

**FEMALE COSMETIC COALITIONS: HOW TO BE WOMEN  
TOGETHER THROUGH DIRECT SALES COSMETICS**

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**FEMALE COSMETIC COALITIONS: HOW TO BE WOMEN  
TOGETHER THROUGH DIRECT SALES COSMETICS**

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## **Abstract**

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork amongst women purchasing direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia. To interpret the data I use concepts from social as well as evolutionary anthropology. In the thesis I examine the closely bonded female collectives that emerged during the purchasing of cosmetics from direct sales companies. I show that while the company sales representatives were trained in the network selling marketing to make a profit, under specified conditions women's collectives emerged that encouraged the shared ritualized purchase of cosmetics which undermined the sales representatives' incentives to make a gain. I identify and explain the mechanisms that intensified the relationships amongst the women who created collectives of allies. In this ritually forged environment the women created small collectives based on mutual trust, sharing, egalitarianism and cooperation that extended beyond the context of attractiveness enhancement. In the ritual mode women generated a resistance culture that opposed the individualistic and competitive practices of the cosmetic companies and favoured the leveling of beautification through ritual egalitarianism. From the energetically costly ritual performance ambivalent ritual gender emerged that incorporated both female and male characteristics and was controlled by the female collectives. Endowed with ritual power women employed their ritually created collective agency by claiming their ritual space and time. In the process of ritualization the women transformed economic relations into gift-like relationships that through a web of social obligations created bonds of solidarity and cooperation amongst them. As a result of the collective ritual practice cosmetics became a signal of commitment to the cosmetic coalition. They were invested with the meanings of morality, cooperation and equality of quasi

kinship ties. Through regular participation in the collective cosmetic rituals women learnt a ritual template that enabled them to enter any such female collective across Slovakia. These collectives provided their female members with benefits beyond the ritual context. The thesis contributes to the body of work on female competition and cooperation. It shows that once women are united through collective rituals with cosmetics and beautification at their centre they create a safe environment where cooperation rather than competition through beauty prevails. Through recognizing and interpreting the mechanisms for bonding and group commitment the thesis also develops the model of female cosmetic coalitions within the setting of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the content of this thesis is my own work unless otherwise stated.

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*I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents Pavel Fejdi and Viktória Fejdiová*



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## Introduction

Social and evolutionary theorists suggest two very different approaches to beauty and beautification practices amongst women. On the one hand, social and feminist theorists claim that the beauty standards are arbitrary and therefore culturally imposed on women through patriarchal relations (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003; Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005). Women are seen by these authors as objects of male desire, displaying for their enjoyment and controlled by their gaze and agency. These theorists also propose that if beauty forms the basis of women's identity, this makes them vulnerable not only to the approval of men but to the critical appraisal of other women, too. Yet this idea is often based on theorizing representations of beauty instead of looking at everyday women's actual practices. On the other hand, Darwinian theorists (Buss, 1994; Campbell, 2004; Low, 1979) argue that, although there are some beauty standards that may indeed be arbitrary, there are certain features such as youth, health and femininity, that across cultures are perceived as attractive. These theorists therefore suggest that these physical features cannot be either culturally constructed or enforced by patriarchal structures. In their understanding these beauty standards should be universal and humans would evolve preferences for evaluating them as attractive. Yet despite this divergence about the origins and representations of beauty *both* theoretical approaches share very similar understanding of the uses of beauty amongst women. Many social as well as Darwinian scholars conceptualize the employment of attractiveness and beautification amongst women as an individualistic and competitive practice.

From the perspective of social theory the socially imposed beauty standards create rivalry and competition amongst women. Consequently women would use beauty and beautification individualistically and in isolation from other women who are seen as possible competitors. Such behaviour would foster divisions amongst women (Wolf, 1990). In this understanding women would compare their attractiveness to the imposed standards as well as to other women competing with each other for the approval of and advantages coming from men (Bordo, 1993). Although some social theorists who use qualitative research methods point towards the direction of use of cosmetics among women in a collectivizing and possibly cooperative context they have not identified or explained mechanisms that are at play in such situations. Nevertheless, some of them emphasize the enjoyable and empowering aspects of such beautification practices as well as the agency women can draw on from it (Beausoleil, 1994; Davis, 1995, Smith, 1990). From the Darwinian perspective women would compete through their attractiveness for the needed men's investment into their children (Campbell, 2004). Choosy investor men would look to their potential long term partners for cues such as youth and femininity that should give reliable information about the women's future reproductive potential. Women should respond to these men's preferences by enhancing their beauty through cosmetics. The enhanced attractiveness should increase women's chances of being viewed as superior partners and thus being chosen by discriminating men (Ingo, Mize, Pratarelli, 2007). Thus from this point of view, too, women should use their beauty and beautification in isolation, individualistically competing amongst each other.

Yet the ethnographic accounts on cosmetic use amongst women from many African cultures tell a different story. Here, the use of bodily decorations is incorporated into

ritual context and carried out by collectives of young girls and women. The initiated girls spend hours decorating each other's bodies. Adult women join in oiling and painting the girls and braiding their hair. The *collective* character of cosmetics use and beautification practices, including the songs women sang at such occasions, emerges in these accounts. These initiation rituals were extremely important for the girls to be chosen as marriageable partners (Power, 1999) yet "much of the cosmetic display occurred in secrecy and could not be directly seen either by the members of the opposite sex or by the members of the same sex who were the possible competitors" (Power, 1999: 94).

My own preliminary observations of the beautification practices amongst my friends and colleagues also showed similar tendencies towards sharing and reciprocity than isolation, individualism and competition. I decided to examine the gap that emerged between theorizing attractiveness and beautification in social and evolutionary theory on the one hand and the lived everyday uses of beauty and its improvements amongst women around me on the other.

In summer 2009 I came across an alternative Darwinian model of Female Cosmetic Coalitions developed by Power (1999) and I was already doing the ethnographic research on women and the way they used cosmetics and beautification in a collective context. I was struck by how much this model supported not only my own early observations amongst the women in my surroundings but also the ethnographic data I was gathering. This model does consider competition amongst women but in a more nuanced way. According to Power women do compete amongst each other but non-competitive internal relations can develop amongst them through the collective use of

cosmetics when in women's coalitions. Although the premises of evolutionary theory are relevant to understand the importance of beauty and beautification for both men and women in securing reproductive success on the one hand and parental investment on the other, as Hrdy notes by "focusing on topics like mate choice and competition for mates we left out the other angle that looks at nurture and who provides it" (Hrdy 2009b: 13). Power's model addresses an aspect of such care by focusing on how cooperative relations can develop amongst women in coalitions that centre on eliciting provisioning of these coalitions and their children by men. Although this model was developed for the evolution of modern humans undergoing severe reproductive stress owing to encephalization among egalitarian hunter-gatherers, I believe that it is still valid in contemporary capitalist conditions. The urban isolation of big cities, high mobility amongst women that drives them away from kin as well as the need for provisioning children and family forces many women under such conditions to cooperate with other women who are non-kin. Women also need to gain access to various resources and they need to attract and maintain male investment into their children. As my research shows through the medium of cosmetics that is collectively and democratically shared amongst them women form cooperative coalitions. In these coalitions they cooperate through beauty and beautification yet this cooperation often extends beyond the beauty context and influences other areas of women's lives.

The thesis answers the following research questions: Do women within the environment of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia compete with each other through beauty and beautification or do they cooperate? If they do cooperate, under what conditions do they do so? What would be the characteristics of such cooperative behaviour? The thesis contributes to the gap in knowledge about cooperation and

competition between women through beauty. It contradicts many assumptions and interpretations made about the nature of relationships amongst women in contemporary western societies that emphasize competition around the issues of beauty. In the thesis I identify and explain mechanisms through which women bond with each other into small cooperative collectives. I elaborate the model of cosmetic coalitions within a contemporary environment of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia and I show in detail how this model operates in a contemporary urban setting. These are the original contributions of the thesis.

I argue that there are beautification practices that are not necessarily or exclusively intended for the male audience. On the contrary, they are often targeted at women only and they frequently take place in seclusion. They are also subject to women's secrets that are used to create and confirm bonds amongst those women who share them. I study the processes that are at play amongst the women who share the beautification experience together. I identify and explain mechanisms through which ritually forged cosmetic coalitions emerged amongst the Slovak women in the milieu of direct sales cosmetics. I argue that ritualized purchase and manipulation of direct sales cosmetics and of related beauty knowledge is one of the ways women can bond with each other in small collectives. Within these collectives women tend to cooperate rather than compete with each other through attractiveness and its enhancement. This cooperation can extend beyond the ritualized context and spread to other areas of women's lives including cooperative childcare.

My analysis is based on ethnographic research amongst women in Slovakia who were selling, buying and using Avon and Oriflame direct sales cosmetics. In my research I

focus on the customers and their sales representatives. For the period of research I myself became an Oriflame seller and Avon purchaser. I examine the ritualized practices of cosmetics purchase and use that take place in a collective context and I identify and interpret the mechanisms these women use to bond with each other. In the direct sales distribution structure and patterns the research participants discovered and carved out a niche where they created space to experience such bonding. Although the corporate culture of the direct sales companies as such is not the main focus of the research, it provides a comparative alternative that helps me to understand the differences between the direct sales business practices aimed at profit on the one hand and the collectivized shared behaviour focused on purchasing and manipulation of cosmetics that I observed among the research participants on the other. In the studied setting the direct sales cosmetics took on social meanings mediated by the relationships of intimacy, trust and ties of fictitious sisterhood amongst the participating women. In the exploration of the data I capture the collectivising aspects of the use of the respective cosmetics. I examine the democratic sharing of the cosmetic resources and information about them that result in equalized beautification of all the participating women. I analyze the collective cosmetic rituals in which the cosmetic purchasers regularly took part. I explore the mechanisms through which the ritual participants show to each other commitment to their collective and their trustworthiness within it. I show that these commercial cosmetics operated as visible and reliable signals of female bonds in the group. Shared use and purchase of these products marked and guaranteed the relationships of trust and cooperation amongst the women in the cosmetic coalition.



I uncover the complexity of the observed phenomena by taking into account their different dimensions. On one hand, the cosmetic purchasers get together through the direct sales shopping which is a marketing strategy of the existing formal market system. Nevertheless, through the empirical data I show that once participants begin to cooperate in the issues of beauty they create a collective counter-culture that undermines the interests of the direct sales strategy. An important aspect of the selling, buying and manipulating of direct sales cosmetics is an emotional high observed at the ritualized gatherings of the participants which represents the physical manifestation of the emergence of the bonded collectives. The expressions of elevated conversational tone, loud laughter and often bawdy jokes distinguish these ritualized encounters from typical direct sales meetings which focus on sales with profit. In the thesis I interpret the observed laughing, intensified repartee, emotionalism, and intensified joking relationships as the markers of the emerged collective coherence manifest through solidarity and cooperation of the ritual participants through beauty and beautification. In the course of the interpretation of the empirical data I show that the discovered attributes embodied by the small collectives of research participants represent the mechanisms for building, marking and sustaining of cooperative coalitions. In the researched collectives participants sell and buy direct sales cosmetics through emotionally and energetically intense rituals. They obligatorily and collectively manipulate the bought cosmetics that they invest with magical properties and meanings of morality, sharing and egalitarianism. The cosmetic purchasers carefully watch each other's behaviour scanning for commitment to their collective within which they generously share their knowledge about beautification resources, beauty tips, and intimate bodily secrets. The observed behaviour results in a

beautification that is equalized by the cooperation of all the participants for each woman present yet maximized for the collective as a whole.

The economic transaction between the cosmetic purchasers and their representatives provide the context for the circulation of cosmetics. Yet the economic explanation does not exhaust the content of the exchange. On the contrary, the real meaning of the exchange is not to be found at the economic level. The purchasers did not compete with each other through beauty or access to cosmetic resources. Equally, the representatives did not try to compete with other sellers through the volume of their sales. Importantly, the researched collectives have not been formed top down under the authority of the direct sales cosmetic companies. They emerged amongst the women as a result of collective cosmetic practices that were appropriated by the cosmetic purchasers as a group. These observed practices were specifically applied by the participants to maintain the cohesion of their respective collectives. Therefore these collectives cannot be interpreted as a product of corporate business. On the contrary, these collectives came to existence from below through the gender solidarity of the women sharing the direct sales experience. Through expressing this solidarity the research participants created a temporary ritual culture of resistance that opposed not only the competitive behaviour expected by the cosmetic companies but also the norms of everyday femininity.

Throughout my research I collected data on the formal shopping procedures that were part of the ideology of both companies and on the ways their representatives were encouraged to pursue such procedures. On the one hand, I analyzed the companies' structure, their hierarchies and "recognition" ceremonies for the representatives with

highest achievements in profit and in number of new recruits. On the other hand, I drew upon both companies printed materials: catalogues, newsletters and sellers' manuals as well as their web pages. I studied in detail the ways many representatives in practice effectuated their sales. Their actual selling strategies were in stark contrast to the ways they were encouraged, recommended or trained to sell cosmetics. I investigated these different selling counter-strategies of representatives within both companies that they used to favour the group dynamics that developed amongst the collectives of women to whom they sold cosmetics. I examined the collective aspects of the direct sales cosmetics shopping procedure. I explored the ways the researched women bought, used and manipulated these cosmetics. I focused on their collective cosmetic rituals and the shared sociality that was part of these rites. I studied the everyday beautification practices within these collectives that were part of an informal world that opposed the ideological representations of individualistic achievements and competition of the researched cosmetic companies. I analyzed the closeness, intimacy and reciprocation that were part of this informal cooperative female sociality. I documented a series of processes that I did not expect to find. What was visible to me from the outside was the formal and optimized profit oriented ideology and its manifestation in the selling culture of the representatives. But what I discovered through 'becoming one of the girls' was the informal counter-culture that came into existence from below. It emerged through the collectivized practices centring on selling, buying and manipulating of cosmetics and pooling of beauty knowledge and resources that were widely shared amongst the participating women. In the subsequent research I focused on precisely these informal aspects of the direct sales cosmetics culture. I examined the ways women created the sense of intimacy and closeness amongst each other and the many ways the researched women reciprocated

through beauty practices. I focused closely on the specific forms of femininity that came to existence during the collective cosmetic rituals as well as its possibilities for collective agency. I looked into the group levelling mechanisms that were at play during these rituals and into ways women displayed their cooperative intentions to each other. I compared the data I acquired on the formal ideology, ceremonies and practices with the observed informal collectivized practices and counter-culture that emerged amongst the researched women. This comparison revealed very clearly the egalitarian and cooperative nature of the informal culture I observed within the collectives of women. I studied in detail the reciprocal relations with regard to the pooling of beauty knowledge, resources and beautification practices.

