorn 2021; Bitmead 2023), whilst disability aesthetics as an art form has emerged as a cultural phenomenon and a means to combat ableism (Fox 2021). Therefore, disabled social influencers could play an important role in supporting disabled people communities and addressing public misconceptions. A framework for disabled influencers’

self-representations on social media based on self-empowerment, vulnerability and resilience has been proposed by Södergren and Vallström (2023: 1033).

Discussions of disability aesthetics are not common, largely reflecting the persistent underrepresentation of disabled individuals not only in everyday social contexts but also within the realms of current social, consumer and media research. Therefore, expanding research on aesthetics, disability and social inclusion will support representation and equality.

Arts, makeup and blind individuals

Makeup can be viewed as an art form, blending skill and creativity. There has been a growing recognition of the role of art in therapies aimed at enhancing the health and well-being of individuals with disabilities (Datlen and Pandolfi 2020; Solvang 2018). Recent research has focused on making visual arts more accessible to blind people, often involving audio information and tactile experiences (Li et al. 2023; Quero et al. 2021). The application of makeup on blind individuals has been reported to activate brain activity, suggesting that visual perception of makeup's effects is not essential for experiencing sensory benefits (Taomoto et al. 2021). Hence, if makeup, as a form of beauty practice, offers personal artistic and psychological advantages to some, BPS individuals should be able to access such potential benefits, paralleling the approach taken in visual arts. Research specifically exploring the connection between makeup use and the well-being of BPS individuals is very limited. However, Li et al. (2022: 18) discovered that makeup played a role in boosting their self-confidence, allowing BPS people to express themselves and redefine their social roles. Similarly, a recent survey of BPS makeup users reaffirmed the positive impact of makeup on their well-being, driven by a desire to appear professional and *on par* with sighted individuals (Pradhan and Daniels 2021). Challenges are reported, too. Blind individuals rely on sighted people for information equivalent to seeing oneself in the mirror and are concerned about being judged in relation to their blindness Kaplan-Myrth (2000). Their limited representation in the media, often leading to the assumption that 'blind people do not use makeup' is another challenge (Li et al. 2022: 11). Enhancing the representation of the BPS community in the media was identified as one significant motivation for visually impaired vloggers to create YouTube content (Seo and Jung 2021).

In summary, there is an imperative to better understand BPS people's experiences and aspirations in relation to personal visual aesthetics, with makeup as one specific manifestation of it. Makeup is the most omnipresent of all 'beauty' practices, due to its relatively low cost, lack of health risks, easy access and temporary effect. Through this study

we aim to foreground the makeup experiences of people with visual disabilities who are a source of ‘ordinary expert’ commentary on blind people’s makeup practices. In so doing, we also explore how disability has shaped their practices and how it has impacted their broader motivations to wear makeup and share that experience publicly. We do that in the potential for heightened aesthetic capital, paralleled by an emerging awareness of accessibility and inclusivity challenges for disabled people.

Methods

We conducted qualitative content and thematic analyses on video content freely available on the internet between April 2021 and August 2021. The chosen video content database was YouTube, the most popular online repository of video content with the number of beauty views reaching 169 billion in 2018 (Ceci 2022). A search for makeup video tutorials generated by or with BPS makeup users was conducted using a combination of search terms e.g., ‘makeup’, ‘beauty’, ‘blind’, ‘visually impaired’. The rationale for this search strategy was to focus on the interplay of makeup and disability, avoiding product/brand related facets or the presenters’ personalities. Only videos in English were accessed, as this was the common language between the researchers and to ensure that software-generated translations into English would not inadvertently introduce bias and inaccuracies. We reviewed the relative quality of the video material against the principle of affective design outlined by Morain and Swarts (2012:12), which includes the importance of narrators’ competence in motivating viewers and inspiring confidence. The competence of the presenters was assessed based on the real-time process shown and on how well the products themselves were handled (e.g. opening and closing of packs, adequate verbal descriptions of the products and what was being done (Morain and Swarts 2012: 12). The number of videos from the same source was restricted to three to ensure breadth of data. Transcriptions of the selected videos were automatically generated and collected through the YouTube official caption function. We thoroughly checked the transcripts for accuracy and imported them into NVivo (version 12) software to conduct an inductive thematic analysis using the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data was coded to gain a systematic understanding of the practices, challenges and motivations of the BPS makeup users. The reliability of the coded video materials was established through two iterative cycles of coding with the researchers thoroughly reviewing, discussing and finalising the final codes. The identified themes were semantic only. Visual content such as the cosmetic products featured, their colour, the

product applicators and the background setting were also recorded for additional content analysis.

