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**HOW WOMEN EXPERIENCE COSMETIC BRANDS:
THE INFLUENCE OF EXPERIENTIAL BRAND ASSOCIATIONS ON BRAND
SATISFACTION**

ABSTRACT

This study analyses the effect of perceived instrumental and hedonic brand associations on women's satisfaction with cosmetic brands. Four emotional brand experiences are identified: the feeling of sexual attractiveness, sensual pleasure, social interaction success and relief from dissatisfaction with one's self-image. Results of a survey of 355 women indicate that both utilitarian and hedonic brand associations contribute to satisfaction with cosmetic brands – with an overall stronger influence of emotional brand experiences. The greatest influences were found for the feeling of relief from dissatisfaction with one's self-image and the impression of not doing enough to take care of one's appearance.

KEY WORDS

Cosmetic brands, women's satisfaction, emotional brand experiences, utilitarian and hedonic brand associations

1. Introduction

In today's society, consumers are continuously exposed to imagery of highly attractive females advertising cosmetic brands. The high consumption of cosmetics is due to the great importance assigned to physical appearance in our present society – in which beauty and physical attractiveness are constantly emphasized as desirable and admirable characteristics (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986). Featherstone (1993) notes the widespread use of “idealized” images of bodies which are used to promote products and services throughout the consumer culture, these images being often openly sexual and associated with hedonism and leisure while stressing the importance of appearance. For consumers this may lead to significant behavioural implications. A number of studies have addressed the impact of the representation of attractive women on female consumers. As a general result, the exposition to pictures of good looking and even slightly above-average looking females lowered the self-image of exposed women (Pollay, 1986; Myers and Biocca, 1992; Martin and Gentry, 1997; Hawkins et al., 2004). The desire to improve one's physical

attractiveness seems to be an inherent characteristic of most individuals (Adams, 1977; Etcoff, 1999; Winston, 2003). Cosmetics have been traditionally used by women to control their physical appearance and, presumably, their physical attractiveness. While this study focuses on women – still the most salient consumers of cosmetic products – male consumers are also increasingly targeted by the cosmetic industries. Several researchers have examined the psychological correlates and consequences of cosmetic use (Cash and Cash, 1982; Miller and Cox, 1982; Graham and Kligman, 1985; Cash et al., 1985; Cox and Glick, 1986; Etcoff, 1999). Cash (1988) has reviewed some of the available research evidence and, from a self-presentational perspective, has argued that cosmetics use specifically and grooming behaviours in general function to manage and control not only social impressions but also self-image (e.g. body image, self-perceptions, and mood states). These findings indicate that the benefits sought after in the purchase of cosmetics in general as well as in deciding on a specific cosmetic brand are not limited to instrumental or functional benefits but may also be related to hedonistic or emotional consumption experiences. It is therefore not surprising that a significant share of the claims in cosmetic brand advertising can be related to subjective psychological consumption motives, rather than objective outcomes. The aim of this study is to explore the brand associations of cosmetic brands from a female consumers' perspective and to analyse the comparative effect of identified brand benefits on female consumers' brand satisfaction. For this purpose a survey of consumer perceptions of cosmetic brands was carried out, assessing instrumental and hedonistic brand benefits of the brand used by each interviewed participant, as well as the degree of satisfaction with the surveyed brand. The collected data was modelled using a structural equation analysis.

2. Instrumental and hedonic benefits of cosmetics brands

Research has focused on two major dimensions of product or brand associations (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Mittal and Lee, 1989; Batra and Ahtola, 1990; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Bhat and Reddy, 1998; Voss et al., 2003). The first is the traditional notion of instrumental or utilitarian performance where the brand is seen as performing a useful function. The second dimension is that of hedonic (emotional) performance (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Adaval, 2001; Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000) whereby brands are valued for their intrinsically pleasing properties. In the specific domain of cosmetics, *utilitarian brand benefits* refer to the ability of the brand to effectively accomplish the promised effects over physical appearance

(e.g. body shaping, reducing wrinkles or cellulite, obtaining a firmer, brighter and more-hydrated skin). With regard to the *hedonic benefits of cosmetic brands*, these refer to emotional experiences that the brand is able to deliver to the consumer. Consumers' experiences with cosmetics brands, as retained in memory, will include emotional associations with the brand (Hansen and Christensen, 2007). Several seemingly relevant emotional experiences related to cosmetic brand consumption were identified in the literature and through a number of qualitative focus group sessions with female university students.

