

Running Head: INFLUENCE OF COSMETICS ON CONFIDENCE

Influence of Cosmetics on the Confidence of College Women: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

Many American women suffer from poor body image and low self-confidence. Wearing makeup is something they can do to quickly and temporarily change their appearance, thus increasing confidence. The current study is an exploration of the relationship between cosmetics, their match to certain situations, and the resulting anxiety levels. Anxiety was used as a measure of confidence. Participants altered their makeup in three different styles in two actual situations. After each situation, the participants filled out a short survey about their feelings about the makeup and the situation they were in. The Spielberger state-trait anxiety survey was used to gauge anxiety. It was thought that less anxiety would be felt when makeup matched the situation. Implications for the findings are discussed.

### Influence of Cosmetics on the Confidence of College Women: An Exploratory Study

In America, women are constantly bombarded with images of what our society deems as beautiful. As a result, many women tend to feel inadequate and their feelings of confidence and expectations of self are affected. “When one’s body is disliked because of deviation from norms of function or appearance, replicated evidence shows that anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem are regular correlates” (Jourard, 1964). A study by Turner et al. (1997) found that the media shapes, rather than reflects, societal perceptions of the female body. In addition, they found that women’s body image satisfaction is influenced by their exposure to the thin ideal presented in fashion magazines. More often than not, the images these women are seeing have been computer-edited and their models have been airbrushed and piled with makeup to camouflage any slight flaws that may, in reality, exist.

An abundance of research exists on how women feel when comparing themselves to the ideal of thinness that exists in American culture. “For the most part, what a woman observes in the mirror is what she uses as a measure of her worth as a human being” (Lerner, Karabenick, & Stuart, 1973). The majority of research on women and their self-esteem has historically been related to how they feel about their body shape and size (Trampe, Siero, & Stapel, 2007). However, not much attention has been given to a particular action women can take to improve their self-confidence – applying cosmetics. Cosmetic products such as foundation, mascara, and blush are a quick and impermanent means to improving one’s appearance and thus improving confidence (Miller & Cox, 1982). Cosmetics are a quick means of improvement versus more long-term, arduous changes such as diet and exercise. As only a handful of studies exist to date, there continues to be a need for more exploration of the topic in such areas as what role makeup

plays in the lives of women, when and why women use makeup and, what is achieved with its use.

Makeup is femininity made tangible. Makeup can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different women. For many, makeup is a way to invoke one's self (LaBelle, 1988). Using different products and colors, women can use makeup to explore and portray their own individuality. According to Beausoleil (1992), many women report having different makeup routines depending on what they expect to do during the day. Women often engage in specific appearance practices to distinguish between day and night looks, basic looks and looks for special occasions, etc." (Beausoleil, 1992).

Cosmetics serve as a sign of femininity in their symbolization of stereotypical feminine values. They are often seen as a way to enhance feminine beauty ideals and serve to help women to conform to our society's beauty expectations. In America, women are constantly seeking ways to change their appearance to fit the American ideal of beauty which they are bombarded with by the media – big blue eyes, clear skin, rosy cheeks, and pouty red lips (Poran, 2002). As cosmetics companies present the made-up face as ideal, many women use makeup as an attempt to conform to these images of ideality. According to Kelson, Kearney-Cooke, and Lansky (1990), there are certain pressures on women to meet cultural standards of beauty, as well as rewards involved for those women who use cosmetics to reach these standards, such as increased attention from the opposite sex and idol recognition from other females. Cultural definitions of feminine beauty vary with regard to body size, skin complexion, hair length and color, and the use of adornments (Rich & Cash, 1993). With cosmetics comes the promise of change towards this ideal image, (Bloch & Richins, 1992). Many women may wear makeup with the belief that it will positively affect their level of physical attractiveness. According to Rich and Cash (2002), upper-social-

class Caucasian women, particularly adolescents and young adults, are the most dissatisfied with their bodies. A woman can use cosmetics to both hide the things she does not like and accentuate the things she does. Makeup holds the possibility for a woman to personally transform herself, resulting in an increase in self-confidence.

