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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Strategies For Managing the Relational Self: the Case of Women'S Consumption of Cosmetics**

Chihling Liu, Manchester Business School, UK

Debbie Keeling, Manchester Business School, UK

Margaret Hogg, Lancaster University Management School, UK

We challenge the ongoing social stigma of how beauty and artifice contribute to the sexual objectification of women and explore women's relational selves via the context of cosmetics consumption. Unstructured phenomenological interviews reveal four different strategies for managing the relational self, across assorted social spaces.

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# Strategies for Managing the Relational Self: The Case of Women's Consumption of Cosmetics

Chihling Liu, Manchester Business School, UK \*

Debbie Keeling, Manchester Business School, UK

Margaret Hogg, Lancaster University Management School, UK

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Our phenomenological exploration of the self contributes to understanding the relational, social aspects of the self, and the mundane “consumption-relevant phenomena about which we have little understanding in terms of “why”, “when”, and “how” in spite of being generally aware of their existence” (Park, 2009, p.570). The present research builds on previous findings that women's social construction of the self can be explored via their use of cosmetics (e.g. Bloch & Richins, 2006; Darden & Worden, 1994; Franzoi, 2001; Liu, Keeling, & Hogg, 2012; Solomon, 1983; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Thereby cosmetics are utilized as an informative context to deepen our understanding of the symbolic, intimate relationship between its application and changes in women's sense of self over time; and the liberating and restraining facets women encounter in their daily lives in a given culture. Following some pioneering feminists' footsteps to revisit fashion and beauty (e.g. Peiss, 2010; Scott, 2006), this research seeks at the same time to challenge the ongoing prevailing social stigma of how beauty and artifice contribute to the sexual objectification of women promoted by visual media (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997); through exploring the personal meanings embedded in the taken-for-granted daily cosmetics consumption phenomena nurtured and constructed in response to the “co-occurring working models of the self and other in relationship contexts” (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012, p.180). Cosmetics consumption in this study refers to short-lasting objects or substances used to manipulate physical appearance, and is equivalent to the use of makeup. The short-lasting nature of cosmetics further enables us to explore the fleeting nature of some human consumption experiences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Unstructured phenomenological interviews were conducted with thirty-one women, aged between 19 and 62, to allow expression of individuals' feelings, perceptions and experiences of cosmetics consumption. Each interview ranged in length between one and two hours and began by asking, “when you think about a cosmetics brand, what comes to your mind?” The opening question was used to initiate a dialogue on an understandable domain, however, the opening question exerted little influence on the overall course of the dialogue (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 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. To ensure both a level of comfort and confidentiality, all informants were told prior to the interview that anonymity would be guaranteed, no judgment would be passed on any of the descriptions given and they could terminate the interview if at any point they did not feel comfortable. To capture their immediate, direct experiences as lived they were merely informed upon their recruitment that the purpose of the study was to examine their experiences on the topic of cosmetics consumption. A hermeneutically grounded interpretative framework was adopted to explore the deeply embedded personal meanings arising from the habitual relationships informants develop with daily applications of makeup (Bleicher, 1980; Thompson, 1997). The hermeneutic circle was thus used as a method in our study to move back and forth between the parts and the whole (evolving understanding of the phenomena as a whole) and between the particular and the shared

aspects of the consumer descriptions (Bontekoe, 1996; Heidegger, 1960). This dialectical, circular interpretative relationship enables a more thorough analysis of each individual case and a broader understanding of consumer ‘intentionality’ (Holt, 1997; Schleiermacher, 1998; Thompson et al., 1990).

Our findings suggest that the self changes over time in the course of interpersonal life to satisfy existentially fulfilling experiences; and depending on different changes being sought, cosmetics are used, and varied strategically to (re)construct social reality, manipulate, reflect or protect manifold aspects of the self. These changes in the self not only impact on, but also reflect types of cosmetics consumption strategies adopted in our daily living in an attempt to create positive meanings for our being-in-the-world (Spinelli, 1989), responding to a wide range of socio-cultural and relational contexts across a variety of social spaces. Four shared experiential themes are noted to provide an elucidated sense of how the meanings embedded in cosmetics consumption emerged from individual everyday lived experiences, particularly in terms of the self in an ongoing interpersonal relationship: 1) Self-endorsement versus Self-protection; 2) Self-transformation versus Self-manipulation; 3) Self-disclosure versus Self-liberation; and 4) Self-aspiration versus Self-aversion. Each experiential theme represents what is going on in the external socialising world, and how that is translated into or reflected upon the ‘happenings’ in the self across relational contexts or vice versa. For example, 1) As I endorse myself externally by applying more makeup, I protect myself from being deemed as unworthy of connection and feeling hurt internally; 2) As I transform my looks externally by wearing more professional makeup, I manipulate myself internally into thinking I am able to stand up for myself in a business meeting; 3) As I disclose myself without any makeup externally, I feel truly loved and liberated internally; and 4) As I aspire to be a desired self externally, I avoid being an undesired, negative self internally. Resulting insights offer intriguing understandings of how consumption can potentially manipulate, protect, reflect or impact on both issues relating to changes in the self and dynamics in an ongoing self-other relationship. Moreover, they highlight the therapeutic and emancipating capacity of adornment for the portrayal of a multifaceted self; and provide potential themes for cosmetics advertising and brand segmentation targeting women in varying phases of ongoing interpersonal relationships, satisfying the need of cosmetics companies to develop narratives and brand stories around their products. On the whole, daily cosmetics consumption is the outward symptom or indicator of what is going on both externally (e.g. degrees of social bonds, conflicts, stable relationships) and internally (e.g. covering up insecurities, seeking for control or longing for a closer relationship). The mundane, everyday activities embedded in the majority of our everyday lives, e.g. putting on makeup when we go out, are performed to strategically manage the relational self as revealed via our empirical context of women's consumption of cosmetics.

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