Sensorial Pleasure

Sensorial stimuli (visual and acoustic stimuli, as well as smell, touch and taste) may significantly contribute to the emotional brand experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986). Cosmetic brands can deliver emotional benefits through their association with multi-sensorial brand experiences (Aaker, 1996) such as touch (with textures capable of giving a sensation of smoothness and/or coolness to the skin) and smell (sensual fragrances capable of creating a sense of well-being and pleasure; Sedgwick et al., 2003).

Feelings of Social and Professional success

Judgments based on physical appearance are considered powerful forces in contemporary consumer culture. Indeed, research shows that external appearance affects professional success (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994) and is often decisive in social interactions (Nash et al., 2006; Adams and Read, 1983; Bloch and Richins, 1992). Multiple studies link personal appearance to positive reactions from others, including friendship preference (Byrne et al., 1968; Perrin, 1921), romantic attraction (Walster et al., 1966; Byrne et al., 1970; Huston, 1973; Krebs and Adinolfi, 1975; Sigall and Landy, 1973; Holmes and Hatch, 1938), promotion and success in business (Marlowe et al., 1996; Frieze et al., 1990, 1991). The reason why people like the physically attractive more than the unattractive is thought to be because the former are assumed to possess more desirable and rewarding personalities (Dion et al., 1972). This effect is so robust and ubiquitous that it has been coined the "what-is-beautiful-is-good effect" (Eagly et al., 1991). Consequently, to experience this connection and enjoy social favour, many individuals look for ways to improve their appearance and reflect popular notions of beauty. The cosmetics and grooming industries all successfully cater to the demand for aesthetic enhancement (Askegaard et al., 2002). As a consequence, the human

body becomes more and more integrated in social life and is often quite central to the individual's self-actualization, which implies increased awareness of the body (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). The individual is increasingly seen as responsible for the appearance of his or her body (Askegaard et al., 2002). It is therefore not surprising that many female consumers wish to improve their physical appearance through the use of cosmetics. Research has shown, that most women agree on the fact that features such as physical attractiveness and beauty are more and more appreciated and required by society, and that attractive women have more chances of succeeding in their social and professional relationships (Etcoff et al., 2004).

The use of cosmetics may enhance the reactions of others to the person using them (e.g. people should perceive a woman more favourably in terms of personality characteristics and are likely to have a higher opinion of her; Graham and Jouhar, 1981). Kyle and Mahler (1996) showed that the use of cosmetics can even influence income in job as a result of the perceptions of higher female abilities. Ads where famous actresses or attractive and successful models are shown – symbolizing success both in their personal and professional lives – may evoke feelings of social success as a consumption experience (Forkan, 1980; McCracken, 1989). Thus, the consumption of specific cosmetic brands may deliver the feeling of being more successful in social interactions on a personal or professional level.

Feeling Sexually Attractive

To be attractive to the opposite sex has been considered one of the main stimuli for the consumption of cosmetic brands (Sturrock and Pioch, 1998). Several studies have shown that women perceive themselves as being more feminine, sensual and sexually attractive to men when they use cosmetics (Cash, 1988; Cash and Cash, 1982; Cash et al., 1985; Cash et al., 1989; Cox and Glick, 1986; Buss and Schmitt, 1993). Some authors also suggest that women may feel more sexually attractive while consuming a particular brand (Herman, 2003; Post, 2004). Cosmetic brands advertised by physically attractive women (Joseph, 1982; Patzer, 1985) as well as those inspiring a sense of identification in the consumer (Ward et al., 2002; Huckleba, 2005) generate a significant emotional impact, activating and strengthening the “brand-to-attractiveness” association in the minds of consumers.