The present study is interdisciplinary. On the one hand, to capture and explain the data I utilize concepts from within social anthropology. On the other hand, following recent writings from within evolutionary theory and biological anthropology I explore and interpret the nature of the observed interactions that focus on creating bonds and trust amongst the participants. Through incorporating Darwinian approaches into the analysis I show the nature of women's cooperation through beauty and beautification. Importantly, while maintaining the sensitivity to the ethnographic data I use the evolutionary approach throughout the thesis to *frame* the analysis and explanation of observed behaviour or as Finnegan (2008) puts it as a "*foundation* for cultural analyses" (Finnegan, 2008: 86).

Following Dunbar (1996) in the thesis I understand coalition as an alliance between two or more individuals which brings mutual benefit and/or support to its members. In Boyer's (2001) understanding these benefits make it more attractive to belong to such

an alliance then to defect it thus guaranteeing its relative stability. Boyer suggests that despite this likelihood of defection, the behaviour of the coalition members will enhance the benefits for the other members and vice versa. The membership in a coalition is based on trust that is formed and confirmed through reliable signals of commitment. There would be therefore an ongoing monitoring of the member's behaviour for signs of reliability and commitment to their alliance. Amongst the research participants sharing time together, participating in intense rituals, disclosing and exchanging information constructed as secret, and exchanging beauty tips are all means of gaining in trust within their collective. Cosmetics and mutual beautification in the sense of Dunbar's grooming (Dunbar, 1996) operate amongst the cosmetic purchasers as clear and reliable signals of commitment that open up the possibility for gaining coalitional benefits.

### **The outline of the thesis**

In Chapter One I review the anthropological literature on cosmetic use. I show that in the examples drawn from African ethnographies predominantly red cosmetics and permanent body markings are used in ritual context by groups of women. I contrast these ethnographies to the understanding of beauty and beautification coming from the domains of social and evolutionary theory. I show that both theoretical orientations understand uses of beauty and beautification amongst women as an isolated and individualistic practice that aims at displaying beauty to men in competition with other women. I point out an alternative Darwinian approach that centres on collective and cooperative rather than individualistic and competitive use of cosmetics amongst women within bonded female collectives. I also discuss that

while I use concepts from social anthropology to interpret and explain the empirical data I employ evolutionary theory to frame my analysis.

In Chapter Two I focus on methodology and I describe the research environment and my sample. I discuss how I collect the data, research ethics, the sampling strategies and research techniques as well as reasons why I choose them and I review the ways I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork in an urban environment. I discuss how I determine the sample in a situation where the collectives to be studied are hidden and not readily accessible and I look at advantages as well as limitations of the chosen snowball sampling technique. Further, I show how I apply the theoretical concepts and how I evaluate them through the ethnographic detail. I then describe the research environment of direct selling with specific focus on direct sales cosmetics. I describe the studied cosmetic companies, their organization and the process of selling cosmetics directly and I characterize the research participants.

In Chapter Three I interpret the monetary relations as well as commodity and gift-like exchanges that I observed taking place amongst the research participants. I further explore the relationship between the representatives and the purchasers participating in the collective selling and buying of the direct sales cosmetics. I look into the strategies adopted by the research participants that transformed purely monetary commodity transactions and competition for profits into highly collectivising gift-like exchange. I show how through the process of ritualization cosmetics were taken out of the sphere of commodity exchange and transformed into ritual objects carrying symbolic meanings of collective morality of cooperation and commitment to the collective. I show how by re-contextualization of cosmetics through collective rituals

participants secured their equalized distribution within their collective. I further interpret the collective morality of the cosmetics exchange. I focus on the practices that show commitment to the collectives and I show that the collectivized reciprocal distribution of the cosmetics is one of the means that facilitates and maintains the egalitarian relationships within the researched women's collectives.

In Chapter Four I analyze collective cosmetic rituals and I show that they are essential in creating intimate bonds amongst the cosmetic purchasers as well as commitment to their collectives. I describe the two main occasions for such rituals: collective catalogue browsing on the one hand and collective distribution of cosmetics on the other. I discuss how the cosmetic purchasers use a specific form of ritually acquired language which amongst them is constructed as secret. I show that the rituals were organized bottom-up by the participants themselves and took place independently from the presence of the companies' representatives. I demonstrate that in these rituals women create specific forms of collective ritual gender with ambiguous male and female characteristics that differ from the norms of everyday femininity. I further show that when in ritual participants used their collective bodily counter-power to claim their own ritual time and space. I then suggest that by regularly participating in the collective cosmetic rituals cosmetic purchasers learn a ritual template that enables them to join any such collective across Slovakia.

In Chapter Five I demonstrate how the observed collective rituals operate as clear and reliable signals of commitment to the group. Following Darwinian signalling theory I show that the reliability of these signals comes from the costs cosmetic purchasers impose upon themselves when taking part in the rituals. These costs such as time,

energy and money spent on cosmetics are clearly observable and enhance participants' credibility by testing their commitment to the coalition. I further focus on how the research participants monitor each other's behaviour and watch out for the commitment displays by seeking out information about each other's expenditures of time, energy, and money as well as about sharing cosmetic resources and beauty tips. I also show that the use of secret language and sharing of sensitive information about the participants' own beauty flaws and beauty tips operate as signals of commitment to the coalition. Importantly, although the research participants knew each other from work it was the collective ritual experience that intensified their relationships and they became trustworthy and committed allies.

In Chapter Six I focus on the strategic ways the cosmetic purchasers used their beauty and beautification. I show that on the one hand participants through the medium of cosmetics enjoy themselves within the collectives of women and they create for themselves pleasant bodily and emotional experiences. On the other hand, I demonstrate that they strategically display the direct sales cosmetics and their use to each other. Further, I show how the participants employed cosmetics and beautification to become more attractive to men in general and to their current or potential romantic partners in particular. I also show the importance of advertising the direct sales cosmetics purchased with their girlfriends to their current romantic partners.

The proposed study focuses on women's cooperative practices through beauty and beautification. It shows that once women become collectivized around the issues of beauty they tend to cooperate rather than compete with each other. They create a



specific sociality that is characterized by generous sharing of cosmetics and beauty knowledge. They use their beautified looks not only to show off to men but also to display to each other in a clear and reliable way their cooperative intentions.

## **Chapter one**

### **Review of literature and analytical framework of the thesis**

In this chapter I give an overview of the literature about beautification practices. I draw here on three different bodies of research. On the one hand, I look at the anthropological writings where I focus on the collective and cooperative use of cosmetics amongst women and young girls in ritual contexts. On the other hand, I contrast the anthropological examples with concepts that theorize beauty and beautification as an individualized and competitive practice as found in many works of social and evolutionary theorists. The objective of this chapter is to provide examples of literature on beautification practices that support or oppose the argument that if these practices became collectivized by groups of women they can operate as a vital mechanism for building and maintaining bonded female collectives within which women cooperate rather than compete through beauty.

Etcoff (1999) points out that across different cultures beautification is appropriated by both men and women alike. All of us respond to demands for beauty both universally as well as culturally (Etcoff, 1999). Power (2010) notes that often both men and women use cosmetics to become sexually attractive. She suggests that application of cosmetics should be understood as costly and reliable displays of the quality of those ones who wear them (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005; Power, 2010; Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997). Power (2010) further suggests that, on the one hand, it is true that we wear ornaments to compete with each other. On the other hand, however, beautification is not necessarily individualistic and competitive (Power, 2010). For example in rituals

cosmetics are often seen as manipulating nature by installing culture, sociality and order (Lamp, 1985: 43; Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 259; Power, 2010; Turner, 1980). The origin of the word “cosmetics” itself is related to the Greek word “cosmos” that refers to universe and order as well as ornament (Beidelman, 1971: 30; Lamp, 1985: 43). Similarly Power (2010) points out that cosmetics are connected to ancestral powers through ritual symbolism. They can also create states of taboo and magical potency of the decorated individuals and groups (Power, 2010).

The bodily ornamentation in humans dates back to our ancestral environment (Power, 2010). Archaeologists have discovered 300 000 years old cosmetic industries centred on the use of red pigments that modern humans utilised for drawing symbolic patterns (Power, 2010; Power, Aiello, 1997; Watts, 2009). Watts (2014) points out that the ritual use of cosmetics with regular and ubiquitous use of ochre developed in Africa around 160 000 to 140 000 years ago. He suggests that such regular use of red ochre is a trait that defines humans as a species (Watts, 2009).

### **Collective use of cosmetics in ritual contexts**

The uses of ornaments within ritual contexts are interpreted and explained in the anthropological literature in various ways. On the one hand, ornamentation and cosmetics are understood as a means of socialization (Berns, 1988; Faris, 1972; Turner, 1980). On the other hand, they are seen as collective displays of allies towards enemies and to the opposite sex (Strathern, 1979). Further bodily ornaments are interpreted as collective markings of age cohorts and displays to the opposite sex (Faris, 1972). More, they are seen as a part of rites of passage marking the acquisition

of a new social status (Berns, 1988; Drewal, 1988). Finally, cosmetics are interpreted as markers of female reciprocal alliances (Gengenbach 2003). This last interpretation that stresses the collective and cooperative use of bodily ornaments is for this thesis the most relevant one and which I elaborate below. Power (1999) argues that the collective use of cosmetics in ritual context operates as a means for creating and sustaining cooperative relations among women. In her understanding bodily ornaments demonstrate the readiness of its wearers to join a cooperative alliance and cosmetics act as media of the necessary ritual action (Power, 2010: 74).

In this section I review the collective use of cosmetics amongst groups of women and girls in ritual contexts found in African ethnographies. The chosen examples are significant to the argument of the thesis in that they show that collective ritualized use of cosmetics can create and mark reciprocal cooperative relations amongst the women who participate in such rituals.

Turnbull (1961) describes a girl's *elima* initiation ceremony among the Central African Mbuti pygmies that is held at the occasion of the girl's first menstruation. This ceremony involves the use of body paint. The young menstruating girls enter the seclusion *elima* house with all their girlfriends. At the end of their seclusion they decorate each other's bodies with white elaborate patterns (Turnbull, 1961).

Power (2001) investigated cosmetics use in initiation ritual contexts from a range of African ethnographic sources. Here, I focus on the *collective* aspects of some of these rituals that involved the presence of groups of women performing the application of cosmetics and bodily decorations.

Victor Turner (1981) portrays the girls' puberty ritual Nkang'a amongst the Ndembu performed before the first onset of menstruation (Turner, 1981: 199). During seclusion the girl is cicatrized and black ash mixed with castor oil is rubbed into the cuts to make them black (Turner, 1981: 248). They are supposed to make the girl look attractive (Turner, 1981: 249). Edith Turner's (1987) account of the Nkang'a captures interesting details of the collective context of this ritual. She mentions a collective of women cicatrizing the girl. She further comments on the "strong camaraderie that developed among the women who decorated the girl" (Turner, 1987: 75). Women also donated they white coloured bead necklaces for decorating the girl's hair, neck and shoulders. The girl's body and cicatrices were then covered by a mixture of oil and red earth while the group of women sang 'oil must be rubbed in'. Women told Victor Turner that the red earthen head decoration is supposed to make the girl look attractive for men (Turner, 1967: 254-255; Turner, 1969: 253). Yet Edith Turner (1987) stressed the collective character of the beautification ceremony that took place just amongst the women (Turner, 1987: 76).

Richards (1956) depicts the female initiation ritual *chisungu* among the Bemba. In Richards' account the collective character of the application of cosmetics is very clear. She describes a ceremony that took place on the fourteenth day called the whitening magic. This was a purification ritual associated with the end of menstruation yet as Richards points out it was also a beautification ritual. It was attended by the women from the village who washed, cleansed and painted the girls with white clay (Richards, 1956: 89). The girls were then surrounded by the women who sang and danced the girls back to the village. Women then gathered in the initiation hut where all the girls' relatives were touched with white clay (Richards, 1956). As Richards points out

during the whitening ceremony women expressed their affection towards the girls in the way they talked about them: “We make the girls white. We make them beautiful. We make them white like egrets.” (Richards, 1956: 90). In Richard’s words the return of the women to the village was uproarious: they were running and shouting all the way. The older women were covered in red dye mixed with castor oil and when the sun melted it, it gave them “an uncouth and eerie appearance” (Richards, 1956: 96).

In Blacking’s (1969) account of the *vhusha* initiation ceremony among the Venda the collective character of the application of the body paint is also clear. The prevailing cosmetics used at all *vhusha* initiation stages were red ochre (Power, 2001) and it was applied by a collective of older women on several occasions throughout the initiation. During the second stage of the initiation, the girl was covered with a mixture of pig fat and red ochre (Blacking, 1969: 6). Blacking notes, although he has not seen it himself, that some of his research participants reported that the girls were painted with ashes to look like a zebra (Blacking, 1969: 12). Blacking also mentions a song that accompanied this application of body decorations that was sung by a collective of women to whom he refers as the “old ladies”. The plural verb form in the song illustrates it well: “We are smearing ash, we are smearing on the zebra’s stripes” (Blacking, 1969: 12). In the seclusion hut a mixture of red ochre and the girl’s urine was applied on the girl’s breast by *mmane* (either the girl’s mother’s younger sister or her mother’s co-wife) (Blacking, 1969: 13). At the end of seclusion the girl was washed by the older women and painted with a mixture of fat and red ochre; she was also given a string of beads to put around her neck (Blacking, 1969: 18).

Among the Muslim Hausa Smith (1954) describes an institution of bond friendship *kawaye* among women. It was initiated by girls exchanging oil and henna. Here, following Power (1999) henna cosmetics are used to establish and mark out the bonds between girlfriends. Part of this ritually forged friendship is a collective application of cosmetics that took place on several occasions. During the Great Festival one of the girlfriends bought perfume, oil, and henna and brought it to the other girl to put it on her hair (Smith, 1954: 56). Henna was also manipulated and used by collectives of women in the marriage rituals. Before the girl's first marriage her female relatives caught her and painted her skin with henna (Smith, 1954: 88). Henna was also used by the bride's bond girlfriends to decorate her arms and legs (Smith, 1954: 89). Later the bond girlfriends washed the bride and brought her to the compound of one of her mother's younger sisters. In front of the hut her girlfriends again prepared henna and her mother's younger sister painted her arms and legs for four consecutive days (Smith, 1954: 90).

Faris (1972) gives an account of the scarification amongst the Southeastern Nuba. He notes that ritual use of decorations is amongst the Nuba insignificant and that the motive of personal art is mainly aesthetic (Faris, 1972: 6). Yet he continues that the decorations follow precise social rules and they commonly serve as status indicators. They mark age, patriclan membership, physiological condition as well as ritual status (Faris, 1972). Faris stresses the individual display capacity of the bodily ornamentations amongst the Nuba men and women. Here, I will focus on Nuba women. Amongst the Nuba, girls underwent scarification at the first signs of puberty. They received a second set of scars after the start of menstruation (Faris, 1972: 33) and women received their final set after the weaning of their first child (Faris, 1972:

34). This final set of scars was very extensive and took up to two full days. It was expensive and the costs were usually paid by the woman's husband (Faris, 1972: 34). Power (2001) points out that through the husband's payment the Nuba woman tested her husband's commitment and material support. She also demonstrated her own quality by wearing scarification (Power, 2001). If the husband refused to pay, it was interpreted as rejection of his wife and she could then run away with another man (Faris, 1972: 36).

