

How consumers see and feel about themselves, both in terms of body image and self-esteem, are hot topics today on political and media agendas. Debate is rife about whether there is growing pressure on consumers to be beautiful; the negative impact this may be having on health and well-being; the root causes of this pressure; and whether something needs to be done to address them.

There are many impassioned voices in this debate, including politicians, pressure groups, journalists and public opinion. Their views vary widely when it comes to the scale or severity of the problem (if they agree there is a problem at all), but all appear to agree that there is no one, single factor involved. Instead, a number of common 'culprits' are cited, including the media (for advocating perfection and ridiculing the 'real'), the fashion industry (for endorsing unrealistic body shapes) and the beauty industry (for creating an unattainable 'norm' through the use of enhancements).

If we hope to analyse this debate with any real effect, we must first understand how we define beauty – and why we define it the way that we do. Dr Alex Clarke, the head of the psychology department within the Royal Free Hospital Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, says that our definition of beauty is naturally in-built into our DNA. But why is this?

She says that, 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. She says that because symmetrical faces may signal health and therefore fertility, humans naturally find people with symmetrical features more attractive and unusual faces less attractive.

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.

Interestingly, Alex notes that 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. She goes on to say that 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.

And yet Lucy Beresford, a writer, psychotherapist (UKCP registered), and media commentator who writes about human psychology and mental health, believes that 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.

Indeed, far from frivolous or self-indulgent, 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. More than this, argues Lucy, such trips are 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 – for example, 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.

Lucy believes that the need to fit in also provides an explanation for people's desire to copy fashion trends and the latest beauty 'look'. She proposes that by reporting these trends, the media are 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 medieval times to the latest trends in 2011 for bright coloured lipsticks and block colour clothing.

Interestingly, Lucy notes that 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! 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. Western people are often associated with wealth and power so their specific looks are something to which people around the world aspire. For example, there has been an increase in requests amongst Asian people to alter the size of their noses and lighten their skin. This homogenisation of images and looks to which people aspire has indeed been facilitated by the advent of television and the internet.

Lucy Beresford notes

“Using make-up and beautifying ourselves allows us individual expression and a means to explore our identity, which is important for our mental wellbeing. The cosmetics and toiletry industry therefore plays a positive role in this aspect of our lives.”

Photo: Lucy Beresford





Dr Alex Clarke comments

“We often debate what it means to be beautiful and within that, what role the media and beauty industry plays. But we must remember that to a certain extent, our definitions of beauty are biologically in-built. We instinctively look for outward signs of health in others, together with a healthy lifestyle, and the cosmetic and toiletry industry provides us with the means to ensure we look as healthy as possible”

Indeed, if there is a growing pressure to be beautiful, as some would suggest, then the prevalence of images in today’s digital age is likely to be a key driving factor, suggests Lucy. Who can ignore the dominance of social networking sites such as Facebook at the moment? 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.

Couple this phenomenon with the impact of popular television soaps, suggests Alex, which 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.

From fashion and beauty trends mapped out in magazines, in clothing stores or at the beauty counter, to social media and the media more broadly, the wider point here is that, as a society, we simply cannot control every aspect of life. The internet alone has ensured that anyone and everyone is now a publisher of content in their own right and there is very little that can or, arguably, should be done about this. But what it does mean is that we must all have the capacity to mentally filter and process the information we are presented with so that we can make balanced judgements about its significance.

As Lucy rightly points out, humans must have the freedom and ability to appreciate and enjoy beautiful images; engaging in a world of fantasy from time-to-time is important for our psyche. So all of us, including parents, teachers and industry, must therefore 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, Alex suggests, 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. And it would therefore be to the detriment of society at large if we were to ban beautiful images of people.

This is a complex debate and an issue for advertising across all sectors, not only the cosmetics industry. In collaboration with other associations we are constructively engaged in seeing where we may have a role to play in helping to promote positive self-esteem; being confident in your appearance is one of the key drivers of positive self-esteem and we should celebrate the role that the cosmetics industry plays in helping people feel more confident everyday.



Sarahjane Robertson,
Executive Director of Look Good.. Feel Better (LGFb) in the UK says

“We receive so many heart-rending letters in the LGFB office from women who have been affected by cancer. After attending a LGFB workshop they feel uplifted and more confident in dealing with the appearance-related side-effects of their cancer treatment. We frequently receive thank you letters saying what a difference being able to ‘put on their normal face’ has made giving them the ability to approach their daily lives with renewed strength, re-capturing their self-esteem”.



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 women 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 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.



Look Good...Feel Better®

The Beauty Industry supporting women with cancer

www.lgfb.co.uk