

Why does Beauty Matter?

The Cosmetic, Toiletry & Perfumery Association (CTPA) held its first Media Panel event of 2011 on 28th February. With an increase in the debate about the perceived pressure of consumers to appear 'beautiful', the CTPA focused this latest panel on exploring the different aspects of this complex area.

This factsheet features extracts from presentations given at the event by the three keynote speakers:

- **Lucy Beresford:** a writer, psychotherapist (UKCP registered), and media commentator who writes about human psychology and mental health
- **Dr Alex Clarke:** the head of the psychology department within the Royal Free Hospital Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, a centre of excellence in this specialty. She is the author of approximately 70 research papers, book chapters and publications for patient groups
- **Zoe Williams:** a cancer patient who spoke about her experience of attending a Look Good... Feel Better (LGFB) workshop. LGFB is a UK charity offering hair and beauty advice and workshops for women undergoing cancer treatment.

» How do we define beauty?

From birth, young babies demonstrate a disposition to look at certain patterns within human faces, in particular, triangular symmetry in the central portion of the face. As symmetrical faces may signal health, and therefore fertility, humans naturally find people with symmetrical features more attractive and unusual faces less attractive.

Interestingly, the idea that 'what is beautiful is also good' is very common in many cultures and this explains why literature and films often describe heroes as the good looking characters, whilst the evil ones have facial disfigurements. This distinction drives our desire to categorise the faces that we



look at and goes some way to explaining our desire to fit in with those around us.

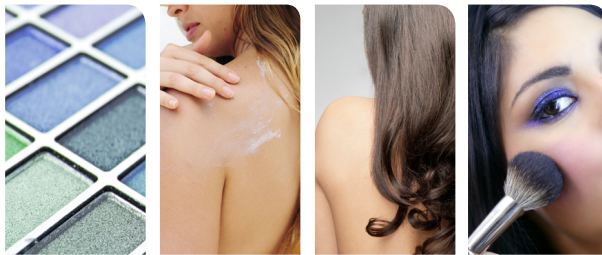
However, this desire to fit in competes with an ongoing need to stand out just enough to attract the best sexual mate – to ensure one's survival.



Attractiveness, or beauty, is seen as a silent language used to communicate one's suitability for potential suitors. Glossy hair, red, full lips and luminous skin are all signs of good health and potentially good genes.

So faces that show the very best signs of health or demonstrate good genes, are therefore most likely to attract the best mate.

There are particular facial features that distinguish male and female faces. Feminine faces have a smaller jaw, higher cheekbones and a greater distance between the eye and eyebrow – this accounts for the female tendency to pluck eyebrows. Luminance of the skin is another distinguishing feature of female faces – the greater the contrast between the skin and the facial features, the more feminine a face is deemed to be, hence the interest in using lipstick and mascara to help define these features.



Why do we follow trends?

The need to fit in also provides an explanation for people's desire to copy fashion trends and the latest beauty 'look'. By reporting these trends, the media is simply responding to a basic human need – the need to conform. This is not a modern phenomenon and can be seen throughout the ages, from before the times of King Henry VII to the latest trends in 2011 for bright coloured lipsticks and block colour clothing.

Fashion and beauty trends are also often linked to the availability of money. For example, in the early 20th century, tanned skin was associated with people who could afford to go on holidays; however, with the rise of cheap package holidays, tanned skin has become less desirable because it has lost its association with wealth. Likewise, thinness is desirable when food is plentiful; so it will be interesting to observe whether a fuller figure becomes more desirable in a recession when there is less money about!

» Is our obsession with beauty a Western malady?

Such trends are not confined to the realms of Western society: the desire to conform is a common driver for all humans, whatever their race. Those from the West are often associated with wealth and power so their specific looks are something to which people around the world aspire. For example, there has therefore been an increase in requests amongst Asian people to alter the size of their noses and lighten their skin. This homogenisation of images spreading across the world has indeed been facilitated by the advent of television and the internet.

» The impact of social media and television

The prevalence of images in today's digital age is likely to be a key driving factor in the growing pressure to be beautiful. The dominance of social networking sites such as Facebook demonstrate first hand how young people today are now able to make photographic records of every social occasion, every birthday party, every night out; images that would once upon a time been seen by close friends, if you so chose, can now be seen by thousands of strangers – and those strangers can make comments and pass judgement on the way that you look. Ten or fifteen years ago this would have been unheard of and it's very possible that this creates a greater sense of pressure to look ones best at all times.

The impact of popular television soaps also challenge the parameters of what we perceive as ordinary or average – and therefore attractive. Story lines portray characters as average looking people living ordinary lives, yet their actual appearance suggests otherwise. This can confuse viewers, putting indirect pressure on them to appear more beautiful all of the time because these programmes have changed our perception of what is normal.





» Having fun is important

Trips with friends to the cosmetic counters of department stores enable women to experiment with their appearances and create that all-important sense of individuality. Such trips are also an important bonding experience for young women and the fun and sense of fantasy they enjoy is hugely important for their psyche. Innovation within the industry – its ability to produce ever-better ranges of colours and textures – ensures that this important activity remains inclusive, whatever someone's age, race or skin type.

» The importance of education

As a society, we simply cannot control every aspect of life and this means that we must all have the capacity to mentally filter and process the information we're presented with so that we can make balanced judgements about its significance.

Humans must have the freedom and ability to appreciate and enjoy beautiful and aspirational images; engaging with them without becoming obsessive in striving to emulate them. We must all, including parents, teachers and industry, take responsibility for engaging young people in a dialogue on these issues, ensuring that they are able to appreciate fantasy or unrealistic images without succumbing to pressure to replicate them. The majority of people are fully able to make this distinction and whilst there will always be those in society who are more vulnerable and susceptible, they are a minority.

Beautiful images can lift people's spirits and engage their senses and are therefore to be celebrated. Importantly, being confident in one's appearance promotes positive self-esteem and the cosmetics industry helps people feel more confident everyday.

» Case study

Zoe Williams and the Look Good... Feel Better Workshop

Having had a baby six months previously, Zoe Williams was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of Stage IV liver cancer. After four weeks in hospital, Zoe began to feel isolated and depressed and her self-confidence plummeted. A fellow patient recommended she attend a Look Good...Feel Better workshop taking place in a Maggie's Centre in another section of the hospital.

Whilst highly dubious about the impact a make-over could have on her sense of well-being, her experience at the workshop transformed her life. The camaraderie with the other woman banished the feeling of isolation and re-engaging with her appearance boosted her self-esteem; it was an important statement to herself and society that she had not given up on life. By putting on her 'normal' face, she also found that she was able to help those around her deal with her illness.

She believes that taking care of their appearance would also help young mothers, unemployed people and others suffering from low confidence to regain a sense of self-worth.



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For answers to more common questions about beauty matters, visit the new Facts About Beauty Matters section at www.thefactsabout.co.uk/beautymatters »

For further information, please contact Eleanor O'Connor at CTPA on 020 7491 8891 or e-mail eoconnor@ctpa.org.uk »
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