

GRWM

Biz Sherbert

A few years ago, I asked my sister to buy me a ring light for my birthday. I'd been making TikToks for months and had grown a following, but I was still chasing the sun and crooking my arm until it was sore to get good lighting and a flattering angle. I became conscious of how my pores appeared on camera and paths of tension around my mouth when I talked, and I knew a ring light was supposed to make you look how people want to look in videos — smooth skin, bright eyes, aging or acne blotted out, lit from within by the glow of luminous plastic. After I received my ring light, I spent time flicking between different levels of cool and warm and bright and dim, watching how they changed my face in the view of my phone's front-facing camera. I settled on a cool tone of medium brightness, pleased with the way it smudged out all signs of life except the good ones (pinched pink cheeks, a spot of light reflecting off the ball of my nose). As part of the filming process, I'd sit cross-legged and do my makeup — usually a protective cat eye with brown eyeshadow or drugstore black liquid liner that I could never quite get close enough to the inside of my eyelashes. I sometimes used my phone's front-facing camera as a mirror, dipping into my makeup bag as I worked. Like all good makeup bags, mine was a little dirty and pockmarked, a fine dust of mixed powder settled on matte-finish palettes and tubes faintly tacky from unidentifiable leaks.

Last year, TikTok introduced the retouch feature, which made it possible to whiten your teeth and smooth your skin on the app — the ring light's ring light, Facetune for what was previously the final frontier of face-editing. TikTok's beauty filters also became more beautiful. No more eyelashes that glitched away if you turned your head, or overripe Bratz doll lips and cheeks that looked like a parody of plastic surgery. Now every week it feels like there's a new filter going viral for being too good at its job. A beautiful blonde TikToker, recently photographed for *Interview* magazine, uses one such filter frequently enough that there are hundreds of videos of girls trying it on to get her look (and almost always making a comment about how the filter, in fact, did not make them look like her). She got big on TikTok for her GRWMs, short for 'get ready with me,' in which she does a full face of makeup while telling stories about last night, usually surrounded by the discard of last night (and the night before, and the night before). Half-eaten Uber Eats, shed hair extensions, skins of tried on or unwashed going-out clothes, makeup stand barely visible beneath a landslide of cosmetics. Her room is like a beauty bog and she's the pearl in the slimy grey folds of an oyster.

She is 5.2-million-followers-beautiful but her room is frat-house-after-a-rager-gross. She got a boob job before she graduated college, but she's also on Accutane. She's too hot to be relatable, but she's relatable enough to not know how to walk down a red carpet. And like all women who are famous in any way these days, the way she looked before and after she blew up is constantly examined for discrepancies (the difference is the work done). "You're not ugly, you're just poor," has become the rallying cry for not comparing yourself to the rich and famous, but maybe that's not the point anymore. Maybe the point is, are you really that beautiful if there isn't a before and after?