Relief from Feelings of Dissatisfaction with Oneself

It has been suggested that women frequently experience negative emotions such as feelings of worry for their physical appearance, or the feeling of guilt deriving from the self-perception of not doing enough to care for or improve their appearance (Fallon, 1990; Catterall and Maclaran, 2001; Askegaard et al., 2002). In today's society women are made to feel increasingly responsible for their body and physical appearance (Wykes and Gunter, 2005; Turner, 1996). In addition, numerous advertisements present standards of beauty that most women do not fulfil with the effect that most women develop feelings of dissatisfaction with their own physical appearance (attractiveness, weight and shape of the body; Heinberg and Thompson, 1995; Downs and Harrison, 1985; Silverstein et al., 1986; Etcoff et al., 2004). The Social Comparison Theory has been used by a number of authors to explain how the representation of highly attractive models in advertising may affect female consumers (e.g. Martin and Gentry, 1997; Martin and Kennedy, 1993; Tiggemann and McGill, 2004; Stiles and Kaplan, 2004). According to Etcoff (1999), the need to reduce these negative emotions constitutes one of the main psychological motivations urging women to purchase cosmetic brands. The suggested persuasion mechanism observable in cosmetic brand advertising would be, thus, as follows: The representation of attractive role models lowers the self-image of female consumers, while simultaneously the feeling of relief is associated with the brand – claiming that the problem with one's appearance can be solved through the consumption of the brand. Evoking temporarily feelings of dissatisfaction with themselves in targeted consumers may indeed represent an adequate advertising strategy, because it may stimulate consumers to consume cosmetic brands to improve their appearance and produce feelings of accomplishment through aesthetic self-enhancement (Richins, 1991).

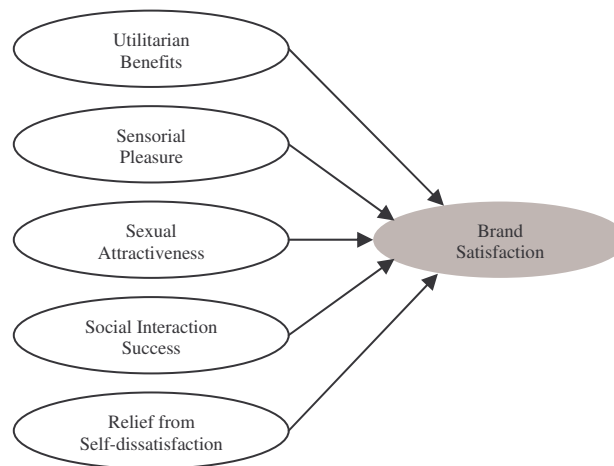
The positive influence that utilitarian and emotional brand benefits exert on customer satisfaction has been shown in varying contexts (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Oliver, 1993; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Rintamäki et al., 2006; Burns and Neisner, 2006). With regard to cosmetic brands it has been suggested that emotional brand experiences may be especially relevant for female consumers' satisfaction (Ashmore et al., 1996; Chao and Schor, 1998; Gould, 1998; Herman, 2003). In the empirical study, the following research question will be addressed:

R.Q.: To what extent are the identified brand associations (utilitarian and emotional brand benefits) influential in shaping satisfaction judgments toward cosmetic brands?

The hypothesized model derived from the conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

HYPOTHESIZED MODEL OF THE IMPACT OF UTILITARIAN AND EMOTIONAL BRAND ASSOCIATIONS ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH COSMETICS BRANDS



3. Method

In order to address the research question, personal interviews were conducted on a sample of 355 women aged 18 to 50, selected through random sampling (street interviews), and establishing an age quota (50% between 18 and 35 years old, 50% between 36 and 60). In each interview the person was asked to rate a number of items related to their perception of functional and emotional benefits of the cosmetic brand they mostly used, as well as their level of satisfaction with that brand. The study focused on anti-aging and body firming/body shaping creams, a relatively new category of cosmetic products where there are indeed no observable short-term effects, while advertising claims refer to medium and longer-term beneficial outcomes. The development of measurement scales and indicators was based on the literature and several qualitative focus group sessions. Perceptions of “instrumental” brand benefits (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986), sensual pleasure evoked by the sensorial stimuli (touch and smell-related stimuli; Moskowitz, 1995; Meilgaard