A girl's initial experimentation with cosmetics in early adolescence can be seen as a rite of passage as well as growth towards developing a feminine identity (Cash, 1985). It is during adolescence that females typically become more concerned with their appearance, (Kelson, Kearney-Cooke, & Lansky, 1990). Theberge and Kernaleguen (1979) reported that as the use (and importance) of cosmetics increased, women's satisfaction with their bodies also increased. Studying the use of makeup by women is important to determine if there is a link between how much they wear and when, and how it affects their confidence in a given situation. Cosmetics are often a tool used for social self-presentation and self-image management. For some women, especially those of adolescent and college-age, wearing makeup is partly due to their concern for their complexion and how they feel about themselves when others look at their blemished skin. A blemish on the skin can lead to embarrassment, humiliation, or other negative body-image experiences, which in turn can diminish self-esteem (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Using cosmetics, such as foundation and concealer, can help a woman hide facial blemishes and other abnormalities which cause her to feel self-conscious. Such use of facial cosmetics may help to boost a woman's sense of confidence in her appearance, thus making her more self-assured overall. Several studies have shown that makeup use by women is associated with stronger feelings of attractiveness and femininity. Evidence also exists that suggests women apply their makeup according to the situation they are preparing for. "It seems that women's appearance practices are almost solely, or at least largely, determined by concerns with situations, occasions,

and audiences,” (Beausoleil, 1992). The current study served as an initial exploration into the idea that confidence is achieved when physical appearance (i.e. makeup worn) matches the situation. The focus was on college-age women and how makeup use affects their level of anxiety and overall confidence in given situations. It was thought that the presence of makeup and the extent to which it is applied would be the deciding factor. An experiment was conducted in which four women were asked to vary the types of cosmetic products they used when going to class and going out with girlfriends. It was hypothesized that the more makeup worn in each situation, the more confident the women would feel about themselves.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were four female college students from a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Two of these women were freshmen and two were juniors. They were between 19 and 20 years old. All were Caucasian. They were selected by the researcher for participation but had to give their consent to participate.

### *Materials*

The participants each signed a standard consent form before beginning the study. They then filled out a survey detailing a number of open-ended questions (see Appendix). Along with this survey, the participants were asked to answer a few demographic questions, such as age, romantic status, and year in school. They also filled out a revised version of the Cash Cosmetics Use Inventory (see Figure 1), developed by Thomas Cash in 1985. For the experiment portion of the study, each woman used her own personal makeup supply. They were given a set of journaling surveys to fill out both before and after each condition. This survey was a tool developed by the researcher to record the specific cosmetic products used as well as the

participants’ actions, thoughts, and feelings in each situation during their participation in the study. The participants were also asked to complete the Spielberger’s state-trait anxiety survey after each situation to gauge their level of anxiety therein. Anxiety level was used as a measure of confidence. Following the two-week long study, the participants were debriefed and any questions they had were answered by the researcher.

*Cash Cosmetics Use Inventory (CCUI).* Adapted from the T. F. Cash and D. W. Cash article from 1985, this measurement tool was revised by the researcher to only include the situations applicable to the current study. The CCUI is a self-report matrix in which the participants were asked to place an X in the appropriate boxes under each of the 15 given facial cosmetics products they normally wear in the situations they would be taking part in. Their “normal” use served as a baseline measure. The participants completed it only once at the very beginning of the study before the experimental portion began. The original version had participants rate their use from 0 to 3, but this was thought to complicate the current study. Both the researcher and participants each had a copy of the CCUI for reference during the experiment.

0 = never 1 = occasionally 2 = usually 3 = always  If you are going: to class off-campus with same-sexed friend(s) where there is the possibility of meeting the opposite sex to a party	how often do you use:	ENTIRE FACE				EYES			LIPS			CHEEKS			
		foundation	face powder	concealer	face shading	mascara	eye liner	eye shadow	eyebrow pencil	under eye liner	artificial lashes	lipstick, lip color	lip gloss	lip liner pencil	blush

Figure 1. Revised CCUI

*Journaling Survey.* Developed by the researcher, it was used by each participant to detail which products she used specifically in the situation, initial feelings she may have had about wearing her makeup in that certain way, how she felt emotionally, and any feedback she may have received from others (see Appendix).

*Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Survey.* Developed by Charles D. Spielberger and colleagues in 1970, it consists of 20 short statements that are designed to measure the participants' state of anxiety after a situation or task. Specifically, the items measure how a person feels at the present time and reflect situational factors that may influence anxiety levels. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 "not at all" to 4 "very much." 10 out of 20 of the items were reverse-scored according to standard procedures. The total score for the survey was obtained by adding the items together. Higher total scores represent more elevated levels of anxiety. This measure has been found to be both valid and reliable (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970).