Results and discussion

Ten publicly available makeup video tutorials involving eight BPS makeup users were selected for the analysis (Table 1). All BPS people featured were white, female, aged between 21 to 40 years and from English-speaking countries. Their self-reported degree of sight loss varied from 85% to complete. Two videos produced by charities and featuring presenters and BPS makeup users who were not regular online content creators were also included to increase the breadth of content and to ensure representation of makeup practices beyond these of highly skilled vloggers.

Insert Table 1 approx. here

The visual content analysis confirmed that the tutorials had been intended as makeup demonstrations delivered in real time. The video materials revealed a breadth of product types and techniques, illustrating that despite the lack of sight, BPS people could master the creation of a full makeup look. Glimpses of private spaces were also included in some vloggers' content. These curated windows of normality of daily life resemble the tactics adopted by sighted makeup vloggers aiming to portrait themselves as 'ordinary' people (Colucci and Pedroni 2022), but they could also have been intended as hinting a capacity to live a life that is not so different from that of sighted people. The latter message might have been aimed at sighted audiences as a response to medicalised and ableist views of disability held by society. The thematic content analysis identified three main themes with corresponding sub-themes (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 approximately here.

Theme 1: Makeup practices

The first theme reflects the process of makeup application with the explicit goal to inform BPS viewers. The vloggers described product and tool usage, and/or demonstrated specific tips addressing the lack of vision. The emphasis on deliberate product familiarization and routine building was prominent, thus singling them as important enablers of makeup application for BPS individuals. Building familiarity involved memorizing the colour, texture

and applicator tools of complex products such as eye shadow palettes. Three presenters mentioned that their first step into the world of makeup was going to a cosmetic shop and letting shop assistants select a full set of products for them. This helped them develop an elementary understanding of which makeup products suit their faces best and the basic routines for applying them: ‘I asked multiple people to explain all the colours and the palettes, um—what they’d be good for: lid, crease, blending out, liner, highlight ... So, I know all the different colours...’ (V2).

Visual product characteristics such as colour and shimmer were routinely described and appeared important to know as part of the experience of wearing makeup, hence enabling the BPS users of the tutorials to have an appropriate understanding of the makeup’s effects. From the point of view of accessibility, this would be a defining feature of tutorials aimed at BPS makeup users, as they require auditory descriptions that sighted vloggers may not provide.

Many practical tips were specifically aimed at aiding BPS makeup users, strengthening the impression that the tutorials were intended as practical guides. For example, presenters emphasised the use of their hands, using expressions such as: ‘my finger eyes’ and ‘my fingers are my eyes’ and following specific patterns, for example, working out a foundation methodically through different areas of the face or counting the strokes in eye shadow application.

Cream foundations, compact powders, lipsticks and mascaras were the most used products, whilst products with more precise definition effect, such as pencils and liners, were less common. Such choices are not surprising, considering the mastery required to draw a consistent line and/or to achieve symmetry. However, not all product choices were determined by risk management. For example, one vlogger demonstrated and emphasised their ability to use eyeliner. Their implicit message appeared to be one of not letting blindness hinder personal choices and realisation, thus modelling perseverance.

I didn't even know before (becoming blind) how to do eyeliner, uh, I didn't do as much makeup as I do today back when I could see better. Am I crazy? I've pushed myself to do so many more things not having sight [...] (V9)

The emphasis on iterative learning and practice emerging from our analysis is corroborated by a larger study reviewing a selection of 145 online BPS makeup videos (Li et al. 2022). Hence, despite relying on a smaller sample data, our study effectively captures the

fundamental practical and cognitive aspects of the makeup experience of BPS people, shedding light on the extent of the efforts involved.