et al., 2006) and customer satisfaction (Oliver and Swan, 1989) were measured as multi-item constructs on 5-point Likert scales. The measurement of the emotional consumption experiences “sexual attractiveness” and “social and professional success” combined verbal and non-verbal, pictorial instruments (Desmet, 2003). Images of people and their facial and bodily expressions have been suggested for the measurement of emotions or emotional consumption experiences (e.g. Hadjikhani and de Gelder, 2003; Ekman and Friesen, 1975; Homa et al., 1976; Etcoff and Magee, 1992). In addition, measurement tools should contextualize emotional experiences (Richins, 1997), either through semantic descriptions (Wierzbicka, 1992), or through images (Holbrook and Kuwahara, 1998). The respondents were shown a picture depicting context embedded emotional situations portraying the analysed feelings and had to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale “in what measure do women that use beauty cream X feel like this?”, replacing X with the brand they had mentioned as the brand they consumed themselves. The method of asking for an evaluation of other women’s emotional responses rather than their own was conceived in order to force a projective task and thereby to discourage social desirability effects (Webb, 1992). The images were tested in previous qualitative focus group and in-depth interview sessions. For the measurement of the emotional brand benefit “relief from dissatisfaction with one’s self-concept” participants were shown images portraying the feeling of dissatisfaction with one’s appearance and behaviour (e.g. having gained weight and cellulite). Subsequently they were asked to rate the extent to which the consumption of their brand made consumers feel relief from the represented emotional experiences. Constructs and indicators are depicted in the Appendix. The measurement scales were tested by confirmatory factor analysis (Table 1). Criteria for model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1995; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1984; Bentler, 1990; Steiger and Lind, 1980; Kaplan, 2000; Byrne, 2001) indicate adequate fit. The dimensionality of the constructs was established following Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Factor loadings of all indicators are significant ($p < 0,000$) and exceeding minimum recommended values. Also, variance extracted and construct reliability exceed recommended thresholds (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Bagozzi and Yi, 1994).

TABLE 1

**CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS
(STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS, CRITICAL RATIOS, CORRELATIONS,
VARIANCE EXTRACTED, CONSTRUCT RELIABILITY, MODEL FIT)**

Indicator	Factor					
	Utilitarian Benefit	Sensorial Pleasure	Sexual Attractiveness	Social Interactions Success	Relief from Self-Dissatisfaction	Brand Satisfaction
Firmness and Elasticity	0.75; 1.03					
Younger Appearance	0.69; 1.00 (*)					
Hydrated and Soft Skin	0.59; 0.71					
Sensual Scent		0.63; 1.00 (*)				
Pleasant Texture		0.67; 0.84				
Sexual Attractiveness (1)			0.86; 1.00 (*)			
Sexual Attractiveness (2)			0.88; 1.02			
Social Interactions Success (1)				0.91; 1.00 (*)		
Social Interactions Success (2)				0.96; 1.07		
Relief from Self-Dissatisfaction (1)					0.90; 1.00 (*)	
Relief from Self-Dissatisfaction (2)					0.87; 1.08	
Satisfaction						0.86; 1.00 (*)
Positive User Experience						0.89; 1.09
Correct Purchase Decision						0.84; 1.03
Correlations						
Sensorial Pleasure	0.60					
Sexual Attractiveness	0.33	0.23				
Social Interactions Success	0.14	0.08	0.35			
Relief from Self-Dissatisfaction	0.29	0.23	0.86	0.33		
Brand Satisfaction	0.49	0.45	0.68	0.39	0.68	
Variance Extracted	0.46	0.42	0.76	0.88	0.78	0.74
Construct Reliability	0.72	0.59	0.86	0.94	0.88	0.90
Model Fit	RMR=0.03; GFI=0.96; AGFI=0.91; PGFI=0.58; NFI=0.95; CFI=0.97; RMSA=0.05					

(*) Non-standardized regression coefficients = 1

4. Results

Subsequently to the validation of the measurement model, to assess the effect of the extracted dimensions on the satisfaction construct, a structural equation analysis was conducted (Table 2). Also in the case of this model, measures indicate an adequate representation of the underlying data by the proposed factor structure. Furthermore, the structural equation analysis indicates significant positive influences of all analysed dimensions on the “brand satisfaction” construct. Remarkably, the utilitarian benefit of the analysed cosmetic brands affects consumers’ satisfaction only to a certain extent (standardized regression coefficient = 0.20), while two emotional benefit dimensions (sexual attractiveness, s.r.c. = 0.27 and relief from dissatisfaction, s.r.c. = 0.32) have a stronger impact on the construct. Overall, the latter dimension seems to yield the strongest influence on women’s satisfaction. Also the latent constructs “sensorial pleasure” (s.r.c. = 0.18) and “social interaction success” (s.r.c. = 0.15) had a significant but somewhat lower influence than the instrumental brand dimension.

