Trajectories of the Self: a Phenomenological Study of Women’s Changing Faces Reflected in Cosmetics Consumption

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past literature indicates the importance of changes in appearance in helping the individual define herself (McAlexander and Schouten, 1989) or cope with problems of liminal states (McAlexander, Schouten et al., 1992). For example, by undergoing plastic surgery, individuals emphasize their role transitions and set out upon a trajectory of identity reconstruction (Schouten, 1991). Nevertheless, plastic surgery is considered to be an extraordinary event, which lies outside individual realms of everyday experience. Therefore, we argue that studies on plastic surgery, whilst useful as setting boundaries for the study of the self, have limited insights in the unfolding drama of the self and the subtle sensitivity of ‘individual’ in daily life. Paradoxically, ‘cosmetics’ are a necessity of daily life for many women and for centuries have been utilized to modify or enhance physical appearance. The systems of everyday consumer consumption, e.g. cosmetics, that make us human – appear to be easily overlooked and hide potential meanings from us (Crotty, 1998). This study addresses this opportunity for examining selves in daily transition and cosmetics use across key developmental stages of everyday life (Markus and Wurf, 1987; Schembri, Merrilees et al., 2010; Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak et al., 2011). We aim to provide a holistic understanding of changes in the issues of sense of self and how cosmetics consumption is used to strategically reflect, protect and impact on the trajectories of the self over the lifetime.

A sample of twenty-six women, aged between 19 and 62, who wore makeup on a daily basis, was recruited for this study. Verbatim transcriptions were generated via phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander et al., 1989; Smith, Flowers et al., 2009), regarding their feelings, perceptions and experiences of cosmetics use. The interviews ranged from 1-2 hours. Fictitious names were assigned to all informants, guaranteeing confidentiality. Each interview began with the question, “when you think about a cosmetics brand, what comes to your mind?” This question was used to initiate a dialogue on an understandable domain, however, exerted little influence upon the overall course of the dialogue (Thompson, Locander et al., 1990). All other questions emerged spontaneously from the informants’ narratives, therefore ensuring restricted influence from the interviewer and allowing informants to make sense of their experiences at their own pace. A hermeneutic approach was adopted to discern the constellation of past-present-future relations that underlies intentionality (Husserl, 1970), e.g., consumer consumption goals, and individual reflections on everyday experiences (Heidegger, 1960; Gadamer, 1993). Consumer depictions about their everyday experiences create temporal trajectories in which a past event is relived in relation to present concerns and used in shaping an envisioned image of the future self (Thompson, 1997). The interview focused on descriptions of consumers’ lived experiences in terms of changes in the self over time and the role cosmetics consumption plays in facilitating this experiential journey.

THE TRAJECTORY OF CONTRADICTORY SELVES

This study showed how contradictory selves conflict in the different time frames of past, present and future (See figure 1). Our findings suggest cosmetics consumption is used dynamically as an instrument to enable views of the self and manage changes in priorities over the life course.

Past-present Conflict

For example, Abbie was constantly battling signs of aging. She was at times almost denying this fact and spoke as if she was still young and her complexion was still perfect. At the same time she was torn between two cultures, i.e. Africa (her family roots) and Europe (brought up), and changing society’s expectations from the ‘old days’ to the present, e.g. conform to a certain look.

Present-future Conflict

She anticipated that her future self would be wearing fewer cosmetics, for example, due to the importance of passing the ‘right’ values to her children, e.g. beauty comes from inside. Nonetheless, she envisaged having more dramatic makeup at night for herself as a woman; and for her husband, in order to feel sexy and attractive as a wife.

THE TRAJECTORY OF CONTRADICTING SELVES

Furthermore, in Isabel’s set of realities, cosmetics enabled her to have multiple selves, particularly in terms of her conflicting selves; when she wears makeup (e.g., ‘demanding’, ‘tougher’ and ‘argumentative’) compared to when she wears no makeup (e.g. ‘timid’, ‘caring’ and ‘vulnerable’). Her obsession with cosmetics grew out of childhood issues she faced in the family and at school. She used makeup as a ‘shield’ to keep people from getting close; and as a ‘sword’ to be ready to fight back. She was caught in a struggle between wanting to be different and yet be the same, especially during childhood (See figure 2).
As she grew older, she pictured changes in the reasons for wearing cosmetics. She used to wear makeup to hide her problems but in the future, she would hope to only utilize cosmetics to boost her confidence. As she aged, she became more confident and grew more tolerant within herself, like most of our informants.

**COSMETIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE SELVES**

Cosmetics are used as a mechanism to communicate between the contrasting selves, particularly during major life events. For instance, Nancy was re-applying makeup in a constant manner to communicate between her ‘hopeless self’ and her ‘hopeful self’ post-breakup. She strove to depart from the hopeless depressing self and pick herself up as makeup allowed her to be that strong, confident and attractive woman.

Consumption is more than skin deep. Beyond cosmetics consumption, we provide a more enlightened perspective on this very complicated area—how does consumption potentially reflect and impact on issues of sense of self? Our findings offer intriguing insights into changes in the trajectories of the self and identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). They inform the challenges individuals face to define the self and how cosmetics are used as tools for coping with these challenges in a deeper, more dramatic way. Following on from enhancing understanding of the trajectories of the self, we conclude that the self changes over time and cosmetics consumption provides instrumental values to manipulate and attack others; and to create, re-define and protect the self, responding to transition phases during life.

**REFERENCES**