Yet apart from the display of individual quality through the ability to bear scars that are costly in terms of time, energy, loss of blood and endured pain shown by Power (2001), there is also the remarkably prescribed character of scarification patterns all the girls and women receive that accounts for unifying results. This suggests that the purely individual aesthetic display capacity of these bodily decorations amongst the Nuba women is not the only explanation of such extensive and costly operations. Thus Power (2001) proposes that these collectivizing aspects of scarification are a means of demonstrating woman's membership in a female network involved in her scarification (Power, 2001: 257).

Drewal (1988) describes the highly regarded pigmented scarification known as *kolo* among the Yoruba women. The women received the elaborate and darkened scars before puberty. They were seen by the community as proof of the woman's bravery and strength (Drewal, 1988). According to Drewal it was thus important that she acquired such marks when she reached a marriageable age to show that she had the necessary strength to undergo the pains of childbirth (Drewal, 1988: 83). Drewal suggests that the cicatrices were done for aesthetic reasons, to show off the individual



beautified body (Drewal, 1988: 84). Drewal suggest that the individualistic display of the Yoruba women's cicatrization is the main reason why the women have it done (Drewal, 1988). Yet, similarly to the Nuba women, the Yoruba cicatrices seem to also play a role within a wider female community. Their collective and collectivizing aspects transpire in the behaviour of the fellow women. As Drewal shows if a young girl did not have the scarification done, she was insulted by other women. When she was pregnant, she would be insulted again (Drewal, 1988: 90). The importance of the cicatrization is reflected in the insults by other women that were directed at those women who failed to produce them. Thus, following Power (2001), like in the case of the Nuba women, the elaborate cicatrization apart from their aesthetic and display aspects also demonstrate the woman's belonging to a network of fellow women.

Berns (1988) describes elaborated scarification of women *hleeta* among the Ga'anda from north-eastern Nigeria. Scarification started when the girls were six years old. It had six stages and it took several years to complete it. Each stage was associated with bride-wealth payments and bride-service of the girl's suitor (Berns, 1988). The girl's family encouraged the continuation of these payments and work accumulating the resources provided by the girl's suitor for long periods of time (Berns, 1988: 62). Berns interprets the scarification, in line with the argument of rite of passage, as marks of social transition to adult status. She stresses the importance of such painful operations to the socializing process and to how this was further reinforced during the public festivities following the completion of scarification where the girls demonstrated their commitments to the community and received its acceptance (Berns, 1988: 63). In these festivities the mixture of red ochre and oil was used by the girls to show and highlight the scars. The red ochre also linked these bodily adornments to the

spiritual world. Each girl used different style of body decoration that “provided dramatic visual effects”. Scarification made young women eligible to marry and also provided spiritual protection for their productive and reproductive success (Berns, 1988: 65).

Power (2001) points out that the elaborate scars among the Ga’anda communicate to men as to what investment they should expect to provide in the form of bride-service to the initiate’s kin to secure their right to marry. She shows that the stages of the girl’s scarification correspond to the stages in arranging the marriage. The last phase was the most elaborated and after it was completed no other young man was allowed to approach the girl (Power, 2001; Berns, 1988: 62). As Power (2001) shows the ability to endure pain in obtaining scars refers to a high quality individual who can do so. Yet apart from this handicap display, a public demonstration that an individual can carry a self-imposed load, what is also being established by elaborate scarification is a “cooperative alliance of women” (Power, 2001). As Berns notices herself “scarification is identical on all Ga’anda women, regardless of dialect subgroups” (Berns, 1988: 63). If its purpose was a demonstration of strength and beauty of individual women, surely a varied display of bodily ornamentation would be more suited for this. Berns interprets the importance of scarification as “a means of ethnic consolidation and identification” (Berns, 1988: 63) and she points out that the exogamy and patrilocality also support the consistency of scarification among the women (Berns, 1988: 64). As Power (2001) points out under the last two conditions young women have to get along and cooperate with non-kin. The alliances established amongst the Ga’anda women through collectivized costly bodily ornamentation offered a reliable framework where such cooperation was possible (Power, 2001). As

Berns puts it, “the gradual process of acquiring the scarification binds the families to continuing social interactions that link dispersed communities” (Berns, 1988: 63). It is the women who through the costly yet collectivized bodily displays secure the durability of such bonds.

Among the Ga’anda, Nuba and Yoruba the scarified women were referred to as beautiful. Miller (2001) suggests that our preferences in beauty have evolved to favour costly adornments that reflect the quality of individuals who wear them. The high cost of such ornaments assures that only high-quality individuals can produce them. According to Miller, beauty and ornamentation thus correspond to difficulty and high costs (Miller, 2001: 281). However, what is being perceived here as attractive are not just women who can bear pain and display their strength via painful bodily ornaments. There is also the importance of “ethnic identification and linking of dispersed communities” (Berns, 1988: 63) through scarified women where, as Power (2001) suggests, female bonds displayed through bodily ornaments are an important part of social life that requires cooperation and reliability. As Power points out through her ornamented pattern the young woman gives a clear indication that she belongs to a wider female collective whom she can call upon for support. It seems that it is the combination of these two aspects, personal beauty with the female collective support that makes the wearer of elaborate and costly ornaments attractive in the eyes of the opposite sex. As Power (2001) shows the costly bodily ornaments were used amongst women to bond in the absence of real kinship and to guarantee cooperation amongst them. As she further demonstrates, these bodily ornaments guaranteed trustworthy and reciprocal social relations through their costs in terms of time, payments for them and pain women had to go through that operated as proofs of

women's reliability as cooperative partners (Power, 2001). Power also shows that such widespread cooperative networks were important for women in maintaining social influence in the societies that were predominantly patrilocal and patrilineal.

The extent and purpose of such cooperative female networks forged through costly bodily ornamentation can be noticed in Gengenbach's (2003) account on the tattooing practices among women under the colonial rule in Mozambique. She shows that tattoos provided networks of reciprocal alliances amongst the tattooed women in a milieu of patrilineal kinship. Gengenbach argues that women used the tattoos to bond together and that this bonding was not rooted within ethnic or kin ties but rather in the collective feminine culture that was accessible through the tattooed bodies. These "blood ties" (Gengenbach, 2003: 108) formed through tattooing were highly valued amongst the women and were more inclusive than the kinship ties. Gengenbach points out that the tattoos were targeted mainly at a female audience and displaying them to attract men was seen as a side effect. According to Gengenbach the tattoos were not ethnic-specific yet they did collectivise women. The tattoos were acquired by small groups of young girls who would go through the beautification procedure together. Tattoos were done in secrecy by a skilled artist who was never compensated for her work with money because tattoos were not seen as an economic transaction. The girls were often motivated to have tattoos done by their girlfriend who already had them. The girls would check each other's tattoos and mock those without them. In her account Gengenbach stresses the high mobility of the researched women manifest in their free movement across the country for the purposes of visits, trade or need. Tattoos operated as means to create new networks of "female fellowship in a shared geographical space" (Gengenbach, 2003: 113). Through the tattoos women also

created affective bonds with other local women after they moved to their new home following marriage (Gengenbach, 2003: 114). Apart from being seen as proofs of bravery and prestige judged within a collective of female peers tattoos also forged new bonds of kinship amongst the unrelated women that Gengenbach calls “blood sisterhood” (Gengenbach, 2003: 115). She points out that through shared tattoos women connected across the ethnic, religious as well as age and class boundaries and transformed “their peer competition into bonds of an intra-generational female community” (Gengenbach, 2003: 116).

### **Perspectives on beautification in social theory**

Beauty and beautification practices have been intensively theorized by many social and feminist theorists especially in their analyses of cultural representations of beauty and beautification in the media, particularly in film and advertisement. Their main argument is that beauty is arbitrary and socially constructed (Reischer, Koo, 2004). The pursuit of beauty is seen by these authors as a means of women’s oppression (Jeffreys, 2005). This view emphasizes the idea that cosmetics enhance individual physical features of female bodies. They should create sexually attractive women who as sex objects of male desires are individually able to show off their best qualities and conceal the undesired ones through their use of make-up. Women are seen by these scholars as using beautification individualistically and in isolation. Through comparing each other to the beauty ideal as well as to the other women, women are theorized as aiming to show off individually and thus compete through beauty with other women (Bartky, 1990; Greer, 1970; Weitz, 2001; Wolf, 1990). They are also

seen as using the beauty strategies for their own advantage when competing for men and jobs (Wolf, 1990).

This is a contrasting view to the collective aspects of cosmetics use discussed in the ethnographic examples in the previous section where cosmetics were employed to establish and mark the extent of cooperating female collectives (Power, 1999). On the other hand, however, a body of recent research that focuses on lived experience and everyday practice of concrete women points in the direction that this individualistic and competitive character of beautification practices amongst the women is more complicated. Based on qualitative research methods as opposed to analyses of representations of body and beauty some of these studies suggest that women can achieve empowerment and agency that are connected to the uses of beauty and beautification practices. Contrary to the first view, active and pleasurable aspects of beautification are revealed (Beausoleil, 1994). In some of these studies (Dellinger, Williamms, 1997; Masi de Casanova, 2004) the collectivizing nature of attractiveness enhancement emerges that is based on shared beautification experiences.

Jeffreys suggests that many social theorists understand the dominant Western cultural practices as constructing women “as both potentially beautiful and interested in beauty” (Jeffreys, 2005: 21). As Reischer and Koo (2004) point out, through beauty and beautification women become desirable. On the one hand, women are seen as spending large amounts of time, money and emotional energy to beautify themselves (Jeffreys, 2005: 121). Jeffreys (2005) suggests that it is the existing patriarchal power structures that make women think about their appearance and change it according to the dominant beauty ideal. She further argues that this interest in beauty and

beautification to achieve the beauty ideal is seen as part of the social construction that differentiates men from women. On the other hand she points out, that women are theorized as independent social agents engaging in beauty practices as consumers for whom the pursuit of beauty is pleasurable and fun (Jeffreys, 2005: 14). Here the beauty is not just “a simple articulation of the dominant cultural values but also a negotiation of them” (Reischer, Koo, 2004: 299).

Kwan and Trautner (2009) suggest that the importance of beauty for women is to be understood as a consequence of the emphasis that Western culture places on the female body. In their understanding the mass media transmit idealized images of perfect women’s bodies with the consequence of objectifying, sexualizing and commodifying them. According to these two authors these images further reinforce ideals of femininity that are organized around male interests and desires.

Similarly Bordo (1993) argues that women learn how to be feminine through bodily discourse, that is to say, through images transmitted through the mass media that strongly influence women’s understandings of beauty and desirable behaviour. In her view women constantly monitor and normalize their bodies through discipline and self-regulation that lead to pursuing of beauty as a central feature of their lives (Bordo, 1993). She suggests that women learn to see the inadequacy in their bodies through the “tyranny of fashion” that she sees as a disciplinary tool for normalizing of all women to the requirements of a standardised femininity and a preoccupation with their appearance (Bordo, 1993: 254). For Butler (1993) gender is, too, forcibly produced through heterosexual normative practices that are imposed on individuals through the power of institutions. This production of gender is a repetitive,

performative process. Whereas Butler sees the forcible heterosexual normative practices as oppressive to both sexes, many feminist critics of beauty see them as particularly oppressive to women (Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005).

Some social theorists see the basis for such cultural oppression and domination of women in their objectification (Bartky, 1990; Mulvey, 1989). Jeffreys (2005) suggests that women's bodies and their parts are perceived as separated from their personalities. Female bodies are further seen as representing women. Consequently, women are seen as learning to understand and treat their own bodies as objects separate from themselves (Jeffreys, 2005). They see themselves as men see them (Bartky, 1990) and as erotic objects of the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1989: 19). Others argue that beauty is used as a political weapon against women's political and economic freedom (Wolf, 1990). In Wolf's view women constantly compare their appearance to the physical ideal circulated in the media and spent significant effort to improve it. This constant preoccupation with their looks keeps women in their subordinate position (Wolf, 1990).

In contrast to the above cited theorists who understand the beautification of the body "as a mechanism of social power and control" (Reischer, Koo, 2004: 299) other social theorists (Beausoleil, 1994; Davis, 1995, Smith, 1990) see women as informed consumers who make their own choices (Jeffreys, 2005). In this view beauty is an "embodied concept that not just articulates dominant cultural values but also negotiates them" (Reischer, Koo, 2004: 299). As Jeffreys (2005) points out the focus of these social theorists has shifted from examining how beauty practices oppress women to how women can enjoy and use such practices to their advantage within the



existing power relations. Jeffreys notes that in the writing of these authors the idea of oppression was replaced by the notions of pleasure and enjoyment. Women are seen as exercising agency, choice and resistance in beautifying according to their own interests (Beausoleil, 1994, Davis, 1995; Jeffreys, 2005; Peiss, 1998).

Weitz (2001) sees the uses of hair as one of the ways women can follow or resist certain beautification practices as active agents. Women can follow or resist the beauty ideal or combine both strategies to gain power and advantage. In Weitz' view women make these choices according to their own judgement of how to best achieve their goals (Weitz, 2001: 673). The different strategies women adopt through their hair management can, according to Weitz, increase their power in some areas but they often decrease it in others. In Weitz' understanding, whatever strategy women adopt to negotiate their lives through the uses of beauty it will only improve the position of individual women. The position of women as a group will not change because these strategies in Weitz' view do not challenge existing ideologies that support women's subordination. In her view such practice therefore reflects and fosters competition between women for men's attention. This competition is reflected in the behaviour that led women to "handicap feminine looking women professionally and professionally looking women socially" (Weitz, 2001: 683). Such competitive behaviour precludes women from forming alliances amongst themselves (Weitz, 2001: 675).

Whereas Weitz suggests that beautification practices foster competition amongst women and do not challenge the existing power relations Grosz (1994) argues that beautification can operate as a resistance practice. In her view female bodies are

marked by beautification that gives them meaning. Accordingly, female bodies can be read as texts or symbolic systems. Yet, Grosz points out that these beautification inscriptions do not make women passive or compliant. On the contrary, in certain contexts beautification practices can subvert the existing patriarchal codes (Grosz, 1994).

Gimlin (1996) shows that women through beautification and hair stress social differences amongst themselves rather than follow a beauty ideal. Contrary to the understanding of some theorists (Bordo, 1993; Mulvey, 1989) that women blindly follow the beauty ideal dictated by the media Gimlin shows that it is the women's social position and their distinctions in taste that influence their hair styling decisions. Gimlin points out that women compare themselves to other women and distance themselves from hair styles that in their view do not correspond to their social position (Gimlin, 1996: 518). Yet there were several occasions when women deliberately compromised the femininity and attractiveness of their hairstyles as a consequence of their life circumstances or for the sake of a professional appearance. Gimlin understands these compromises as resistance practices to beauty ideologies (Gimlin, 1996: 521-522).

