Badass Beauties: The Culture of Rebellious Femininity

Natalia L. Boise
University of Montana, Missoula, natalia.boise@umontana.edu

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the wonderful women who were involved in this project. I have gotten to know so many amazing women through this project, and their contributions were what made it possible. I would also like to thank my faculty mentor, Liz Ametsbichler, for being so supportive and encouraging throughout the process. Gratitude as well goes out to the Diversity Advisory Council and the department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literature for providing funding for the printing of the photos. I could not have done it without all of your support.
Badass Beauties: The Culture of Rebellious Femininity
Natalia Boise
University of Montana
Davidson Honors College
Senior Thesis
Spring 2017

Introduction

This project began with inspiration from my fellow “badass beauties” and a question: “How can rebellion against beauty standards and female cultural norms create a notion of the feminine that is more inclusive and intersectional?” I set out to answer this question by pursuing a vision that would display the ways in which women push societal norms of femininity by creating a photo series. This research question culminated in an explorative, collaborative, multimedia essay aimed at capturing diverse individual expressions of femininity. The whole project was ultimately about empowerment: empowerment of feminine identity through diverse expressions, and empowerment of women by helping them to feel comfortable being who they are. Developing a community of empowerment, support, and representation is intrinsic to the culture of rebellious, inclusive, intersectional femininity. Through this project, I feel that this community of empowerment was built and shared.

In this thesis paper, I will discuss my inspiration for the project, its significance and impact, the theoretical background that informed my process, my creative methodology, and the result of this creative scholarship project.
Inspiration

Badass Beauties is a culmination of my college education, my personal experiences, the experiences and stories of friends, and my own interests and passions. I have always been amazed by the women around me who continue to push the limits of what it can mean to be a woman. The idea for a photo project was conceived my freshman year of college. I was inspired by friends who did not shave and were comfortable and even proud of their own bodies naturally. This was a critical moment for me, because it was then that I realized that a lot of the norms of femininity that we experience in our society are external.

Armpit hair is something that most women have. It is natural and, at its core, feminine, because it is something that is developed during puberty when many women begin experiencing hormonal changes. Body hair is something one would not expect to seem so unfeminine because it is something almost all women have. It would not seem to be so rebellious for women to refrain from macerating their skin with a sharp razor in order to conform to some social construct of gender, but it is. That is why the title of my project is about rebellion against cultural norms and the “badass” women who dare to break from that, but also those who do not. This project really has been about exploring what it can mean to be feminine.

The project originated from both frustration and admiration. I was frustrated with restrictive social norms of femininity, and I admired the women who broke from them. I started talking to these amazing women whom I admired so much. Their stories, their survival, their personal expressions of individual identity and unique femininity led me to want to document it in a photo series capturing these themes of rebellious femininity identity against societal norms.
Significance and Impact

This project became a source of empowerment for women, because it was a true exploration of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be feminine in our culture. I had the privilege of getting to know wonderful women on a new level, getting to experience their expressions of femininity, and learning myself about the many ways a person can be feminine. More than ever, I believe that empowered women empower women, and that we need to encourage women to stretch the definitions of femininity. I am tired of women having “masculine” traits, because they work on cars, or play guitars, or have muscles, or sweat. Rosie the Riveter could tell you that’s not masculine at all. That’s industrious. That’s hard working. That’s smart. That’s athletic. And that can absolutely be feminine if we just expand the concept of feminine to be more inclusive.

The beauty myth is the false concept that an objective and universal quality called “beauty” exists, that is natural, biological, sexual, and evolutionary. This myth further purports that women want to embody beauty and those who do are reproductively successful, and men battle for and want to possess women who embody it (Wolf). This is false. Beauty is a cultural construct influenced by politics, societal factors, power, and oppressive patriarchal standards. “In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated themselves” (Wolf 12). This statement by Naomi Wolf in her 1992 book, The Beauty Myth, seems to apply a general level of blame on men as a force for female subordination through beauty standards. I believe the case of the beauty myth is one that is perpetuated by institutions and market pressures, as well as individual people as a living
culture of style, trends, and beauty constructs, and that these beauty constructs only become problematic when they are inhibiting for women’s progress and autonomy.