Central to the makeup journey of a blind person is the management of the risk of failing to accomplish the desired appearance. Li et al. (2022: 1) identified this concern via interviews with BPS makeup users, likening it to a ‘gamble’. Similarly, Burton (2011: 316) noted the sense of risk in relation to fashionable dressing, suggesting that blind people do not wish to be subjects of pity due to poorly put together outfits. The video content in our study did not reflect explicitly such concerns and appeared to focus on positive enabling messages, with makeup application being presented as stress-free. Moreover, the public personas of all presenters appeared specifically curated to emphasise their abilities, linking these explicitly to mindful and determined practice and aligning with the BPS vloggers’ strategies for demonstrating resistance reported by Södergen and Vallström (2023).

This emerging difference in attitudes between BPS vloggers and BPS makeup users in general is not surprising as, in the strive to maintain their expert status, the vloggers are unlikely to share all of their personal struggles. It could be also reflective of a highly effective social support structure scaffolding the vloggers’ lives and successful online presence. Indeed, the supportive role of families, friends and other sighted people in developing the makeup capabilities were acknowledged in several videos: ‘So, the very last thing I do actually is to get someone to check my face for me’. (V5). One vlogger also used sighted people’s compliments as a way of helping them to decide which tones of makeup (colours) suit them. These references raise the question about the extent to which speedy access to a sighted person for makeup advice is available and, if not, how much can be achieved in a fully autonomous manner. Such details were not included in the vloggers’ tutorials, but the existence of video tutorials generated by charities for blind people suggests that makeup demand is not resulting from or being solely driven by social influencers. Thus, the existence of BPS makeup tutorials could be simultaneously addressing an existing demand for accessible and practical advice, whilst setting the bar too high for BPS individuals who were already feeling under pressure to fulfil aesthetic expectations despite personal cost such as the significant time investment.

Overall, the first theme highlights specifically the scale of the beauty labour that BPS vloggers have dedicated to their quest for building their personal aesthetic capital. This content simultaneously informs, encourages and adopts a tone of aspirational realness, replicating the style of sighted makeup vloggers (Findley 2019) but is contextualised to blindness. For online BPS communities, such content offers alternatives to regular makeup

vlogs, which may lack accessibility features and clarity, so these tutorials are addressing a specific need of this group. The tutorials also demonstrate to sighted viewers that makeup vlogging is not solely contingent on vision.

Theme 2: Challenges and other expectations of makeup usage

The second theme highlights a more nuanced range of vloggers' experiences with makeup, some related to challenges and others to the multisensory elements of makeup usage. It presents another angle of the personalities of the vloggers as, albeit still practical in nature, it touches on memories and emotions, too.

Product colour clearly impacted preferences, as most eye shadows and lipsticks in the tutorials were warm neutral colours. Such colours would enhance facial features, rather than create a strong effect, possibly reflecting a desire not to stand out. Strong colours were also mentioned as more challenging to apply: 'I used to be so scared to apply really dark colours, but I did start with soft matte lipstick creams, any sort of consistency that is quite liquid'. (V5).

By making this point, this vlogger offers practical advice whilst sharing openly their vulnerability, so that others can associate with it. Because the aesthetic and emotional significance of colour choices mentioned in the videos are not unique to blind or low vision makeup users, the shared challenges also serve to normalise their experience in the context of a broader audience of sighted viewers. Some vlog features also mirrored the strategies used by sighted fashion and beauty vloggers to establish authenticity and trust with their audiences (Rocamora 2018; Colucci and Pedroni 2022). For example, despite the acknowledged difficulties with using mascara, it was used in all videos whilst commonly accompanied by jokes about re-occurring accidents: 'I get blobs all over my nose (from wet mascara), you just – it's a bad makeup day!' (V7). In addition to bringing authenticity, the humour of these situations imply that the notions of beauty and makeup should have a light-hearted element, possibly as a counterbalance to the structured and systematic practice outlined in Theme 1.

The elements of playfulness and aesthetics beyond colour were intertwined and related to varied multisensory experiences such as product scent and texture as well as packaging finish:

I believe this one (lipstick) is Celeste, so it's a shimmery nude colour and has a minty kind of feeling. I like it, and it smells so good. The minty feeling is what it makes me feel like I see it [...] (V9)

I love the texture, when you touch it with your finger it is very slippery. (V2)

The significance of tactile experiences and the role of scent in enhancing the well-being of blind individuals has been reported in past research; hence the colour-based aesthetic outcome of makeup is not the only avenue for emotional and psychological gains (De Coster and Loots 2004; Feng et al. 2019). The multimodal effect of cosmetics is not confined to makeup and is commonly highlighted in advertising; the identified benefits for BPS individuals could be equally relevant to sighted people.