Walters (1995) points out a shift in research focus and methods among social theorists that contrast with the highly theorized writings about beauty and media representations. These theorists moved to analyses of everyday lived experiences of particular women using sociological and anthropological research methods (Walters, 1995: 99). Interestingly, some of these studies suggest that the beauty experiences and practices are for women less isolating and individuating as previously argued when

basing the analyses on the representations of beauty alone. In some of these writings the collectivizing aspects of beautification practices that are shared amongst women emerge.

Dellinger and Williams (1997) point out that women link their value as competent employees to wearing makeup. Female co-workers continuously monitored and positively evaluated each other's appearance and commented on it. This made women feel more confident and productive despite the fact that they were trying to accommodate to the "cultural ideal of made-up, healthy, energetic and successful working women" (Dellinger, Williams, 1997: 159). Women were balancing this cultural heterosexual beauty ideal incorporated into the workplace norms about beautification and feminine looks with the enjoyable and pleasurable aspects of wearing makeup that emerged amongst women in conversations through which they bonded together. This female culture was also expressed through friendly advice that female co-workers gave each other about their appearance and makeup use. This collectivising side of makeup use was expressed through women's affectionate compliments and advice about their appearance (Dellinger, Williams, 1997: 169).

An interesting insight into how beautification might operate amongst women in collective contexts offer case studies conducted by Goldman (1992) and Parker et al. (1995). On the one hand, Goldman (1992) and Parker et al. (1995) found dissatisfaction with body image among the white American adolescent girls resulting in their constant comparison to other girls. These girls followed the beauty standards that they failed to meet. They were frustrated by the attractive appearance of other girls and expressed enmity towards them (Goldman, 1992; Parker, Nichter, Vuckovic,

Sims, Ritenbaugh, 1995). On the other hand, the study showed higher flexibility of the African American girls in their concepts of beauty than found amongst the white American girls. Many African American girls expressed their understanding of feminine beauty as being “well kept and well groomed” and they did not strictly follow the beauty ideal (Parker et al., 1995: 108). They also stressed personality and humour as attributes of beauty (Parker et al., 1995). A collectivizing aspect transpires in the study results amongst the African American girls in the positive feedback and support for “looking good from their peers and community” (Collins, 1989; Parker et al., 1995: 109).

Similarly, a case study conducted among Latin American young women by Masi de Casanova showed that contrary to their white peers, the Latin American young women complimented and supported their girlfriends in the interactions with appearance at their centre. Harsher judgment was reserved for outsider girls who did not belong to the respective peer group (Masi de Casanova, 2004: 304). The last two studies on African American and Latin American young girls suggest that when young girls become part of the female collective where they share the beautification experience, they have a tendency towards supporting each other and leave the competitive relationships centred on beauty to take place rather amongst other girls that are seen as outsiders and do not belong to their respective collective.

### **Beauty and Beautification from Darwinian perspective**

Beauty and beautification have been of interest for evolutionary theorists who have been trying to understand and explain them through Darwinian paradigm. In

comparison with their colleagues from social theory many Darwinian scholars, suggest that although some beauty standards may vary across cultures (Jones, 1996) there are some bodily features that they propose are universally seen as attractive and therefore cannot be understood as an outcome of social construction (Buss, 1989). Despite the distinction that contrasts social and evolutionary theorist in understanding the origins of beauty and beautification many from both theoretical orientations share the same assumption that the women use their beauty to compete with each other. Yet, similarly to the interpretations coming from social theory, many accounts of evolutionary psychologists in particular, are theorized and do not address the lived everyday practice and experience of women and their uses of attractiveness and beautification.

From the perspective of evolutionary theory bodily ornaments are understood as “complex and costly traits” without any apparent survival function employed for display to the opposite sex (Miller, 2001: 35). Humans put a lot of time, energy and resources to use pigments, tattoos and scars for decorations of their bodies; they cut and style their hair and wear clothes and jewellery (Miller, 2001: 271). Power (1999) points out that the costliness and elaborations of bodily ornaments are the reason why they should be explained through sexual selection theory.

In this section I first look at the parental investment and how women are theorized to respond to it through using their attractiveness in securing it. Then I consider men’s preferences in attractiveness and how women are theorized to react to them through using their attractiveness and beautification. I further examine the assumption about competition amongst the women through beauty. The premises of evolutionary theory

are relevant to understand the importance of attractiveness for both, men and women in securing reproductive success on the one hand and parental investment on the other. Finally, I discuss an alternative Darwinian model (Power, 1999) that suggests a different understanding of competition and cooperation amongst women through attractiveness and beautification. Without underrating the competitive dynamics amongst women this model posits that once unified around the issues of attractiveness and its enhancement women tend to cooperate rather than compete through beauty. This model is relevant for identifying and explaining the behaviour observed in the studied cultural setting of direct sales cosmetics. While respecting the ethnographic detail I frame the analysis of the data through out the thesis by this Darwinian approach.

### **Beauty and sexual selection**

Miller (2001) comments on Darwin's fascination with the variety of ornaments he noticed in animal species on his journey around the world. Yet these beautiful ornaments seemed to rather interfere with the survival of their wearers than help it (Miller, 2001: 35). They evolved through sexual selection to display to prospective mates (Miller, 2001). As Buss and Barnes (1986) point out males usually display more than females yet females tend to be more discriminating and selective in their mating choices (Buss, Barnes, 1986: 559). This female choosiness Darwin termed "female choice" (Buss, Barnes, 1986).

The sexually selected bodily ornaments are characterized by extravagance (Miller, 2001). They are costly to produce and as such they reliably communicate information

about the quality of their wearers – only high quality individuals could afford the costly ornamentation (Miller, 2001; Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997).

As Power (2001) points out extravagant ornaments will be usually found in males who compete for access to more investing females (Power, 2001: 258) because they allow females to select the best mating partner they can (Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997). However, as Miller notes, in many species, as well as in humans, males exercise mate choice too (Miller, 2001: 185) thus both men and women would be selective about their sexual partners (Power, 2001).

Many sexual selection theorists suggest that when compared to men women invest more in children and provide more parental care (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Hewlett, 1992; Puts, 2010). However, men also provide substantial investment in children (Puts, 2010) such as food, learning, protection, shelter and social status (Buss, 1988: 617; Trivers, 1972: 142). Thus according to Buss (1988) women would choose them for their ability and willingness to do so both of which represent crucial components of women's selection criteria for their sexual partners (Buss, 1988: 617). Yet in contrast to women, notes Buss, the main reproductive constraint for men is to secure a relationship with reproductively viable women (Buss, 1988). According to Buss men would therefore value in women such characteristics that provide reliable cues to their reproductive value such as health and fertility (Buss, 1988: 617; Buss, Schmitt, 1993: 226; Low, 2001: 65).

Yet there is a complication. Buss (1994) points out that, on the one hand, men cannot observe health and fertility directly (Buss, 1994). On the other hand, Jones (1996)

notes that past reproduction does not give reliable information about present ability to have children. Sexual selection theorists therefore suggest that mental adaptations were selected to distinguish bodily traits that are correlated with health and fertility. They argue that these proximate bodily cues are then interpreted as attractive (Singh, Singh, 2011).

Li et al. (2002) show that although there are many attributes women can have to influence reproduction and rearing of their children, for example kindness, sociability or creativity, they note that their fertility is the crucial variable seen by men as necessity in their mate preferences. Therefore, the authors suggest, men would look in their future sexual partners for physical cues related to fertility and interpret them as attractive (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, Linsenmeier, 2002: 948).

Buss (1994) suggests that one of the cues men would look for is youth. In his view this is a “critical cue” because women’s reproductive potential declines with age more sharply than men’s. Buss argues that men’s preferences for this cue are reflected in their desire for long-term partners who are younger than themselves (Buss, 1994: 51) and he suggests that this is true for Western as well as for non-western cultures (Buss, 1989; Buss, 1994). Ridley (1993) points out the difficulty for a man to tell a woman’s age directly and that it therefore needs to be inferred. Ridley further suggests that there are two types of observable cues to infer woman’s youth: her behaviour and her physical appearance. Humans thus evolved a preference for women who displayed these cues (Ridley, 1993). Buss (1994) argues that characteristics seen as universally attractive are “youthful gait and high energy levels as well as clear and smooth skin, full lips, clear eyes, slim waist, lustrous hair and good muscle tone” (Buss, 1994: 53).



They represent honest signals of a woman's reproductive potential (Ridley, 1993: 285).

Buss (1994) shows that men's greater preference for physically attractive partners is consistently documented and found across many cultures. He suggests that this preference is underpinned by a species-specific mental mechanism found cross-culturally (Buss, 1994: 58). Buss further argues that many cues about women's reproductive potential are shown in their physical appearance and consequently men's evolved standards of beauty correspond to these cues. Buss' argument that physical appearance and attractiveness are the most important elements in men's preferences for long-term partners (Buss, 1994: 57) seems to be confirmed by the study on necessities and luxuries of preferences in women's and men's sexual partners (Li et al., 2002). Li and colleagues (2002) show that in their long-term partners women saw social status and resources as necessities contrary to men who viewed physical attractiveness as a necessity (Li et al., 2002: 948). Buss (1994) suggests that these preferences are an outcome of evolved mental mechanism to adaptive problems resulting from the centrality of marriage in human societies. Buss suggests that the men's evolved preferences for long-term partners are designed to evaluate women's future reproductive potential and that physical appearance provides reliable cues for judging it accurately (Buss, 1994: 70).

Buss (1994) points out yet another dimension of viewing female attractiveness by men. He suggests that it is not just the ability to have children that men can infer from women's attractive appearance. Women's attractive looks also reflect the men's status (Buss, 1994: 60). As Buss notes men's higher status and reputation can result in

obtaining more resources and these resources in turn make men attractive to women who look for cues of how much their future partner could invest in their children (Buss, 1994). Buss again suggests that because a man's status and resources cannot be observed directly, they must be inferred from other cues such as ornaments and an attractive woman. Thus an attractive woman shows a man's higher status to other men with whom he competes and to his other potential sexual partners (Buss, 1994: 59).

### **Women, Beauty and Competition**

Some social and feminist theorists conceptualize women as rivals who compete with each other through beauty. Many evolutionary scholars have suggested a similar argument of women's competition through attractiveness. Both sides stress the individualistic showing off of attractiveness and its enhancement.

Hrdy (1981) points out the centrality of female-female competition in primate social organization, taking place in many primate species. Yet as among primates competition among women is theorized as more often indirect because of their heavy investment in their children (Campbell, 1999; Hrdy, 1981: 97, Ingo et al., 2007). Evolutionary theorists view both female primates as well as women competing with each other for resources that can be used to raise their offspring and thus to increase their reproductive success (Campbell, 1999: 207, Ingo et al., 2007). Campbell (1999) notes, that men can represent one such resource where women rely upon them for investment and support (Campbell, 1999: 207). Campbell further points out that men's investment is then seen as a force that drives the competition among women to secure the best investing men possible (Campbell, 2004). For example in his study on

human life histories Kaplan et al. (2000) show that male investment into their wives and children can come in the form of protection and provision through hunting. Yet, men differ in their abilities to protect and provision and this variance in turn influences women's competition for access to benefits provided by men (Cant, 1981; Geary, Flinn, 2001; Symons, 1979).

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that because of the value men cross culturally place on female physical attractiveness, women would use their appearance to compete with each other for men's investment (Buss, 1989; Douglas, Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, Trost, 1990). The importance of men's investment can be seen, for example, among the Ache of Paraguay (Jones, 1996). As Jones (1996) points out up to puberty the Ache girls have higher death rates than boys. Then their death rates drop below those of boys (Jones, 1996: 107). Jones suggests that this change occurs partly because of the men's investment in the form of food and protection women start attracting (Jones, 1996).

In the previous section of this chapter I explained the position of evolutionary theorists according to which women's attraction tactics depend on men's preferences. As suggested by many evolutionary theorists men place a premium on female appearance and the competition among women to attract men should therefore centre on improving and showcasing their physical attractiveness (Buss, 1994, Jones, 1990, Li et al., 2002). Low (1979) in her seminal essay on human ornamentation suggests that sexual signals in humans are expanded or altered by cultural means (Low, 1979: 464) such as clothing, makeup and other forms of bodily adornments (Etcoff, Stock, Haley, Vickery, House, 2011). Etcoff and colleagues (2011) suggest that through the

manipulation of the bodily ornaments women can stress, exaggerate or conceal their appearance features resulting in gaining advantages. For example Low (1979) hypothesized that women use cosmetics to signal sexual availability, receptivity and fitness (Low, 1979: 465). Buss (1994) and others (Buss, Shackelford, 1997; Haselton, Buss, Oubaid, Angleitner, 2005; Low, 1979) suggest that women through the use of cosmetics conceal or amplify certain bodily features. Low (1979) put forward the argument that women would use their attractiveness individualistically competing with each other through “extreme displays” (Low, 1979: 467). By such displaying of beauty to the potential male sexual partners, women would enjoy a greater selectivity and attention in mate selection (Ingo et al., 2007).

Evolutionary theorist further suggest that apart from competing with other women through beauty and beautification women would compete with each other through insulting and denigrating the attractiveness of other women (Buss, 1994; Cashdan, 1996; Fisher, Cox, 2009; Schmitt, Buss, 1996). Women would derogate the rival women’s appearance to men and to the rivals themselves to prevent the rival women from being targeted by the investor men (Buss, 1994: 112; Buss, Dedden, 1990: 416).

### **Alternative Darwinian model of female cosmetic coalitions**

Many evolutionary theorists propose that women would use their attractiveness and beautification individualistically and in competition with other women for men who would invest in their children. Yet such exclusive use of beauty, where individualistic competition through extreme displays enhanced by cosmetics is the only way attractiveness and beautification are employed in relationships amongst women, is

challenged by the ethnographic data as well as by some of the case studies from social theory discussed at the beginning of the chapter. This research suggests that there are beautification practices that are not necessarily or exclusively intended for the male audience. On the contrary, they are often targeted at women only and they often take place in seclusion. They are also subject to women's secrets that are used to create and confirm bonds amongst those women who are sharing them.

In the ethnographic examples discussed above cosmetics were used by collectives of women in ritual contexts. As Power (1999) points out, the initiation rituals high in costs were very important in getting a husband and the girls, who failed to undergo them were viewed as unmarriageable. Yet initiates, as Power shows, were to refrain from sexual activity for lengthy periods of time. Power also shows that much of the cosmetic display occurred in secrecy and could not be directly seen neither by men, nor by the women who were the possible competitors (Power, 1999: 94).