Restrictive female beauty standards and societal and cultural notions of femininity are nothing new. “We know that ideals of femininity have sought to control women before: The suffragists of the nineteenth century were faced with the glamorized invalid, and women were driven out of the work force in the 1950s by the glamorized full-time housewife” (Wolf 3). Looking even further back to the 1830s, “Victoria, the future queen of England, became intensely self-conscious of her body at the age of fifteen” (Brumberg “Introduction”). Even the future queen of England felt restricted by beauty standards. This may seem inconsequential, but it is far-fetched to imagine a male counterpart journaling of his “too-dark hair” or “ugly hands,” and even more for a standard of beauty and grace to be obligatory and restrictive for his position of power. Throughout time, these beauty standards have continually plagued women in particular.

Women in Ancient Greece were expected to be plump, pale, and full-bodied. Ancient Greeks worshipped the male form, “going so far as to proclaim that women’s bodies were ‘disfigured’ versions of men. In this time period, men faced a much higher standard of beauty and perfection than women” (Van Edwards). During the Roaring Twenties, the ideal body type for women was to be flat-chested, with short hair and a boyish figure, turning away from beauty standards associated with child-rearing abilities, but still forcing an almost anti-feminine, androgynous look associated with more manish features. “Beauty in the 1920s featured an androgynous look for women— they wore bras that flattened their chest and wore clothing that gave them a curve-less look. Women even shortened their hair, leaving behind the long-held
belief that long hair signified beauty and desirability” (Van Edwards). This look was revolutionary in terms of women breaking from traditional beauty norms, but was quickly replaced in the 1930s with the hollywood era of female beauty ideals.

Every generation since about 1830 had to fight its version of the beauty myth. “It is very little to me,” said the suffragist Lucy Stone in 1855, “to have the right to vote, to own property, etcetera, if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right.” Eight years later, after women had won the vote, and the first wave of the organized women’s movement had subsided, Virginia Woolf wrote that it would still be decades before women could tell the truth about their bodies.” (Wolf 1)

Although standards of feminine beauty have been tremendously varied throughout history and between cultures, “absolutes” of feminine beauty still exist in temporal contexts. This in itself is unproblematic; humans are adorning creatures and style shifts are natural to both cultural and historical variation. Culture is alive, growing and developing with the people living those standards of behavior. What is problematic, however, is the ways in which these beauty may restrict and restrain women, especially as a tool of political suppression. “There is no legitimate historical or biological justification of the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women” (Wolf 13) The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about patriarchal limitations and institutions.

Arguably, women’s autonomy has been suffocated by continuous restrictive standards of femininity, sexuality, and beauty. In 2015, the future President of the United States, Donald
Trump, wrote in a later deleted tweet about his political opponent: “If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?” (Mahdawi ). This sort of rhetoric plagues women’s advancement in the workplace, qualifying political, social, and cultural value with standards of beauty and sexual complacency. This phenomenon is not new and is a deliberate attempt to subordinate women’s autonomy and success. As Wolf points out: “The beauty backlash against feminism is no conspiracy, but a million million separate individual reflexes such as that one that coalesce into a national mood weighing women down; the backlash is all the more oppressive because the source of the suffocation is so diffuse as to be almost invisible” (Wolf 4).

In the last few decades, women have breached the power structure, while eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, pornography, and the beauty industry profit billions off of women’s insecurities. Naomi Wolf notes in her book *The Beauty Myth* that “thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal” (10). When women are only valued in terms of beauty, sexual subordination, and femininity, they lose an aspect of their autonomy and their self-image.

Women’s magazines create both a unique place of female publication, writers, and readership, and yet are plagued with the same mentality of the “better, more beautiful you,” which they well know is an unattainable, photoshopped standard of beauty. “The rise in women’s magazines was brought about by large investments of capital combined with increased literacy and purchasing power of lower-middle- and working- class women: The democratization of beauty had begun” (Wolf 62).

The paradigm of both women’s liberation through style and beauty expression
confounded by the push from advertisers to pressure women into buying products by making them feel bad about their appearance is one that characterizes the problem of femininity in our culture generally. Women are programed to be mistrusting and judgemental of other women, especially strangers, though this seems to not at all be the case as soon as a group of women come together to help another choose a wedding gown, or gather in rallies of solidarity like the Women’s March on Washington in 2017. Women are caught in a trap of the beauty myth that prevents them from creating connections with other women but also brings them together.