### *Procedure*

The four participants participated in the following actual events: going to class and going out with girlfriends (where there was the possibility of meeting the opposite sex). Each woman filled out the CCUI as well as the history of use survey and demographic questions, after filling out the consent form. They began the experiment by wearing their customary makeup in each situation as a baseline measure; going to class they wore their "class" makeup and when going out they wore their "out" makeup. This was done in order to obtain a measure of general anxiety in each makeup-situation match (see Table 1). For the experimental measure, each woman altered their use of the cosmetics. When going to class during week 1 of the experiment, each woman was asked to wear her makeup as she would if she was going out with her girlfriends and



as if she was going to a party. During week 2, when going out with her girlfriends, each woman was asked to wear her makeup as if she was going to class and as if she was attending a party.

Table 1 represents a 3x2 design where each woman participated in a total of six experimental conditions. Before each situation, each woman was asked to quickly fill out the “before questions” on the journaling survey while applying her makeup. After the women had completed their participation in each situation, they were also asked to fill out the “after-situation questions” and the state-trait anxiety survey as quickly as possible to gauge the level of anxiety felt in that situation.

Table 1. Table showing situation x makeup style

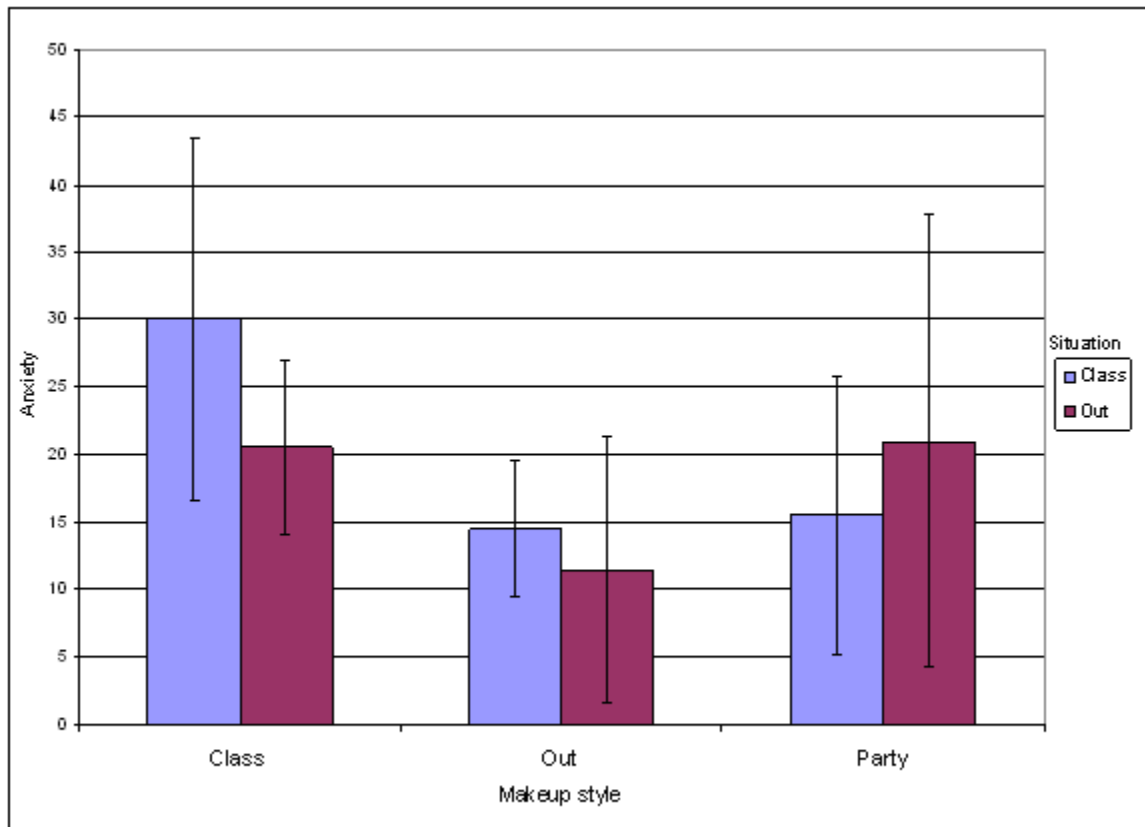
		<u>STYLE OF MAKEUP</u>		
		CLASS	GOING OUT	PARTY
<u>SITUATION</u>	CLASS	WEEK 1 - WEEK 1 - WEEK 1 - WEEK 1 - WEEK 1		
	GOING OUT	WEEK 2 - WEEK 2 - WEEK 2 - WEEK 2 - WEEK 2		