Rucas and colleagues (2006) show that the importance of cooperation rather than competition amongst women is especially apparent in kinship-based societies, where women need to balance childcare and food provisioning. In their study amongst the Tsimane women of Bolivia the authors point out that the cooperation amongst these women is an important part of their life history and feeding niche. Yet the authors demonstrate that significant competition takes place among women for gains ensuing from social relationships (Rucas et al. 2006). These authors suggest that what Tsimane women compete for amongst each other are "good co-operators and larger social networks" (Rucas et al., 2006: 43). Apart from social relationships the Tsimane women compete with each other for men and food but, as the authors stress, it is the

social relationships that are the most important sources of conflicts amongst the studied women (Rucas et al., 2006). Importantly, the study shows that amongst the Tsimane, women who have an extensive support network are considered to be particularly attractive. The extent and quality of women's supporting social networks, such as kin as well as non-kin coalitions, was rated among the Tsimane men besides youth the most important cue to attractiveness in women (Rucas et al., 2006). These social attributes together with personal characteristics "account for half of the variation in attractiveness as physical features and age" (Rucas et al., 2006: 48).

What the example of Tsimane women suggests is that the reproductive success of women depends particularly on the number of helpers and the size of social network women can turn to for support with childcare. As Hrdy (2009b) points out cooperative childcare increases the survival of children and therefore the reproductive success of all the women in such an alliance.

Drawing on evolutionary ecology and sexual selection theory as well as on African ethnographies Power (1999, 2009) suggests a mechanism through which such cooperative coalitions could emerge. In her Darwinian model Power (1999) proposes that it is the cosmetics used by women collectively in costly ritual performance that provide mechanisms for establishing and marking reciprocal cooperative relations and obligations amongst the women who take part in such rituals. Power places the emergence of the collective ritual use of cosmetics within female cosmetic coalitions in the ancestral environment of 300 000 – 200 000 years ago when evolving modern females were facing severe reproductive stress due to raising offspring with increasingly larger brains (Power, 1999). Power suggests that to gain more male

investment and provisioning for their offspring females adopted a cooperative coalitional strategy in which they cosmetically manipulated and ritually advertised the menstrual signal. As Power points out this signal carried economic value in the form of male investment and it attracted males because it signalled imminent fertility of the signalling females. Within coalitions females had to first pay the costs of entry of resisting the discriminating investor males interested in cycling females before gaining benefits of male investment into the coalition when pregnant or lactating (Power, 1999).

Power (1999, 2009) suggests that such rituals would take place at the occasion of a girl's first menstruation and would be organized by the girl's female and male kin. These rituals would advertise a young girl of "maximum reproductive value and demonstrate the extent of her female's kin support network in a costly and therefore reliable way" (Power, 2009: 270). An important element of these rituals would be collective use of cosmetics by the participating women. Power shows that through these costly ritual displays the extent of the girl's coalition supporting the raising of large-brained offspring was demonstrated to the discriminating investor males. As Power further points out by resisting the non-investor males the girl would also demonstrate her "moral" quality (Power, 2009: 272). Consequently, suggests Power, the investor males began to sexually select females wearing cosmetics. Power predicts cooperation within coalitions and competitive dynamic between them for male investment. She further suggests an "evolutionary arms race" of continuously more elaborate use of cosmetics motivated by this competition resulting in ritual performance and amplification of cosmetic displays (Power, 1999: 99). These

displays would include mineral pigments used as body paint to amplify and advertise the cosmetically manipulated menstrual signal, song and dance (Power, 1999).

Power points out that the continuity of this strategy can be seen in many examples in African ethnographies discussed at the beginning of this chapter linked to predominantly red cosmetics used in the contexts of girls' initiation rituals to mark and confirm the extent of cooperating coalitions. It is demonstrated in the ritual template for the puberty rituals, and taboos and prohibitions that are related to menstruation known from many ethnographic accounts. Yet in contemporary capitalist conditions too, women still need to establish and maintain coalitions amongst themselves as they frequently face the urban isolation of big cities, high mobility that drives them away from their kin, and the need to provision their children. Similarly to the examples of Nuba, Yoruba, Ga'anda and Magude district women, many women in contemporary western cities cooperate with other women who are non-kin. One way to do it is to build cooperative coalitions through the collective use of cosmetics in costly rituals. In the thesis I use the mechanism of coalition building through collective manipulation of cosmetics in ritual performance suggested by Power (1999) to interpret the observed behaviour amongst the cosmetic purchasers.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed the ethnographic examples of collective use of cosmetics amongst the groups of women in the context of initiation rituals. I also discussed the approaches to beauty and use of cosmetics within social and evolutionary theory that stress the individualistic and competitive aspects of beautification amongst women.



Finally, I pointed out an alternative Darwinian approach that centres on collective and cooperative rather than individualistic and competitive use of cosmetics amongst women within bonded female collectives.

In the examples drawn from African ethnographies, the use of cosmetics, often red pigments, formed an important and constitutive part of the initiation and nuptial rituals. Female participants involved in applying body paint and/or other adornments often referred to each other with special terms and were expected to have a special relationship based on solidarity that should last for life. Thus a strong camaraderie developed amongst the Ndembu women who decorated the initiated girl and the exchange of oil and henna cosmetics initiated and confirmed bond friendship amongst the Hausa girls. The collective ritual application of cosmetics and other bodily adornments and its public display was expected by all the female participants to mark and affirm long term alliances amongst the involved women based on solidarity and cooperation (Power, 2001).

The collective character of the cosmetics application was another important feature of cosmetics use in ritual. Thus at the end of seclusion the Mbuti girls spent hours working on each other's decorations. During the Ndembu female initiation many women gave their bead necklaces to the instructress to put them into the girl's hair and around her neck and shoulders. The girl was then oiled and painted by the women present. The Bemba initiated girls were painted white in the presence of the women from the village. The women then surrounded the girls, danced them back to the village singing. In the marriage ritual of the Hausa the bride's bond girl friends decorate the bride's body with henna. The collective nature of body paint application

emerges also through the singing of respective ritual songs in which the plural verbal forms suggest the presence of several women who decorated the initiated girls. Thus Ndembu women sang together 'Oil must be rubbed in', the Venda women sang 'We are rubbing ash, we are painting zebra's stripes' and the Bemba women sang 'We are making the girls beautiful, white like egrets'.

As Power (2001) pointed out in the examples of the scarification in bride-service societies amongst the Nuba, Yoruba and Ga'anda the requirements of reciprocity and cooperation amongst the women direct the elaboration of female initiation rites. Power (2001) also showed that costly bodily ornaments were used to build connections amongst the women in the absence of real kinship and thus to ensure cooperation amongst the non-related women. High costs of entry into these networks guaranteed women's credibility as reliable cooperative partners. The framework for widespread reciprocity was clearly marked through scarification and tattoos (Power, 2001).

These ethnographic examples differ from the works of many social and evolutionary theorists, who stress the individualistic and competitive aspects of the cosmetics use. On the one hand, social theorists have pointed out gender inequalities and production and reproduction of power behind these inequalities (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003; Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005). They have addressed beauty and beautification practices as one of the most important means through which these inequalities are produced and maintained. These theorists provide a strong criticism of beauty ideology through the analysis of cultural representations in the media. However, their writings are strongly theorized and few provide empirical data on the everyday

practices involved in beautification. Yet the outcomes of some qualitative case studies suggest that women have more agency and they do not necessarily follow the beauty dictate consistently and rigidly as previously thought (Gimlin, 1996; Weitz, 2001). They also show that women do not necessarily compete amongst each other through beauty and that pursuit of beauty through beautification practices can encourage mutual appreciation and support amongst the women and young girls within the peer group (Masi de Casanova, 2004; Parker et al., 1995). Yet none of these authors identifies, describes or explains the mechanisms that encourage the emergence of such supportive relationships amongst women centred on beauty and beautification.

Social theorists argue that the beauty standards are arbitrary and culturally constructed and imposed on women through patriarchal relations that force women to compete with each other (Wolf, 1990). Darwinian theorists (Buss, 1994; Campbell, 2004; Low, 1979) claim that, although there are some beauty standards that may indeed be arbitrary, there are certain features such as youth, health and femininity, that are seen as attractive across cultures. Evolutionary theorists therefore suggest that these features cannot be neither culturally constructed nor enforced by patriarchal structures. In their view these beauty standards must be universal and humans have evolved the preferences for assessing them as attractive (Buss, 1989). In this understanding women would compete through their attractiveness for the needed men's investment into their children (Campbell, 2004). Discriminating investor men would look in their potential long term partners for the cues to their future reproductive potential such as youth and femininity (Ingo et al., 2007). Women would respond to these mating preferences by enhancing their beauty through cosmetics (Low, 1979). The enhanced attractiveness increases women's chances of being viewed as a better partners and

thus being selected by choosy men (Ingo et al., 2007). The alternative Darwinian model (Power, 1999) does consider female-female competition but in a more nuanced way: women do compete amongst each other but non-competitive internal relations can develop amongst the women through the collective use of cosmetics in coalitions. The social theorists who use qualitative research methods (Dellinger, Williams, 1997; Masi de Casanova, 2004; Parker et al., 1995) do point out some aspects of such cooperative coalitional use of cosmetics amongst the women, but in much less detail and explanatory power. They emphasize the enjoyable and empowering aspects of such collectivized beautification. Yet they fail to identify and explain the mechanisms that enable the emergence of cooperative relations amongst women with attractiveness and beautification at the centre.

On the other hand, the alternative Darwinian model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999, 2009) argues that it is the ability to create and maintain cooperative alliances amongst women that men would find attractive. These coalitions would emerge through collective and ritually costly use of cosmetics. Women would cooperate within such collectives and the competitive dynamics for men's investment would arise between these coalitions. The case study of the Bolivian Tsimane (Rucas et al., 2006) women supports this argument. The ability to build and maintain supportive social networks and alliances amongst the women were seen by the Tsimane men as particularly attractive. This social attribute, together with other personality characteristics, "accounted amongst the Tsimane women for half of the variation in attractiveness as age alone" (Rucas et al., 2006: 48). Importantly, the Tsimane women competed with each other through spreading negative information, but not about their looks as predicted by evolutionary psychologists (Buss, 1994, Buss,

Dedden, 1990), but about their ability to keep their children well kempt (Rucas et al, 2006: 50). As Rucas et al. (2006) point out having unkempt children had the largest negative impact on women's attractiveness amongst the Tsimane. The authors suggest that well kempt children "could indicate not only mothering skills or health but also the number of helpers and size of social networks all of which may influence woman's reproductive success" (Rucas et al., 2006: 48-49).

In this chapter I showed that, in contrast to the theoretical assumptions from the fields of social and evolutionary theory, women do not necessarily use their beauty and its enhancement individualistically and competitively. When they become part of a ritually bonded alliance they use cosmetics collectively to mark the extent of their bonded collective within which they cooperate. A costly ritual performance with collective manipulation of cosmetics guarantees the trustworthiness and reliability of the women participating in such rituals.

## **Chapter two**

### **Method and research environment**

In this chapter I discuss the methods and techniques I used to obtain the empirical data, the reasons for my choice of particular methods and I evaluate the limitations of my research procedures. I also describe the cultural setting of the studied direct sales cosmetic companies and I characterize the research sample.

#### **Selecting the sample**

The fieldwork took place in the urban environment of the Slovak capital Bratislava. I researched small collectives of women that emerged through collectivized shopping and using of direct sales cosmetics. An important point at the beginning of my research was to determine the boundaries of the population I intended to study. The small collectives I wanted to research were hidden and accessible only to the insiders. I decided to follow two strategies to facilitate access to possible research participants. On the one hand I sought out women in my personal network who were either the companies' representatives or cosmetic purchasers to talk to about their direct sales experience. On the other hand I followed the snowball sampling technique (Goodman, 1961). Heckathorn (1997) points out that this technique is well suited for researching social networks and hidden populations that are characterized either by unknown size or boundaries or both. This was the case of the yet undiscovered small collectives of women I wished to study.

To delineate the groups of women who would like to work with me for an extended period of time I asked the key research participants whom I started identifying in my personal network to recommend other possible research participants whom I then again asked to recommend others. This is how my snowball sample started to grow. Goodman (1961) suggests that the initial research participants should be chosen randomly. However, when I was conducting research my initial sample was determined by the accessibility and availability (in term of their time and spatial distances within the city) of the research participants. I did not ask for a fixed number of possible research participants, as suggested by Goodman (1961), but let the research participants decide if and how many other women they would or would not suggest to me. An important advantage of this technique was an easier way of building my credibility in the rapport with the research participants. And as I anticipated in the course of the research the trustworthiness amongst the studied women played a very important role. Out of all the suggested research participants only one was not happy to participate in the research and I respected that. Many of the women who did participate in it did so with vigour and pleasure.

The snowball sampling technique raises questions of representativeness and validity to make generalizations. As Bernard (2006) observes, this is true when asking questions about individual attributes when estimating population parameters such as the average age, income or preferences. In such types of research a random unbiased sample is necessary in order to make sure that every unit of analysis has an equal chance to be chosen for study. However, as Spradley (1980) notes, cultural data are shared and the unit of research are not individuals but units of meaning. Consequently, if a researcher wants to understand observed processes she needs to choose research

participants, “key informants” in Spradley’s words, who can offer expert explanations of cultural norms. Another reason, then, to follow participant-led choice of other research participants was precisely the fact that I needed to work with women who could offer such expert knowledge. Therefore despite the fact that my sample is not a representative one in the randomised social survey sense it does provide a good base for saturating the cultural meaning of the researched cultural scene by the means of the specialist knowledge of the key research participants.

### **Conducting fieldwork**

I started the research with a pilot study conducted during the summer of 2008 in Bratislava. It was an ethnographic study with the aim of gaining an initial understanding about what it is like to sell, buy and use the researched direct sales cosmetics and what it is like to share this experience amongst the women in small collectives. I also studied the way the researched direct sales cosmetics operated. An outcome of this study was a preliminary analysis of the researched cultural setting that was followed by the narrowing of the research focus.

In the pilot study I conducted ethnographic interviews with ten female research participants of whom I knew that they regularly bought the respective direct sales cosmetics. I knew personally eight of these women. They in turn recommended to me the two other research participants. At the end of each interview I asked the research participants for recommendations of other possible research participants. Each research participant suggested to me at least one other woman to work with and I started to build up a network of possible research participants with many of whom I



later worked with. The research strategy based on these recommendations facilitated my first contacts with the future research participants. It also speeded up my entry into the small collectives that I was about to begin to study.

I spent many lunch breaks and early to late afternoons at the selling centres of the cosmetic companies as a participant observer. I became an Oriflame representative and I started to sell cosmetics to my colleagues and female family members. The fact that I was selling as well as buying the direct sales cosmetics from other friends and relatives helped me to lose the outsider status with the research participants. I attended regular monthly meetings as well as specialized meetings for representatives. During this period the relationships that I had with my colleagues intensified and we became close friends often sharing intimate information and gossip. We started to refer to each other as '*our little group*'. Over time the number of women whom we would consider part of our group doubled. Friends invited friends and friend's friends. Some of the women in 'our group' knew each other from the secondary school where they had formed a collective based around the direct sales cosmetics shopping. Others joined the group when I started the research. We used to meet up regularly at our homes, offices or coffee shops and tea houses for sharing new catalogues, making orders and for the distribution of the ordered cosmetics.