Even as women gained sexual autonomy, that sexuality became commodified in the porn industry. Women are continually trapped in a paradox of autonomy and commodification of that autonomy. They become objectified as sexual commodities even in a movement of independence. “The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; “beauty pornography” --which for the first time in women’s history artificially links a commodified “beauty” directly and explicitly to sexuality --invaded the mainstream to undermine ne and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth” (Wolf 11).

Again, this example shows that the problem in itself is not sexual liberation, but the patriarchal norms that commodify and objectify that liberation to subdue women as both sexual and social beings. Women are caught in both attempting to be free from this entrapment while hitting obstacles in
every direction.

The paradox of the beauty industry, both as a means of individual expression and as a representation of women’s restrictions, is not one that cannot be overcome. Individual expression through style and the collectivistic nature of beauty, both as it is perceived and expressed, is an aspect of culture that can be seen universally. What confounds beauty standards and becomes restrictive for women are patriarchal norms that limit women’s value to solely their appearance and sexual “use.”

Again, as a representative of our patriarchal culture, President Trump said in response to the claim by People magazine journalist Natasha Stoynoff that he sexually assaulted her during an interview: “Look at her...I don’t think so” (Mahdawi). Somehow, the future president of the United States managed to equate objectification and assault as an honour, while simultaneously delegitimizing her voice and victimhood by quantifying her worth with attractiveness. This is the reality that women live, and this is the danger of the beauty myth: not that there is no real objective standard of beauty, but that beauty standards are the measure of a woman’s value in our society.

Women in most developed countries are experiencing heightened legal recognition and autonomy while at the same time losing sense of self. Even as women obtain freedoms, we are “punished by an ideology that is using attitudes, economic pressure, and even legal judgements regarding women’s appearance to undermine us psychologically and politically” (Wolf 1). The beauty myth is one that is pervasive in our culture throughout history; at any given point in American and Western history, there has been a standard ideal of feminine beauty that is treated as absolute and almost divine. Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes in her book, *The Body Project:*
although young women today enjoy greater freedom and more options
than their counterparts of a century ago, they are also under more pressure,
and at greater risk, because of a unique combination of biological and
cultural forces that have made the adolescent female body into a template
of much of the social change of the twentieth century. (“Introduction”)

Women in American culture have been uniquely, though not exclusively, disadvantaged
by beauty standards particularly in the last century. As women gain social power, pressure to live
up to unrealistic standards of beauty pushed by mass and social media leads to an unhealthy
preoccupation with appearance. Wolf argues this paradox with the imagery of the “iron maiden.”
These unattainable standards of beauty as well as pressure to succeed trap women in a double
bind used to punish women, both physically and psychologically, for their failure to achieve this.
Ultimately, she argues for a relaxation of beauty standards. I argue for an expansion of them.

The beauty myth is a system of dominance reinforced by societal pressure and patriarchal
norms that keep women distracted by attainment of beauty standards to discredit their greater
achievements and success. Undoubtedly, all people struggle with standards of beauty that are
often unattainable or unhealthy. Men suffer from the same mass media pressures and standards
of appearance, but unlike the social expectations men experience, the social expectations on girls
and women usually inhibit them from acting freely. Yet again, President Trump provides a
stunning illustration of the restrictions and expectations women face in our society. In an
interview with a female reporter at a Miss Universe event in 2014, Trump said: “You wouldn’t
have your job if you weren’t beautiful” (Mahdawi) again equating a woman’s worth with her
attractiveness.
The paradox of the beauty myth also plays out in the double standard of women’s treatment in our society and culture. A woman who is deemed beautiful may at once be more likely to succeed in the job market, while also more likely to be the subject of harassment and assault. “The beauty binary places women at blame for men’s reactions to their appearance. If a woman is considered beautiful, she is supposed to accept that the burden of beauty is harassment. If she is not considered beautiful, she is supposed to accept that any comment at all can only be a gift” (Gradient Lair). Women’s beauty issues are confounded by sexism, racism, ageism, classism, ableism, and factors of identity like religion, ethnicity, and culture. In order to really understand the issue of the beauty myth, it must be addressed from an intersectional perspective.

