

Who am I to you? A phenomenological study of romance, sense of self and the experience of cosmetics consumption

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ABSTRACT

Many theorists agree that a major determinant of self-construction is dependent upon significant others, which leads to a critical self-evaluation (Mead 1934; Sullivan 1953; Chen, Boucher et al. 2006). Additionally, Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self indicates our possessions are a key contributor to and reflection of our sense of self. Thus 'the self' is fundamentally relational to both specific others, e.g. XX, and objects, e.g., cosmetics use. Sense of self, including thoughts, feelings, motives and self-regulatory strategies, alters in response to relations with significant others (Chen, Boucher et al. 2006). Romantic partners are one of the closest adult relationships and play a crucial part in most adults' lives (Berscheid and Reis 1998). Past literature focused primarily on the destructive impact of breakup on human emotional well-being (Davis, Shaver et al. 2003; Sbarra 2006). However, less research has focused on examining changes in the self during an ongoing romantic relationship and strategies individuals use to regulate their states of affect and subsequent goals (such as relationships with objects, e.g. cosmetics as a means of XX). Given the importance of a romantic relationship on sense of self (Monroe, Rohde et al. 1999; Sbarra 2006), studying ways that individuals' selves change over the course of a romantic relationship and the strategies exploited to facilitate/underpin these changes will yield an enhanced appreciation of the dynamics of self within a relational context (Slotter, Gardner et al. 2010). This research aims to provide a holistic understanding of changes in the self in relation to a significant or potential other partnership and how cosmetics are used strategically to reflect or protect varying aspects of the self.

The 25-34 age category is the top spender on cosmetics and most likely to be in a new or mid-relationships that are of consequence, less restricted by finance, excited by experimentation on types of makeup and have undergone several stages of cosmetics use they could report on. We recruited a sample of ten women for our first cohort, aged between 25 and 34, who wore make-up on a daily basis and had a minimum 10 years experience in cosmetics consumption. The length of the interviews ranged from 1-2 hours. Fictitious names were assigned to all informants to assure anonymity. Verbatim transcriptions for the present study were generated by means of phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander et al. 1989) with 10 volunteer female informants regarding their feelings, perceptions and experiences of cosmetics. Each interview began with the question, "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, exerted little influence on 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. The interview focused on descriptions of individual lived experiences in a particular context. Each individual interview was used to attain a better understanding of shared experiential meanings, which in turn enables a more thorough analysis of each individual case (Thompson, Locander et al. 1990; Schleiermacher and Bowie 1998). A hermeneutic approach was used to make sense of the participant trying to understand what has occurred or is happening to them.

Our findings suggest that cosmetics are used dynamically across the relationship reflecting conflicting or stable patterns of self and subsequent coping strategies. The self changes within a relationship and adopts diverse if-then coping strategies (see Baldwin 1992) to reinforce, protect, re-define, or create the self responding to phases of the relationship. Three 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 relationship or the grief process of a relationship ending: 1) The start: Conflicting if-then strategies for self-promotion and self-protection; 2) Equilibrium: The change in if-then strategies for self-disclosure and a state of stability; and 3) Return to conflict: Shifting if-then strategies for emotional well-being. Resulting insights offer intriguing understandings of changes in women's sense of self in relation to their romantic or potential partners and concomitant challenges for advertising and brand management. More precisely, informing the challenges the cosmetics industry face to promote experiential aspects of brands by emphasising different appeals or changes in individual sense of self in varying relational contexts (Jamal 2003). Moving beyond promotion, this study questions current perceptions and marketing practice on cosmetics consumption. For example, many informants expressed the need to disguise themselves in cosmetics due to the fear of not being loved. Finally, our research contributes to the growing literature in the relational self and expands this notion by linking to changes in the experience of cosmetics consumption during an ongoing romance.

References available upon request