By selling cosmetics to friends, colleagues and family I was following the typical trajectory of a typical representative. To pursue this routine is suggested on the web pages of both cosmetic companies. It is given as advice when a new representative is recruited for how to build up her network of customers and it is also suggested at the companies' sales meetings. Although the studied cosmetic companies understood

such selling practice as legitimate, as a researcher I felt the need to carefully evaluate it when used as a research strategy. I was concerned about possible distortions of the research outcomes because of the involvement of people close to me. Yet I believe I balanced this research practice by working with other women whom I did not know at the beginning of research. A research strategy that involves people known to the researcher also very much simplifies the first contacts with the research participants and the building of rapport. Despite these known risks, if I wanted to understand what it was like to sell and buy these cosmetics I decided to proceed the typical way and to balance the possible pitfalls by working with a wide range of research participants other than my friends when conducting the main body of research.

I analyzed the ethnographic interviews alongside the continuation of research focusing on domains and taxonomies up to the point that I could identify categories of thought and gain a preliminary overview of the researched cultural setting. At this point I narrowed the research focus on the basis of my theoretical interests. When I was considering other theoretical approaches from social and evolutionary theory that were trying to explain the uses of beauty amongst women I soon realized that they did not explain the data I was collecting. Therefore I chose the model of Female Cosmetic Coalitions (Power 1999, 2009) which examines the uses of cosmetics in ritual context, to see if and to what extent it operated in the specific local setting I was studying. Cerwonka (2007) suggests that while doing fieldwork the researcher might use theory and ethnographic material to “think one through the other” (Cerwonka, 2007: 19). I engaged with the theory specific to my research throughout the main body of research. This involvement helped me to make sense of the observed behaviour. It also helped me to develop deeper understanding of the researched setting through exploring the

data from different perspectives. Thinking the theory through the empirical data helped me to understand to what extent it worked in the studied environment.

The main body of research was carried out from summer 2009 up to and including the spring of 2010. Because I worked with 15 different small collectives that operated within the space of a city with half a million people I soon faced the issue of overcoming on a regular basis the spatial distances between these collectives as well as the necessity to alternate between them. Commuting between these collectives soon proved difficult and I had to make choices as to with which of the collectives I would spend the time observing for when they conducted their cosmetic rituals. It was not certain that at the moments of obtaining a new catalogue or of distributing purchased cosmetics would always coincide with the moment when the group would go through ritual. My research routine focused around the catalogue launches and distributions of cosmetics yet I faced this problem of timing. Although I could approximately determine when the rituals I studied could take place it was never certain that they would. They often emerged spontaneously and impromptu.

After some period of frustration of being unable to physically attend all 15 collectives as I would have liked, I decided to work continually with two collectives and to alternate to my best abilities between the others. This alternation worked well at times and proved difficult and unsatisfactory at others. I supplemented the missed rituals with interviews. In total I interviewed 42 women from 15 different small groups and conducted over 80 in-depth interviews.

Once getting in contact with a particular research participant I always tried to also interview all the other women from that particular collective. It transpired that this was possible in only three cases. More often (in five cases) I was able to interview only some of these women, usually two or three. Quite often, however (in seven cases), I managed to speak to just one woman from each respective group. The common reasons for this were in the first place the time restrictions the women I worked with faced. On the one hand, all of the employed research participants, who represented almost 60% of my sample, were working full time and had families to look after. Their schedules were often so busy that they did not find time to see their own friends let alone a researcher. Some of them had to reschedule the arranged interviews several times and some of them cancelled it altogether. On the other hand, due to my own limitations, I was not always available to meet the research participants' preferred time-frame. Finally, a small number of women simply were not interested in participating in the research which, of course, I respected.

For the lack of time the research participants had at their disposition I was not able to interview all the women I worked with repeatedly. I conducted a single interview with 40% of the research participants. Because it was a recurrent situation I anticipated it and adapted the ethnographic interviews so that they focused mostly on the selected domains that I had identified after narrowing the research focus. In contrast to suggestions made by Spradley (1979) to conduct the first few ethnographic interviews by asking descriptive questions only, I included all three types of ethnographic questions in one interview. Such an abridged procedure has its pitfalls. First of all, there is not enough time for developing rapport and the interaction between the researcher and the research participant is often based on the initial impression that

cannot be overcome in the course of time, as would probably happen during an evolving rapport. Secondly, because of the absence of the close relationship between the researcher and the research participant, there is no sufficiently developed trust between the two. Therefore there is a higher probability that more intimate information might be missing from the responses. Finally, there is not enough time, energy and focus on both sides to ask structural and contrast questions exhaustingly. As a result, the obtained data might not be detailed enough. To balance this situation I worked regularly and frequently with all the other research participants that represented 60% of my sample. I believe that this way I counterbalanced the possible insufficiency in depth and relevance of my data. The data collected through the shorter or longer interview procedures were not contradictory. The main difference consisted in the detail and in the proportion of intimacy of the content of the acquired information that I gained through the elaboration during the repeated interviews.

An important part of the process of balancing the above mentioned risks was the focused participant observation conducted with two collectives of women. One was a collective of women, both professionals and students, working in a coffee shop. The other was the collective to whom I sold the respective cosmetics. As a participant observer I was present at many occasions when the research participants went through the new catalogue and when the representative or I brought in the ordered cosmetics and handed them out to the research participant. I recorded only some of these occasions but for the most of these events I made “condensed accounts” (Spradley, 1979) that I expanded afterwards. These occasions were usually loud, emotionally loaded with several research participants talking at the same time which made it difficult to discriminate single statements in the recording. Writing field notes also

helped me to stay focused and not to become over-absorbed with the fun we were all having while participating in the cosmetic rituals.

### **Collecting data**

To collect the data I used the ethnographic method. I used both participant observation as well as ethnographic interview as developed by Spradley (1979, 1980). The reasons for choosing these two particular versions of ethnographic method were the rigor of research and analysis offered by Spradley's elaboration of the development of the research sequence from the concrete to the abstract while simultaneously making explicit how abstract concepts are to be discovered.

I collected the data in two major stages. The first stage lasted for about three months and was focused on the gathering of the data in the research setting. During this time I not only worked with research participants but I also immersed myself in how the direct sales cosmetic companies operated. I supplemented the data I gathered through participant observation and interviews by also studying the available print materials and web pages of the researched cosmetic companies. When I had collected enough data to narrow my research focus I started considering possible theoretical approaches that would help me to understand and interpret the ethnographic data. Spradley (1979) suggests considering theoretical concepts when the cultural meaning of a particular cultural setting has been saturated. In his view this should be done after the collecting of the initial data and after the domains and taxonomies have been discovered that is at the level of cultural themes. In this view theoretical concepts for evaluating for meaning cannot be generated without "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Once I

found patterns in the data I was then able to discriminate between the different theories that could explain it. This was not a straight forward process. As Cerwonka suggest, “one always tends to read empirical details in the field through theory” (Cerwonka, 2007: 4) yet this interpretive process is iterative (Spradley, 1979; Stinchcombe, 1968) in that it represents a constant moving between theory and ethnographic data (Cerwonka, 2007). Cerwonka draws on Malinowski (1935/1978) in what he understands the ethnographic research as a constant interchange between empirical evidence and “theoretical moulding” (Malinowski, 1935/1978: 321). As Cerwonka (2007) points out this constant movement often leads to the modifying of both the theoretical ideas as well as the understanding of empirical data. I, too, experienced a very similar iterative movement in the second stage of the research. I needed relevant theoretical concepts to help me understand the behaviour I was observing in the researched setting. Yet I did use theory reflexively. On the one hand, the constant re-considering and re-interpretation of the empirical details and theoretical framework widened the theoretical concepts applied to interpret the observed behaviour. On the other hand, it led me to applying the analytical theoretical framework to the particular cultural setting and thus to effectively elaborating this model as it operated within the studied environment.

The fact that I was a female researcher represented an important factor that influenced the data collection in my research. First of all, my participation in the collective cosmetic rituals was conditional upon the fact that I was a woman. These rituals were intended for women only and took place without the presence of men, often behind closed doors, or if not at least in secluded areas of public or work spaces where the research participants felt safe and could continue with their rituals undisturbed. It also

influenced the kinds of questions I was able to ask. I was very well acquainted with the cosmetics the research participants engaged with because I myself used it and sold it. Also as a woman and a ritual participant I engaged with the research participants in disclosing intimate bodily information. All my engagement with the studied women, my inclusion in the researched collectives, the bonds of closeness and intimacy of the relationships I succeeded to forge through cosmetic rituals and through further engagement and friendship with the studied women led to the situation when the research participants saw me as a trusted member of their collectives. I became ‘one of the girls’. This earned closeness in return helped me to collect specific types of data revealed to the insiders only.

### **Ethnographic interview and rapport**

In the course of ethnographic interviews and participant observation I was learning the cultural meanings from the ways the research participants used their everyday language. The research process, however, was not sustained only from gathering ethnographic data through these particular research techniques but also by developing a relationship between me and the research participants in what Spradley (1979) calls “rapport”. According to Spradley developing good rapport consists in encouraging the research participants to share their cultural knowledge with the researcher. In his view, the basic condition for rapport is trust between the research participants and researcher that facilitates the free flow of information that the ethnographer is interested in. A good rapport between me and the studied women enabled them to trust me and, consequently, to feel free to share with me information that they themselves considered intimate. It also allowed me to experience with them the



bonding and intimacy that was involved in sharing cosmetics and intimate bodily knowledge that goes with it. Regular participation in the ordering and distributing of cosmetics, in the repeated interviewing of many of the research participants and in the collective rituals proved good ways of building rapport. In the course of the research using the respective cosmetics and sharing my own beauty knowledge and personal intimate bodily information with the studied women were important ways of me proving as trustworthy. Additionally the fact that at that time I was working as a representative of one of the researched cosmetic brands combined with my respectful and unbiased attitude also helped to create a good relationship with the research participants.

Spradley (1979) points out that part of the developing rapport is an initial shared sense of uncertainty on the part of the researcher as well as of the research participants. In Spradley's view, this concern can be overcome by encouraging the research participants to talk through the means of descriptive questions. This was the reason why I started to ask these questions at the beginning of the interviews especially in the initial phases of the research. I asked general questions about the environment where the studied women bought and shared cosmetics. Amongst many questions I usually asked for descriptions of the space and time of the meetings, the activities the cosmetic purchasers did together, what was the content of their conversations and cosmetics they used, and what people were involved in selling and buying them. Through these and other questions I obtained a large amount of ethnographic information that represented the basis for structural and contrast questions asked together in interviews. At the beginning of the research the descriptive questions were very similar or even the same for all the research participants. However, the

descriptive questions about smaller units of experience of studied women varied from participant to participant according to the information obtained from the initial questions. The same was true for some of the structural and many of the contrast questions. Therefore, the actual questions asked of each research participant were characterized by similarities as well as differences.

### **Research Ethics**

I conducted my research on the basis of the informed consent of the research participants. All the studied women were thoroughly informed about the research purpose, my interest in the research topic and their role in it at the occasion of our first interview. I reminded them of what I was doing and why at the beginning of several subsequent interviews. I also explained to the research participants what the data obtained from them will be used for.

At the beginning of each interview I explained what its aim was and what I wanted to know as well as what was the research participant's role in helping me to obtain and understand the sought after information. In the initial phase of the research I gave more general explanations. Later on I was more specific in clarifying at what specific set of knowledge I would like to focus. At each interview I asked for permission to record and take notes.

Throughout the research process I repeatedly assured the research participants about my interest in their knowledge of the researched cultural setting and I encouraged them to share this knowledge with me by repeating and rephrasing my questions, by

careful and attentive listening and by reassuring them that I trust their cultural competencies. In the course of the interviews I encouraged the cosmetic purchasers to talk to me in the same way they would talk to a colleague or friend with whom they would share their experience with the respective cosmetics. By regularly offering ethnographic explanations (Spradley, 1979) I tried to overcome or at least soften the research participants' insecurities in their roles as informants (Spradley, 1979, 1980) that could arise especially during the first few interviews. However, once we had overcome the uneasiness often present in the beginnings from both parties we soon came to enjoy talking about the cosmetics with each other and the sharing and intimacy that goes with it. When working with several research participants at once we experienced a lot of laughing and fun around it. This intense emotionality was for me one of the best experiences of the research. An important part of sharing the pleasures surrounding the cosmetics purchase and use was also the other side of it that embodied concerns in each other's confidential bodily information reflected by the research participants' as highly personal and intimate. To overcome the studied women's concerns with possible inadequate use of such information and to share it with me required real trust between us.

Before and throughout the research I assured the research participants that their anonymity as well as the confidentiality of the obtained information will be guaranteed. To assure confidentiality I have changed all the names of the research participants used in the text. I coded the studied women by age and whether or not they were representatives, and then allocated a number. This data, as well as the information about their profession, are provided in the brackets following the

respective interview statements. Names provided alongside research participants' quotes in this thesis are fictional.

I did not research the corporate cultures of the respective cosmetic companies as such. The data I collected I used as the background information to the researched cultural setting and practices. I obtained them from sources accessible to any representative and member of the public. Therefore I did not feel it necessary to inform the companies about my research. The regular putting in of orders in the companies' sales centres and attending some of the companies' meetings were common activities of any other representative and did not interfere with the companies' cultures and policies in any way. Excluding my placing orders and then picking them up as any other representative does, I conducted all my research activities outside the companies' premises. Further, the conversations and interviews with the studied women were strictly confidential and I did not want them to be used for marketing or any other purposes. Finally, I did not want the companies to influence or appropriate my research in any way.

Part of my research was creating close relationships with the studied women. Many of them became my friends and close friends and with some of them I am still in touch today. The issue I felt I needed to negotiate in the field was whether and how to differentiate the friendship – research participant relationships, namely on how to draw a line between friendship and research relationships. On the one hand, I was aware that in the field I relied upon friendship and assistance of several key research participants. Was I to keep my distance as a researcher or was I to allow the closeness to develop? Was there anything in between, to allow closeness while keeping the

distance? Soon after I started to take part in the collective cosmetic rituals that I wanted to study I realized that closeness between me and the research participants will inevitably evolve. On the other hand, however, I was anxious to negotiate this closeness ethically. I was still a researcher who after a certain period of time will leave the studied field and return to the environment of the university to analyze and interpret the data and write up the research results. There were moments when I felt I cannot respond to the closeness from my part to the same extent as some of my research participants opened up to me. In such situation I was anxious not to hurt someone's feelings. I was also concerned not to be seen as someone who was taking advantage of the emerging proximity to gather the data without being able to equally reciprocate the emotional engagement in some of the relationships that developed in the field. These are issues that I still have not solved to my personal contentment and sometimes still arise when I think about the data.

### **Research Environment**

Direct selling of cosmetics is a specific form of cosmetics retailing effectuated through a representative. In Slovakia it is carried out by companies such as Mary Kay, Just, Avon Cosmetics and Oriflame Slovakia. In this form of shopping a representative ('Avon lady' or a 'beauty consultant') brings the cosmetic catalogue to the customer's home or workplace. She usually shows the catalogue to her client, gives explanations about cosmetics, and offers advice as to what type of product would best suit particular customers. The customers are able to try samples of some of the product before they make a purchase. This type of shopping is usually carried out within the representative's personal network and frequently quasi friendship ties may

develop between the representative and her clients. Storr refers to this type of retailing as “hybrid” because it combines “shopping with a social event” (Storr, 2003: 3).