In conclusion, despite the disability-specific references, the second theme strengthens the notion that the BPS vloggers aim to position themselves as ordinary people and that their experience with makeup transcends ableist assumptions. Together, the first two themes set a narrative of how a particular group of disabled people have utilised consumer products for personal benefit in the face of rather inaccessible product design. By posting makeup tutorials online, the BPS vloggers demonstrate to their audiences that they are interested in and capable of beauty labour despite the challenges involved. Implicitly, they also position their makeup routines and vlogging as illustrations of their determination not to be defined solely by their disability.

Theme 3: Motivation for using makeup

The third theme explores further what motivates the BPS vloggers to wear makeup and to share their content via social media. A common message of makeup supporting psychological wellbeing emerged, reflecting the beauty industry's and sighted vloggers' narratives that much of beauty labour is a form of self-care and self-expression.

When it comes to beauty, for me it's really about self-care. Being with myself, it's art, it's expression, it's showing the world who I am on the inside, outwardly. (V3)

Makeup definitely makes me feel more girly and more put together, so I really enjoy it because it definitely transforms how I feel and so I do it for me, not for everybody else. (V10)

Although it appears market driven, the concept of BPS selfcare via makeup has a somewhat different meaning, as it is predicated on significant learning and resource investment in

practising. It underscores the vloggers' unique position of being simultaneously the ordinary expert for blind and sighted audiences alike, whilst showing their extraordinary skills in a light-hearted way. Complementary to the notion of self-care is the experience of fun. Five presenters mentioned that their interest in dressing up and wearing makeup started in their childhood when they had some degree of vision and that these habits were a lot of fun while growing up. These personal details not only place aesthetics within the broader scope of one's life span but also subtly confront public misconceptions about the lives of BPS individuals.

The Henshaws charity (V4) and Priceline (V6) tutorials suggest that prior to the advent of social media, the demand for makeup by blind individuals would have already existed but, likely, on a smaller scale. In contrast, the BPS makeup vlogging reflects the digital media-driven trend of constantly evolving beauty standards (Kuipers 2022). By normalizing time-consuming makeup practices as a form of selfcare and fun, in line with mainstream beauty advertising and vlogging, this content also foregrounds the tensions among needs, regulated practices and social context.

Some vloggers linked wearing makeup with confidence, something about which different psychological studies have produced mixed evidence. This simplistic message is common in cosmetic brand advertising and, in the absence of brand references in our videos, the implied benefits are centred on emotional rather than on the aesthetic gains, thus aligning with self-care motives: 'I want you guys to feel confident out there ... because that's what makeup is all about. It's to make you feel confident and pleased with yourself, well, that's what [it] makes me feel anyway'. (V8)

For some vloggers, makeup-derived confidence was also grounded in demonstrating to 'the world' that they should not be solely defined by their disability: 'Hey, you know, the world doesn't think that I can do this without sight, I don't even know if I can do it, I sure want to try, I mean, why not?' (V9).

Past research reveals that blind and low vision people are strongly motivated to wear makeup by the perceived need to conform socially by emulating sighted people's behaviours (Williams, Neylan and Hurst 2013; Kaplan-Myrth 2000; Pradhan and Daniels 2021). The vloggers in our study differ in the sense that they go beyond social conformity by seeking disability equality as they demonstrate their capabilities. However, aesthetics may also contribute to their intentions as achieving 'social accessibility' and 'aesthetics and social acceptance' via fashionable clothing (Liu et al., 2019: 8). A further significant finding was that sharing makeup tutorials is also about inspiring and supporting people with disabilities more generally. Three vloggers clearly stated their aspiration to support the families of BPS

people by bringing comfort and empowerment, making the families and the BPS people themselves more aware of their capabilities.