TABLE 2

STRUCTURAL EQUATION ANALYSIS: REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS

(STANDARDIZED, NON-STANDARDIZED; P)

Factor	Brand Satisfaction
Utilitarian Benefit	0.20; 0.24; p<0.000
Sensorial Pleasure	0.18; 0.21; p=0.003
Sexual Attractiveness	0.27; 0.19; p=0.020
Social Interactions Success	0.15; 0.10; p<0.000
Relief from Self-Dissatisfaction	0.32; 0.23; p=0.005
Model Fit	GFI = 0.94; AGFI = 0.90; NFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.96; RMR = 0.04; RMSEA = 0.06

5. Conclusions and implications for cosmetics advertising

The results of the study confirm that both utilitarian and hedonic brand benefits significantly contribute to female consumers’ satisfaction with cosmetic brands. Thus, in first place, instilling product attribute beliefs through advertising is a relevant factor of brand success, in particular if objective utilitarian benefits (improvement of body shape, reduction of wrinkles, etc.) are absent. Also pleasure feelings as a result of sensorial stimuli (product texture, fragrance, visual impact, etc.) significantly enhance brand satisfaction. However, overall, the

influence of emotional consumption experiences seems to be more significant, confirming the view of a number of authors (Bloch and Richins, 1992; Chao and Schor, 1998; Herman, 2003). Thus, the brand should evoke the feeling of “sexual attractiveness” and “social and professional interaction success” in female consumers. This can be achieved through advertising by associating the brand with imagery representing successful and highly attractive role models. The concern for sexual attractiveness is hypothesized to originate from one of the most basic evolutionary patterns of human behaviour. Darwinian approaches to the study of physical attractiveness posit that the features of attractiveness are important biological signals of mate value that motivate behaviour in others (Etcoff, 1999; Perrett et al., 1998; Grammer and Thornhill, 1994; Aharon et al., 2001). Remarkably, the strongest overall contribution to customer satisfaction was achieved by the emotional experience of “relief from dissatisfaction with one’s self-concept”. The feeling of worry and/or guilt as a consequence of dissatisfaction with one’s appearance and the perception of not doing enough to improve may be the combined result of the exposure to attractive woman in advertising and the society-wide accepted notion of responsibility for one’s appearance. Thus, it seems useful for cosmetic advertisers to expose female consumers to imagery of attractive woman to lower their self-image and to evoke a feeling of dissatisfaction, while simultaneously presenting the brand as a means to experience relief from those negative emotions. Possibly even the representation of slightly above average looking females – as in the controversial and highly successful “real beauty” campaign of Unilever’s DOVE brand – may have the overall same or, at least, a similar impact, because even if initial dissatisfaction effects may be weaker, stronger identification processes may take place (Halliwel and Dittmar, 2004). Using social comparison processes to instil temporarily feelings of dissatisfaction in consumers (Richins, 1991) may indeed contribute to a subsequent higher brand satisfaction and turn out to be beneficial for cosmetic advertisers.

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APPENDIX

MEASUREMENT SCALES OF CONSTRUCTS

Utilitarian Benefits

With Brand X creams my skin is soft and hydrated.
 Brand X creams restore firmness and elasticity to my skin and body.
 Brand X makes my skin and body have a younger appearance.

Brand Satisfaction

I'm satisfied with Brand X.
 My experiences using Brand X have always been good.
 Purchasing Brand X I made the right choice.

Sensorial Pleasure

I like the feeling of Brand X products on my skin.
 It's a pleasure to smell the sensual fragrance of Brand X products.

Success in Social and Professional Interactions



Item 1



Item 2

Relief from Dissatisfaction with One's Self-Image



Item 1



Item 2

Sexual Attractiveness



Item 1



Item 2