**Theoretical Background**

Inclusivity and intersectionality provide the major theoretical contexts for my project. Inclusivity is a major tenet of Third-Wave Feminism, which informed much of the theoretical background for my project. Third-Wave Feminism started in the 1990s as a reaction to largely white, exclusive Second-wave feminism. It attempts to expand feminism to include diverse identities, including race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and culture (Tong & Botts). Third-Wave Feminism embraces the related concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality played a major role in the formation of my theoretical approach. It describes overlapping and intersecting identities, as well as systems of oppressions, domination, and discrimination. It is the idea that many identities can intersect to create a whole identity that is different from its components. These component identities can include race, class, gender, religion, age, ability, nationality, and more (Tong & Botts). I attempted to bring intersectionality into my project by
including a diverse range of women with varying identities all relating to femininity and gender identity expression.

Sayantina DasGupta writes in an essay chronicling her first encounters with intersectional feminist theory, wrote:

Toxic body culture isn’t a white woman’s issue. It’s not even a woman’s issue—it’s all our concern. But only if a discussion of advertising happens within an understanding of consumerism, if beauty standards are discussed alongside able-ism or the oppressions of gender and sexuality binaries, if local embodiment politics is contextualized within broader global forces. (DasGupta)

DasGupta describes how growing up as a minority in the Midwest, she realized that the toxic body culture she experienced was not due to her gender, but her ethnicity. She believed that she could not attain cultural and societal beauty standards because she was a brown girl. This example clearly illustrates the necessity of incorporating diverse perspective and identities when addressing the challenge of the beauty myth and the normative restrictions it places on not just women, but people of all gender identities.

It is critical to incorporate the voices of diverse identities in representation of beauty and to create a notion of feminine beauty and the feminine that is more inclusive and intersectional to include all identities that identify as feminine. We need to “think of gender, class and race not as ‘structural positionings enabling or constraining certain ways of understanding’ but as ‘designations that are embodied and inhabited by actual subjects in complex ways’” (Cefai & Indelicato).
Intersectionality and Third-Wave Feminism stand at odds with a post-feminism that moves away from inclusivity and into a neoliberal market-based perspective of gender oppression. Neoliberal post-feminism manifests itself “in reality television programs that capitalize on minority status difference” to control and exert social pressures and influence on minorities, lower income, and at-risk women. “The genre of reality television exposes the ways in which post-feminist and post-race discourses work together to further complicate the contradictory positioning of women of colors within neoliberalism” (Cefai & Indelicato). This mass-media influence that reality TV culture has had on women, particularly lower-class women and minorities, illustrates the ways in which the beauty myth is a self-perpetuated construct manifesting from diverse influences.

Addressing the beauty myth from an intersectional perspective is necessary in creating a community of empowerment and intersectional representation to expand the notion of beauty in our culture and femininity to be more inclusive.

**Creative Methodology**

I wanted to bring this concept of intersectionality and inclusiveness into my project by incorporating as many diverse women as I could: transgender women, women from age 18 to 65, LGBTQ+ women, women of color, women of different religions and of different nationalities. I deliberately wanted to create a community of identity that integrated gender among other identities to reveal this intersectionality of feminine identity.

This task of creating a framework of intersectionality was not easy. First, because Montana is ethnically and culturally a relatively homogenous state, it was difficult to be able to find and document that diversity. Additionally, it is not easy to encourage people, especially
strangers, to open up on a personal level like that. I began with close friends. Women I had known for years were happy to contribute, and then as their friends saw how other women opened up and embraced this challenge of traditional feminine identity, more and more women began opening up. Women I didn’t know started to contact me; women I had contacted about providing venues wanted to be a part of the project; friends reached out to friends; and, eventually, a community of mutual support and empowerment began to build.