The Federation of Direct Selling in Europe (FEDSA) describes direct selling as the “marketing and retailing of consumer goods and services directly to consumers usually in their homes or the homes of others, at their workplaces and other places away from permanent retail locations” (The Federation of Direct Selling in Europe, [FEDSA], 2008). It is usually a face-to-face retailing and the actual sales are completed either “where a product is being demonstrated to an individual or group or where a catalogue is left with a customer”. The demand is created through personal contact with a customer. Important characteristics of the direct selling method are personal recommendations (FEDSA, 2008).

FEDSA data for 2008 show a constant growth of the sector in the previous five years with over 10 million sales-people and with annual sales of 16 billions euro in Europe, of which in Slovakia almost 100,000 sales-people made sales totalling 69.50 millions of euro. Direct sales companies in Europe offer a broad range of products including cosmetics (FEDSA, 2008).

As FEDSA specifies there are two main types of direct selling: person-to-person selling and party-plan (FEDSA, 2008). Storr (2003) in her study of Ann Summers parties defines a party-plan, also known as home shopping parties, as a type of retailing where a “party organizer comes to the private home of a customer who hosts a party to demonstrate products to a group of people invited by the hostess. The party-

goers can see, handle, or try out the products before buying” (Storr, 2003: 3). Overall 34% of European direct sales in 2007 were made through the party-plan form.

Cosmetics hold the leading position in direct sales in Europe. At the time of the research in Slovakia Avon Cosmetics held the first position followed by Oriflame Slovakia. For these two companies direct selling is their only retail strategy. While Oriflame sells its products exclusively via person-to-person, Avon at the time of my research had started to combine the two main types of direct selling by introducing Avon parties (known as ‘*Avon babinec*’ referring to a party for women only). In 2006 Oriflame Slovakia became the most successful amongst all the countries Oriflame operated in and its sales reached 17.9 million euro. This translates into over 7 million sold products. In Slovakia the company has more than 30,000 active beauty consultants who in 2006 were paid in commissions, bonuses and discounts 3.5 million euro. In Slovakia, the company distributes over 1.5 million of their product catalogues per year (Oriflame Slovensko, 2009). Avon Cosmetics has in Slovakia around 50,000 sales persons who serve 3.3 millions clients per year (Avon, 2009). In 2006 Avon sales achieved 40 million euro (Krčmériková, 2009).

The data in the companies’ web-pages are ambiguous. For example, does the number 3.3 million indicate all the clients making orders or all the orders made? Despite this ambiguity, however, considering that the approximate number of the women between 16 and 60 years of age is 1.5 million (Index Mundi, 2014) and taking into account the fact that there are many other beauty and cosmetic products available from chain stores and other direct sales companies (such as Mary Kay, Amway or Just), whichever is the case, the logic behind these numbers suggests that a very large

number of women in Slovakia buy Avon and Oriflame beauty products. Working with the research participants showed that they acknowledged the wide-spread use of Avon and Oriflame cosmetics among Slovak women. Many observed during the interviews how common these two brands are amongst Slovak women as it is apparent from the following examples:

*“I think that nowadays everybody (...) I don’t know, I really don’t know a girl or a woman, who wouldn’t have sometimes ordered something. Because in stores there’s only one product assortment or then you have another one and not all the stores have it all handy. If you want something that’s a bit different maybe, or you like it, then the only option is to order it this way from catalogues.” (Research participant Nr.18, age 32, primary school teacher)*

*“And that’s interesting, because I then asked the postman, I live in a village that has 1500 inhabitants, and (he said) that there are 15 Avon ladies, so I almost had to sit down.” (Research participant Nr.16, age 37, Civil Service employee on maternity leave)*

Both studied companies offer a similar range of beauty products, wellness products, jewellery and accessories for women of all age groups as well as cosmetic products for men and children. Their product-prices vary to cover different customer-groups. Both offer a similar company image of good quality cosmetics for a good price. They claim their production and packaging are environmentally friendly, without animal testing, and they perform ‘a friend to a friend’ direct sales retail strategy carried out by their representatives. In addition, Oriflame projects its brand image by offering the



concept of 'natural Swedish cosmetics' made of mostly plant ingredients and by supporting charities for children in need. During the period I conducted the research the campaign run in Slovakia was called 'Colourful hospitals' and it focused on enhancing the environment in children's units in hospitals. On the other hand, important aspects of the Avon image were campaigns against breast cancer and domestic violence. There are other differences between the two companies in marketing strategies as well. Whereas Avon invests in publicity of their products and charity campaigns, Oriflame has been investing more in sales support and offering products discounts and price reductions. The discounted goods have become its revenue focus (Krčmériková, 2009).

Both cosmetics brands operate successful websites. Their web pages provide their up-to-date product catalogues on-line, information about the companies, product range offered and special promotions. New representatives can also be hired through submitting a filled-in on-line application form. New customers can find an Avon lady or an Oriflame beauty consultant closest to their place of living by submitting their post code. Both companies have special sections accessible only to their representatives (for example in Avon known as '*online office*') providing information about selling strategies, special discounts and motivational information to increase sales. These web pages are actively used by representatives. During my research more than a half of all orders were posted on-line.

Both cosmetics companies entered the Slovak market in 1993. Among women they soon acquired an image of exclusivity and good quality. Despite the fact that at that time they were more expensive than other brands available on the Slovak market they

became very popular. They also represented a counterpart to the usual cosmetics available in stores that were judged as unappealing and inferior. The following statements illustrate it well:

*“As I remember it, these products have always had a bit different status (...) that it’s something better, that it’s something more (...) that this is an important tradition of those Oriflame and Avon products, when I really, I remember, that it was taken as something better than anything else and that’s why they are more expensive than cosmetics that people used to buy usually. But there was this feeling, that, yes, I will pay for it but it’s worth it, because I have an Oriflame mascara; I have a great Avon make-up (...).” (Research participant Nr.1, age 26, researcher)*

*“(...) A big difference was in the fact, that I could tell my friends, that I had those cosmetics. That means, that I use Avon cosmetics, I, you know, I (laughs). That was a big difference, that I could tell it to my school mates (...) You know, the difference between the cosmetics at the drugstore and Avon isn’t big, but then there was a big difference. Then, when I was thirteen to eighteen years old, I saw a big, an essential difference. That is Avon, that is a real brand and the things that they sell in the shop are not as good.” (Research participant Nr.29, age 26, journalist)*

*“And then it was, it was something new, this is important, and it was something different, [because] in the store, there weren’t so many commercials, that would offer you goods and Avon gave you a catalogue, where there was written [about it], there was a picture, that was supposed to evoke a certain mood, there was the price, so one knew straight away, whether she could afford it (...) I remember, that I was able to go*

*through those catalogues more times and I was reading the descriptions and looking at the bottles, how it looked, when they were fragrances, how they could possibly smell and what it would be like to have it and whether I would look so pretty as in those pictures. I don't know, it was as if one were in a way dreaming but on the other hand it was very real. And I remember those lip balms. I had one (...) that was to be put on the lips with a finger, and nobody had anything like that before. That was for the first time that I've seen anything like that. I really liked it. It was, firstly, it had a different, modern design, because I was used to what we had under commies, such small lip balms, a lip-salve. But that one had a different colour, it had a lovely smell, it gave one a feeling that she is, it was a very pleasant feeling, feeling of a difference, I felt in a way special and maybe prettier as well and as if I had a higher value. In all this it [Avon] was different, I think [...]" (Research participant Nr.2, age 26, admin manager)*

In their statements about the period of the mid to late 1990s the research participants refer to the researched direct sales cosmetics as something exclusive and *'better than anything else'*. They saw these cosmetics as *'something new and different'* and *'modern'* compared to the shop bought cosmetics. This exclusivity was strengthened by the expensiveness of these products and by the belief that the higher price guaranteed their specifically high quality. Buying and using these cosmetics were seen as marks of difference that bestowed on to the cosmetic purchasers *'a higher value'* compared to those women who did not have access to these products. Importantly, both brands offered to their female clientele sensual experiences that they could not experience in the High street shops. They made possible for their female customers to create a *'dream world'* that, however, became *'very real'*

especially through the employment of the senses of sight, smell and touch. Such sensual beautification experience was associated with pleasure, attractiveness and exceptionality.

In the 2000s this notion of novelty disappeared. The higher expense of Avon and Oriflame compared to other brands decreased and the perceived difference between these brands and other cosmetics available from chain stores diminished.

*“On the other hand Avon isn’t one of the cheapest things, therefore I think that it’s a normal main stream [brand]. Something like L’Oreal, but it’s distributed differently, maybe.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

*“[...] [now the status of Avon and Oriflame products has changed] because the people’s purchasing power had gone up, because we are talking about the nineties, when the depression was the greatest, salaries very low and then, when you should buy a cream for 200 crowns, that was a lot of money, you know. So I think that cosmetics are much more accessible and maybe this different status of these products results from these historical circumstances as well [...].” (Research participant Nr.1, researcher)*

*“In this it was different I think, because now you have more of those products, more catalogues and I think that people are financially better off, although I don’t know whether all of them, but I suppose that they are. More people keep ordering it and they can afford it. As if it [Avon] had lost its glitter. [...].” (Research participant Nr.2, admin manager)*

As it is apparent from the above mentioned examples, the financial difference between these cosmetics and other products available on the market decreased and they became more accessible. As one of the research participants put it they turned into '*main-stream brands*'. However, the former image of exclusivity can still be found in the representations of these brands that could be viewed as legacy of the historical circumstances that formed it.

According to FEDSA figures direct selling is overwhelmingly practiced by women. Of all Europe's direct sellers 83% are women (FEDSA, 2008). Accordingly, the vast majority of Avon and Oriflame representatives in Slovakia are women. Storr (2003) points out, that direct sales representatives are self-employed and are the customers of the companies whom they represent. Their income is made through the commissions on each sold cosmetic product. Their clients order products from the up-to-date catalogue and the representative in turn orders the products from the respective cosmetic company (Storr, 2003).

Representatives get a discount on the prices displayed in the catalogues. The discount amount varies according to company: 30% with Oriflame and 15 to 20% with Avon, according to the amount of products ordered. The mark-up between the discount prices and the catalogue prices constitutes the representative's profit.

Both brands use network or multilevel marketing in their direct sales retailing. Therefore apart from earning commissions from their personal sales made directly from customers, representatives can earn commissions known as '*override*' ('*bonus*') from the sales of other sales representatives whom they have recruited and manage as

their own network of representatives (Storr, 2003). In Oriflame, for example, this is called '*sponsoring*' ('*sponzorovanie*') and such network is called a '*business group*' ('*obchodná skupina*'). Representatives can earn from 2 to 21 per cent performance discount on turnovers of such group sales for each catalogue launch known as '*campaigns*'. These percentage figures are set by the company and representatives are encouraged to recruit new beauty consultants and motivate them to enhance their sales, for example, in the beauty consultant manual or in business meetings accompanying each new catalogue launch.

The representatives of both companies are organized in units often called '*teams*' or '*groups*' led by sales leaders. Units are further organized into geographic areas or zones that are led by area, or '*zone managers*' ('*zónová manažérka*'). As Storr (2003) points out this organizational structure is at the same time a pay structure; the higher in the structure the higher the pay. Area managers hold meetings every three weeks with each new campaign (i.e. with every new catalogue launch). The representatives and unit leaders participation in these meetings is voluntary. In these meetings a particular area manager presents the new catalogue, the new products in it, and special offers and gives advice on selling strategies. Representatives can, for example, try on new cosmetics of the forthcoming campaign, examine jewellery and other accessories, and exchange their tips of how they have enhanced their sales etc. Area managers give small presents, often cosmetics samples or travel-size cosmetic products, to the meeting participants. Apart from these regular meetings, area managers and sales leaders hold meetings focused on sales skills improvement and support.

Both companies strongly encourage their sales representatives to make as much profit and as many new recruits as possible. The representatives with highest turnovers, also called '*top earners*', become members of the '*top club*'. They can but do not have to work under a particular sales leader. They are further divided according to the size of their personal and network turnover and they are classified as silver, bronze, golden and diamond Top Avon ladies (or gentlemen) and bronze, silver, golden and platinum Top beauty consultants. The requirements for becoming a Top Avon lady or a Top beauty consultant are set by the companies for each campaign and published in their newsletters. Such requirements can be, for example, increasing the number of new recruits by a certain percentage, achieving the expected targets in bonus points assigned for each product in the up-to-date catalogue, increasing the sales of certain products by a certain percentage and many others. For example, a Top beauty consultant in Oriflame, apart from a turnover of over 250 bonus points in sales, has to achieve 5 per cent increase in new recruits in a campaign. After fulfilling these criteria, the Top representatives receive bonuses that can achieve more performance discounts on personal and group sales, free products from the next catalogue to '*winning*' family holidays, trips, a right to use a company car in the following year and a qualification to attend the company top sellers events called '*conferences*' where the top earners are publicly '*recognized*' through various awards.

As Storr points out "there are no entry requirements, qualifications or selection process for becoming a representative". Membership is open to any woman (or man) over 18 years of age (Storr, 2003: 10). At the time of the research a prospective representative needed to register either on-line or through another representative. In Oriflame she is called a '*sponsor*'. The newly recruited representative had to pay a

less than 2 euro registration fee. She then received from her sponsor a start-up kit that contained catalogues for the next campaign, a special offers catalogue, order form and price-list, client cards, perfume guidebook, Oriflame news letter, a Representatives manual, which is a 16 pages booklet with the basic information about how to order and sell products, and a Sponsor manual – an 8 pages booklet about how to recruit new representatives. The sponsor usually gave the newly recruited representatives explanations and instructions about how things worked in terms of placing orders, obtaining products, paying for them, returning products and what were some of the strategies to boost the sales. Oriflame offered to the new recruits an introductory seminar, whereas Avon offered a special training on cosmetics. For most representatives this training and manuals were all of their induction and training and although they were offered further informal training in individual campaign meetings and in business meetings aimed at selling skills improvement not all representatives attended them. In fact, in my research sample only one representative attended these events regularly; all the others went either once usually shortly after they registered or not at all.

As Storr (2003) notes the unit leaders are always trying to involve representatives that have become inactive as well as to recruit new ones by using personal recommendations of their clients and of other representatives, canvassing in the streets, at various events and campaigns or in public places, for example shopping malls, where Avon or Oriflame often had their stalls. Avon ladies used Avon parties called '*Avon babinec*' ('Avon hen party') that were newly introduced at the time of my research for this purpose as well. They also used their personal networks of colleagues, friends and family. Storr (2003) shows, that the use of such personal



networks for business purposes is another feature of direct selling. As she further points out representatives as well as unit leaders “draw on such networks not just to find new recruits but also” to get orders. New representatives typically start working in the direct sales by “persuading female friends and relatives” to make orders with them (Storr, 2003: 11).