### Results

The anxiety levels felt by the participants, whether out with their girlfriends or in class, had no relation to the makeup worn. It was found that, overall, the participants felt more anxious while wearing “class” makeup in both situations. Less anxiety was felt when wearing “party” or “out” makeup, even when in class (see Figure 2). This is evidence against the hypothesis that

matching makeup to a situation will produce less anxiety and increase confidence. The only condition that supported the hypothesis was when the participants wore their typical “out” makeup when going out with girlfriends, which produced the lowest average level of anxiety in the experiment. This fluctuation may be due to the nature of the situations. While sitting in class, the participants had a greater opportunity to sit and think about their makeup and how it made them feel. While out with their girlfriends, it is likely that they were concentrated on other things. Another possibility is the notion that “out” and “party” makeup styles are usually more premeditated. What makeup a woman wears to class and how much is apt to be influenced by how much time she has to get ready before class. No significant results were obtained for the relationship between makeup and situation. Figure 2 shows the standard deviation in each situation away from the mean. The wide spread variation for each condition shows the inability to control for environmental influences and other personal factors that may have made the participants anxious outside of their makeup use. Within the experiment itself, the procedure required participants to pay more attention to their makeup use which likely made them more self-aware overall. One woman stated in the journaling survey, “Because I was wearing more makeup, I thought I would attract more attention considering I normally wear minimal makeup.” Because she had given extra thought and effort to her makeup application, this participant formed expectations for what wearing more makeup would do. In expecting to attract more attention, it is also likely that she felt more anxious at the thought of receiving it. In wearing “out” makeup to class, one participant stated, “I thought I would feel overdone so I kind of dressed up to compensate.” The fact that she felt overdone most likely made her anxious and so she chose to match her clothing to her makeup to feel less so. This is evidence for the idea that matching two variables (i.e. makeup to situation) will reduce anxiety, thus increasing confidence.

The participant who had the lowest anxiety levels in class, while wearing “class” makeup, reported that wearing less makeup allowed her to focus more on class than how she looked. The use of a greater amount of makeup likely led to greater expectations and, thus, more anxiety.



*Figure 2. Graph of mean anxiety scores*

### Discussion

The anxiety levels found could be due to the experimental nature of the study. Because the participants were made more self-aware of their makeup use, they may have developed hesitations and/or expectations about what they were wearing on their face. According to Beausoleil (1992), makeup application is generally a part of overall appearance practices. The experiment design called for the participants to pay attention to an action that is usually given

little thought. As the current study was designed as an exploration and only had four participants, no significant relationships were found. Perhaps using a great number of participants would allow results to be more substantial. Future studies may also involve a different method, such as a picture study or questionnaire. The experimental procedure of the current study likely raised anxiety levels in itself, thus impeding the results. Past studies have taken photographs of women before and after they have applied their makeup. The women are then asked to report their feelings about how they look with and without makeup. This may be a method to consider using in regards to looking at how the different styles of makeup used in the current study affect confidence in terms of amount and types of makeup. Because the women would be asked to apply their makeup specifically to be studied, little anxiety would be induced while wearing it. If the current study were to be replicated, there should be more control over the types of products the participants wear to better measure their impact. As it is hard to control for environmental factors that produce anxiety, the types and amounts of makeup worn should be more controlled to improve the chance of finding any correlations between the makeup and the situation. This study opens the door to future studies of its kind. The topic of women's self-confidence in relation to makeup use and its match to situation is one that deserves continued research.

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## Appendix

### History of Use (HU) Survey and Use Survey Items

- \*1. When did you begin experimenting with makeup?
- \*2. What is your greatest concern about your face?
- \*3. What are your favorite facial features?
- \*4. What are your personal reasons for wearing makeup?
- \*\*5. While putting on your makeup today, how did you think it would make you feel while (*circle one*) at class / out with your friends?
- \*\*6. What would you say is your general mood today?
- \*\*7. How did you feel in the situation today?
- \*\*8. Did you receive any comments/reactions from others? If so, please list any you can recall.
- \*\*9. How did you feel about the above reactions? Did they match your own?



<sup>i</sup>\*HU items

\*\* Use survey items