Once women contacted me expressing interest in taking part in the project, a dialogue began. I usually asked the women how they wanted to be represented, and that question is a surprisingly hard to answer. Many wanted me to “be the artist” and choose for them, but, as I was learning to be a photographer, this became instead a collaborative artistic process in contextualizing a theme of feminine identity expression. When I was starting out, I had ideas of what I wanted for a few of the photo shoots of friends I had known for years, but collaboration in capturing the aspects of their identities they wanted to explore allowed them to reveal themselves in powerful, beautiful, “badass” ways I had never seen before. Once the women came up with a “theme” of their identity, we found a way to contextualize that theme in a photograph. One woman wanted to display her mixed gender expression, presenting herself both as feminine and masculine, and I suggested doing more feminine makeup on one half of her face and masculine makeup on the other, creating a photographable expression of individual identity.

The 42 photo sessions took place in a location where the women felt comfortable, like a house or a mutual meeting place, and I made sure that the situations were consensual and received both verbal and written consent for publication. Shared privately, subjects picked their top five photos out of an album, and from those I selected the pictures which I then framed and
hung in the gallery.

**Result**

All of this work culminated in a final, explorative multi-medium essay documenting these women’s stories and expressions of feminine identity. Before I found a venue to display my exhibit, I created a website to display the photos so that this project could be accessibly documented in a way that would be lasting and easily referenced. Still, I hoped to find a public venue to allow these women to express themselves publicly.

Eventually, I was able to secure a venue, and in April 2017 at “Betty’s Divine” boutique in Missoula Montana, I opened the exhibit to the public. The exhibit consisted primarily of framed photographs of women displaying some facet of their feminine identity, along with other expressions of feminine identity through artwork, choreography, essays, poetry, and jewelry. At the opening, I had a number of speakers and performers lined up who started the show. One friend choreographed a dance piece to express herself, another gave a speech about the clitoris, another talked about her experiences as a big woman, and others played music, read poetry, and spoke about their personal experiences with femininity. After these women spoke I offered the opportunity for an open mic, and women I had never met before stepped forward to spill their hearts out to complete strangers. It was an emotional, communal, beautiful experience, and “Betty’s Divine” said they had never seen such a big crowd in their store. It was a bigger success than I could have hoped for, and it could never have been so successful if it had not been collaborative and if it had not involved the voices of so many diverse, powerful, strong, beautiful women.

During the show, multiple women approached me to express interest in being a part of
the exhibit, and one woman even messaged me saying she would be honored if I would consider doing an art-walk show at her store in Livingston, so in July 2017, there will be another installment of the exhibit. A few days before the exhibit at Betty’s Divine, a reporter for “Arts and Culture” at the Kaimin contacted me about covering my event. Another student made a film project documenting my thesis, and it was really exciting to see people so eager to talk about and document it. I was not at all expecting the outpouring of encouragement and love I received while doing this project.

I still am amazed by the amount of support I have experienced, but even more by the ways it has impacted the women involved. The following quotes are from a few of the women I photographed, either from the Kaimin article or from emails they sent to me. I include them, because we need to see the importance of having a supportive community for women to share their identities and to empower each other. It is crucial to create a notion of the feminine that is more inclusive and more diverse, to include all kinds of feminine identity.

One woman posted her picture on facebook and wrote: “I feel validated in a way that I had yet to feel before.” Another, after I emailed her the album of her pictures responded: “Thank you so much for giving this HUGE gift to me.” A woman who had just began hormone therapy and her transgender transition wrote: “As a transgender woman, I felt both validated and empowered by Natalia's inclusion of my photograph in her exhibit.” One friend said in the Kaimin article, “I think that seeing each of the photographs will help others to recognize their own unique strengths that may not conform to established standards present in magazines and other types of media,” and another said: “To be able to look at that photo and still feel beautiful and even more to feel brave is just really important.”
These quotes show the impact that representation and a community of empowerment can have on women. This project helped me to expand my own thinking about what the feminine can be and helped me to understand the intricacies of identities. I hope that, looking forward, this project might inspire women to be more accepting and inclusive of diverse identities and to recognize the importance of intersectionality in creating communities of empowerment for women.

“Our beauty must come from a critical understanding of the forces at work around us… it must rise from within our individual and among our collective selves” (DasGupta).
Works Cited


Gradientlair. "Conversations About Beauty and Beauty Privilege Need To Be Intersectional."