I do it for parents of blind children. I know my parents would have loved seeing someone who is blind live their life and go to college and just do what every other kid does. If I can provide any type of comfort or reassurance to those parents, then I am happy. (V9)

Moreover, sharing old photos and personal information about becoming blind via the choice of a digital platform, their message could reach and influence public opinion on disability, too. This message was further strengthened by the implicit referencing of inequality, with the aim to tackle it actively and set an example.

I don't live up to the world [of] expectations... I am all about pushing myself to tear them down. I want to change the world's perception of blindness and disability. (V9)

[...] to show sighted people that blindness is a good thing and to be open to learning about it. I also wanted to show blind youth that they are perfect just the way they are [...] (V5)

This thread of self-empowerment and changing misconceptions about life with a disability fits particularly well with the empowerment strategies for disability self-representation outlined by Soderger and Vallstrom (2023: 1021). Although the level of support utilised by the vloggers for mastering makeup and the production and posting of the tutorials is not revealed, each vlogger conveyed a strong sense of personal agency, without which the content would not exist.

In conclusion, the 'makeup positivity' messages emerging from our study seem to be indirectly addressing the public and echo other studies on social media representation (Seo and Jung 2021). These strategies confirm digital media as a platform for disability rights activism, through which outdated medical viewpoints and negative perceptions of disability are challenged (Cocq and Ljuslinder 2020). However, the social media portrayal of disability in the context of face and body aesthetics also intersects with broader notions of femininity and inclusion, as well as internalized experiences of ableism (Hill 2022).

As the representation of disabled people in the selected videos is quite narrow from gender, racial and social perspectives, further research reflecting these complex intersections is needed. Another question arising from this analysis is to what degree the implicit narrative of equality through aesthetics and well-being conforms with rather narrow societal concepts of success. For example, Lamont argues that social worth constructs in American society are too focused on self-reliance and material resources, and a shift towards ‘plurality of worth’ is needed to reflect marginalised groups (2019: 682). Thus, the successful engagement with beauty labour should not be hailed as a step towards overcoming the social disability barrier faced by BPS people, but considered in a more nuanced way, including as a possible distraction from their more pressing equality needs.

Concluding remarks

Makeup is ubiquitous in modern life as an embodiment of consumerism and social media power. It is steeped in the human history of culture and society as a means of personal and social identity manifestation and influence. Against the backdrop of this rich historic and modern context, as well as the gender, race and ethnicity biases in the fields of beauty and fashion (Kaiser and Green 2021), the challenges faced by BPS people in relation to accessibility and representation in the beauty and makeup arena persist. Furthermore, the omnipresence of the mirror exacerbates the visual biases in the perceptions of beauty (Ruggerone and Stauss 2022). Engaging in aesthetic experiences that involve multiple senses is one avenue to counter such biases not only for the BPS people, but for people with disabilities and visible differences in appearance, and in the society more generally.

Our study demonstrates that learning to apply and enjoy makeup is not solely contingent on vision, thus supporting the idea that the personal beauty experience is a multi-faceted and multi-sensory experience. We also demonstrate that by projecting personas who combine ‘ordinary expert’ with disabled persons’ experiences, and by showcasing their skills and notable aesthetic capital, BPS vloggers portray a public social identity that is not defined by disability alone. We highlight that by modelling empowerment and by creating their space in the social media environment related to beauty, BPS vloggers raise a legitimate claim for fair representation and challenge misconceptions related specifically to blindness.

We also acknowledge the legitimate concerns of the pervasive effects of high beauty norms on society and its individuals, but we argue for equality and fair access as an overriding priority. Finally, we highlight the low public awareness of social disability, as seen

through the eyes of BPS vloggers, and the need to raise the profile of debates around disability in the media, academic research and related industries.

A limitation of this study is that the data reflects only BPS makeup users who are active on social media and belong to a narrow age and racial demographic. Consequently, the findings are not generalizable to all BPS vloggers and makeup users, but importantly, they offer valuable insights into challenges and motivations reviewed and interpreted through the combined frameworks of psychology, sociology, and media and disability studies. Hence, we raise the representation of BPS individuals in these research domains and contribute to current debates by highlighting the tensions among beauty labour critiques, social disability and inclusion. This study also fosters an awareness beyond visibility in fashion and beauty studies.

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