The following images include the article that was written on the exhibit by a writer for the Montana Kaimin, accompanied by close-ups of portraits displayed in the exhibit.

http://www.montanakaimin.com/arts_and_culture/there-s-no-wrong-way-to-be-a-woman-um/article_e4b92c6-209f-11e7-812a-7b192c8a8649.html

There's no wrong way to be a woman: UM student photographs feminine diversity

Drew Novak  Apr 13, 2017

Photo by Kira Vercruyssen
Natalia Boise’s photography displays in Betty’s Divine, a local boutique located on the “Hip Strip” in downtown Missoula April 7, 2017. The exhibit showcases unique female figures and is available for viewing until the end of the month.
Creativity struck Natalia Boise, a senior studying anthropology and German at the University of Montana, after she misplaced the razor she used for shaving body hair.

“I could have bought a new razor, but I got inspired by my friends who didn’t shave and were just so comfortable with it,” Boise said. “That’s when I sort of realized that a lot of the norms of femininity that we experience in our society are external.”

The 21-year-old took that realization and ran with it. She photographed a series of portraits titled “Badass Beauties: The Culture of Rebellious Femininity,” which became her thesis for the University’s Davidson Honors College. The models’ ages range from 18 to 60. They are clothed, nude, clean-shaven or natural. One plays guitar, another wears ballet slippers, while a third hoists a mountain bike on her shoulders. Boise wanted to capture each subject in a way that highlights and celebrates womanhood in every form.

“It started with the idea of doing an armpit hair exhibit, and it just sort of turned into displaying all the diverse ways a woman can be feminine,” she said. “Creating a notion of the feminine that is more inclusive and more diverse, to include all kinds of feminine identity.”
The collection debuted at Betty’s Divine boutique Friday, April 8, as part of Missoula’s monthly First Friday event. Attendees were also invited to share their experiences with the community via an open mic.

Boise’s photos pay special attention to the concept of physical feminine beauty, noting that women often deal with expectations that can prove harmful and unrealistic.

“When a woman hits puberty, she grows pubic hair. All women have it. Trans women have armpit hair. Everyone has armpit hair,” she said. “But men have now started wearing tank tops, and they don’t shave their arms. They wear shorts, and they don’t shave their legs. So [shaving] is obviously a female-oriented standard that is not expected of men.”

Many of the portraits’ subjects attended the exhibition, sharing poetry or performing music for the First Friday crowd. They believe Boise’s work is beneficial for the audience and themselves.

“I think that seeing each of the photographs will help others to recognize their own unique strengths that may not conform to established standards present in magazines and other types of media,” said Sonia McLain, a 21-year-old German and English as a second language student.
“The photo we chose for me is one where I’m not wearing any makeup and my biggest physical insecurities are exposed,” Kenzie Lombardi, 22, said. She studies political science and communications at UM. “To be able to look at that photo and still feel beautiful and even more to feel brave is just really important.”

The exhibit comes at a particularly turbulent time, as controversy over the rights of individuals to use bathrooms corresponding to their gender identity continues.

“As a transgender woman, I felt both validated and empowered by Natalia’s inclusion of my photograph in her exhibit,” model Virginia Nichols said. The 31-year-old is an active member of the local branch of the Industrial Workers of the World.

“No woman is set aside in the world of feminism. I attended the viewing and was truly inspired by these photographs, which told the story of what women truly are, instead of the patriarchal vision handed down to us,” Nichols said.

Boise considers the exhibit a success, mentioning that a few women even approached her during the show asking to be involved in future projects.

“It turned out way better than I expected. I never in my life thought that I would have a gallery opening dedicated to just my artwork or, God forbid, my photography because I wasn’t a photographer before I started this show.”
“Badass Beauties” will remain on display at Betty’s Divine until the end of April. There are plans for future exhibits this summer in Livingston, where Boise hopes that her work continues to provide an opportunity for discussion on ever-progressing social issues.

“You don’t belong to the politicians,” she said. “You don’t belong to societal norms. You just belong to you, and that can be however you want it.”

drew.novak@umontana.edu
@drewhnovak

Drew Novak
The following images include screenshots from the website publication. 
https://nlboise.wixsite.com/badassbeauties
Thank You