### **Sample**

In my research I interviewed 42 women of whom 16 were either Avon or Oriflame representatives. Out of these representatives two research participants were selling both brands. The other 26 women were Avon and/or Oriflame customers.

Out of 26 customers I worked with 18 were employed full time as primary and secondary school teachers, primary and secondary school headmasters, administrative workers, public services workers, researchers, waitresses, a journalist, Civil Service employees and sale executives; five were full time university students, one was a retired shop assistant, two were full time university students and part-time employees in a coffee shop and one was a full time university student and a full time manager in a coffee shop. The common feature of these employments was the presence of a wider female community within which the selling and using of the researched cosmetics took place.

Out of 16 representatives I worked with six were employed full time as primary and secondary school teachers, administrative workers or public services workers, six were university students, one was a secondary school student, one was a social

researcher on maternity leave and two were working and studying at the same time. Even though a web page of one of the cosmetic companies states that representatives can choose a full time career as a beauty consultant, apart from the one that enrolled me I have not met any representative who would have done so or was considering doing it.

According to the existing sociological discussion outside Slovakia direct selling, including catalogue shopping, is theorized as belonging within the sphere of working and lower-middle-class women (Storr, 2003). However, in my research I came across research participants from more varied social backgrounds. I worked with women from different social environments that ranged from university students, several social researchers, secondary school head teachers to waitresses and cleaners. This wider social span of the Avon and Oriflame cosmetics users could suggest that the purchase and use of the researched direct sales cosmetics was at the time of the research less class defined compared to the cultural settings studied outside Slovakia.

An interesting characterisation of the social environment associated with purchase and use of Avon and Oriflame cosmetics comes from the research participants themselves. These examples were chosen from many:

*“Well, I think, all women who are employed and make as much money that they can afford to invest even in a bit better cosmetics.” (Research participant Nr.17, age 51, Avon representative, admin officer)*

*“I think that those ones who don’t have much money (laughs), I can’t tell really. Because here the teachers enjoy Avon and many, many buy it, maybe they don’t buy it from Janka, they have their own [Avon ladies]. And I think that the prices [for Avon cosmetics] are not too tall, they are not too high. So I think that middle class [buys it], because celebrities surely don’t buy Avon.” (Research participant Nr.15, age 52, primary school headmaster)*

*“I didn’t sell one thousand crown perfume, and I didn’t even try to. So I think it’s the middle class, age doesn’t matter, young ones and old ones alike, that doesn’t matter. However, it happened to me, that women that, I have two, a cleaning lady from my office called me, that she found an Avon catalogue on the table and whether she could make an order with me. But she does work elsewhere as well. The same happened to my sister that a cleaning lady was buying Avon from her, but she was only helping out herself to make more money, so I wouldn’t call it social status. I think that they [who buy Avon] are middle class women. Never from well-to-do families, but never those ones who don’t have money. But age and education are not important.” (Research participant Nr.16, age 37, Avon representative, researcher on maternity leave)*

*“I don’t know, whether they could be ranked down to one type of women. I think they are unmarried, well, unmarried and married, well around thirty, and around forty, too. now maybe from a financial point of view I think that maybe even women that would otherwise be able to spend money on more expensive cosmetics, I think that in such euphoria, that someone [women] is doing something here [selling Oriflame], such an activity, so I think they would order it anyway. But I would rather say, that it is more middle class and I wouldn’t limit it by age, younger ones and older ones, the*

*twenty five as well as forty five years old order it. I would rather say it's the more middle, middle class.” (Research participant Nr.22, age 26, Civil Service employee)*

First of all, the studied women stress the fact that, apart from university students, they were all employed. This employment was on a full-time basis. They also saw themselves as making enough money as to afford *‘a little bit better cosmetics’*. This better quality of the purchased cosmetics was one of their main attributes that came up throughout the research at many occasions and in several different contexts. Yet the research participants set themselves apart from other women whom they see as earning better money than themselves. In their own words *‘celebrities’* or women from *‘well-to-do’* families do not buy the same cosmetics. The cosmetic purchasers I worked with positioned themselves alongside the cosmetics they were buying. The respective direct sales cosmetics were situated within the cosmetics market as such in the middle price range with some products overlapping with both the inexpensive as well as the more expensive price ranges of the marketed cosmetics in general. Similarly, the research participants positioned themselves in the middle of the emerging social stratification as middle class. Such positioning could be understood as a reputational allocation of class, namely that women themselves self-reputed their class status and a component of the research participants' understanding of their social position seems to be aspirational. It is important to note, however, that at the time of research, the class differences within the Slovak society were in flux alongside with the stabilization of the neo-liberal capitalism.

What seems to be a decisive factor that determined the purchase and use of the researched direct sales cosmetics brands in my sample was the presence of a female

community that strongly encouraged the expectation of whether one would or would not buy them. As one of the research participant puts it *‘in such euphoria, that someone is doing something here, they would order it anyway’*.

All the women I worked with during my research spent significant amounts of time with other women either at work (such as teachers, administrative workers, students or employees of large organizations) or in their free time (for example in sports training, dance classes, drawing classes and so on) or both. Even the representative at the time of the interview on maternity leave was coming to her office regularly with Avon catalogues and cosmetics to *‘keep in touch’*. Typically, all the clients and often representatives, too, together participated in purchasing and using the cosmetics with their girl friends, female family members and female colleagues. None of them ordered or bought cosmetics alone without any participation of their girl friends or colleagues. The observed cosmetics purchases for both brands took place in small collectives of usually three to four women, but at times the number would rise to five or six, or even more. As another research participant puts it:

*“(...) I have such a feeling, that for the women using Avon is common that they very often get in touch with it through a collective [of women]. That they on their own probably wouldn’t engage with it. I would say that a typical user is part of a female (...) or she has, or a certain aspect of her life is formed by a bigger female collective, in which someone orders it. I can’t imagine, that any woman would be like, that she would try to find a way on her own ‘well, I’ve heard about Avon, so I’ll do it’. It doesn’t work like this, on the contrary. The condition must be met, that there’s a*

*female collective, that there's someone who works as Avon lady or a contact person (...).” (Research participant Nr.1, age 26, researcher)*

The age of women I talked to ranged from 16 to 62 years. Their marital status varied. Among the representatives six were married, six had a boyfriend (or a partner) and four were singles. Among the customers seven were married, 12 had a boyfriend (or a partner), one was divorced but living in a relationship with her male partner and six were singles. At the time of the interviews three representatives and nine clients (35%) had children out of whom seven were teenaged or older and five children were under 6 years of age.

Most of the representatives and their clients have come in contact with Avon and Oriflame cosmetics for the first time through a friend, a female family member or a female colleague. Some of these women who already knew these brands became representatives because they wanted to get the cosmetics for the cheaper purchase price than they were getting as customers. Some of them were Avon and Oriflame clients for some time but then they lost contact with their representatives and became ones themselves. This sometimes happened on a request of their girl friends and female colleagues who wanted to shop with the respective brands. And some women were recruited by unit leaders either in the street or in a shopping centre or at some special event where Avon or Oriflame had their stalls.

The period the representatives were working with Avon or Oriflame products varied from about 10 years to about a year or two. Some representatives worked with these products some time ago, then, as their clientele lost interest for various reasons, they

stopped working as representatives themselves. However, as they moved on with their lives and their female networks expanded or changed, they re-started their career as representatives and in this way stretched their time with either one or both of the researched cosmetic brands.

Interestingly, for the representatives I worked with, the selling of cosmetics was not always aimed at making profit. In my sample, a half of the representatives were selling cosmetics for the cost price and that way making no profit at all. Another half of the representatives were selling products for the price displayed in the catalogues. The difference between their purchase price and the catalogue price was their profit. Only two representatives admitted that they were and wanted to make money out of sales. However, as they stated later in the interviews, they did not have enough time to make enough money out of the sales and eventually stopped it all together as their life priorities changed (e.g. they went to university or changed job).

The amount of money the clients and representatives spent on both cosmetics brands varied as well as did the ranges of the products they bought. Some of the research participants spent quite large sums on the cosmetics compared to the others that would be as high as 40 euro per each three week campaign. Women from my sample bought expensive items such as perfumes or expensive creams and make-up items as well as cheaper products. Some of research participants would only buy '*small items*' such as nail-varnish or hand creams spending between five to ten euros in each campaign. However, these sums could vary from campaign to campaign, one month spending more or less than the other, sometimes even spending nothing at all. These variations were determined not only by the research participants' earnings but also by the

campaign offers, other expenditures that particular month and the money the studied women had at the disposal to spend on themselves or family provisioning.

Most of the cosmetics purchasers came in touch with the respective direct sales cosmetics through a female friend or a family member. The female clients I worked with saw the direct sales as a comfortable way of purchasing cosmetics. In their own words, they could sit down, go through the catalogue and read what they want to know about the product. They did not have to go around shops in order to make a purchase. Such selling in their view saved time, energy and money compared to shopping for cosmetics in High street shops. As some of the studied women put it *'when you get to the chemist and you're standing in front of those shelves, and you know what you need, but you still buy things you don't need'*. An important aspect of the catalogue shopping represented the photographs in which the research participants could examine how particular cosmetics were used to achieve specific effects, effectively using the catalogues as a learning resource of cosmetics usage. Many research participants felt that buying cosmetics via direct sales offered to them more and better choices when buying cosmetics. They thought they had more time to think about what they wanted and thus to make their choices without the time pressure often experienced in shops. They also could compare prices from the catalogues with the cosmetics in shops to make better purchases. The representatives often had samples at their disposition that they brought in for the women to try. This way the cosmetic purchasers could make good buys and order cosmetics that worked for them the best. Importantly, the presence of other women, apart from a representative, allowed the studied women to discuss their cosmetics purchases and thus again make a better choice. The research participants often stated that they became the representatives to



be able to *'buy good quality cosmetics for a good price'* due to their representatives' discounts. The comfort also played a role in that the studied representatives did not have to go to a shop to make a purchase, but could chose it from a catalogue and, if working as Avon representatives, receive them at home via courier. Attractiveness enhancement and experience of the specific female sociality were common motivations for both clients and representatives alike.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed the data collection, the sampling strategies and research techniques selected to collect the empirical data and I explained the reasons why I chose them. I described how I determined the sample in a situation where the collectives to be studied were neither easily discernible nor readily accessible. I explained the use of the snowball technique advantages as well as limitations in my research and counter-measures I took to balance the later ones. I briefly explained the representativeness and generalizability of the research outcomes in that I was not studying individuals but examining units of meaning. I further reviewed the ways I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork in an urban environment and the methods I used. I reflected on their strengths and weak points and discussed the means I put in place to overcome or mitigate these constraints. I showed how I applied the theoretical concepts and how I re-evaluated them in the light of ethnographic detail and vice versa. I discussed the research ethics. Next, I described the research environment of direct selling with specific focus on direct sales cosmetics. I outlined some of the historical circumstances of introducing the direct sales cosmetics onto the Slovak market in the 1990s and the resulting status the researched cosmetics had

amongst the studied women. I characterized the respective cosmetic companies, their organization and the process of selling cosmetics directly as I observed it in the studied setting that formed the background of my research. Finally, I characterized the research participants I worked with in terms of their employment, age and social positioning. I also suggested the importance of the female community in encouraging the studied collective cosmetics purchases and I briefly looked at the motivations for purchasing cosmetics through direct sales.

### **Chapter three**

#### **‘They are my better girlfriends’: The moral economy of cosmetics transactions in female collective rituals**

Monetary relations and commodity exchange represent important components of the relationship between the representatives and the women participating in the collective selling and purchasing of the direct sales cosmetics. However, the researched women and representatives alike adopted a number of strategies that transformed purely monetary commodity transactions and competition for profits into highly collectivising gift-like exchange that became invested with the meanings of a collective morality of cooperation and commitment to the collective.

Through the process of ritualization the transacted cosmetics were taken out of the sphere of commodity exchange and transformed into ritual objects carrying symbolic meanings. By means of re-contextualizing the cosmetics in collective rituals, participating women secured its equalized distribution within their collective. Such collectivised shared distribution operates as one of the levelling mechanism within the respective female coalition and demonstrates the commitment to it.

In this chapter I use the concepts of “spheres of exchange” (Bohannan, 1955; Sillitoe, 2006), “transactional orders” (Parry and Bloch, 1989) and “ritualization” (Dissanayake, 2009) to interpret the collective morality of the exchange of cosmetics and the strategies representatives and their clients adopted to counter-act the commoditization of cosmetics and subsequent individualistic competition that such

commoditization entails. I focus on the practices that show commitment to the respective female collectives and I argue that the collectivized reciprocal distribution of the cosmetics is one of the means that facilitates and maintains the egalitarian relationships within the researched female collectives.

### **The interpretive framework:**

#### **‘Spheres of exchange’ and ‘transactional orders’**

In his Cultural biography of things Kopytoff (1986) argues that commodities are culturally marked as such. He sees commodity transactions as those exchanges whose main “immediate purpose is to obtain the counterpart value” (Kopytoff, 1986: 69). In distinguishing gifts from commodities Kopytoff’s work is consistent with the views of other commentators (Gregory, 1982; Malinowski, 1922; Weiner, 1992). Gregory understands commodities as alienable objects whose “exchange establishes relations of equality between independent transactors” (Gregory, 1982: 84). By contrast, while Kopytoff sees gifts as individualized objects with biographies, Gregory understands gifts as “inalienable objects whose exchange creates a state of reciprocal dependence between the participants” (Gregory, 1982: 100-101). Gregory sees these reciprocal relations as “personal relations of rank” (Gregory, 1982: 84). In a similar manner, Kopytoff distinguishes commodity exchanges from gift exchanges in that the latter mark relations of reciprocity (Kopytoff, 1986: 69).

Both Kopytoff and Gregory see the exchangeable objects as part of a continuum with the commodity status at one end and a singular status of gift objects at the other. Both authors point out that from this vantage point the same thing may be understood as “a

commodity at one time but not at another”. The same object can also be seen as a commodity by one person yet not by another (Kopytoff, 1986: 64). This oscillation on the gift – commodity axis happens in Gregory’s observations according to the social context of the exchange (Gregory, 1982: 119). The outcome of such movement between the two spheres is according to both authors ambiguity of the objects exchanged (Gregory, 1982: 119). Kopytoff points out that the commodity status of an object is unambiguous only at the time of the actual exchange (Kopytoff, 1986: 83). As a result, the objects in their ambiguous status are, according to Kopytoff, opened to different social processes through which they can be “singularized”. Through the processes of singularization non-monetary values are ascribed to exchangeable objects and these values go beyond exchange value (Kopytoff, 1986: 83). Similarly, Gregory understands these processes as practices of personification that “give gifts a soul” (Gregory, 1982: 103).

To capture the ways objects pass through the process of “commoditization” and “singularization” Kopytoff suggests looking at these processes from the perspective of their cultural biography that investigates the cultural meanings of the exchanged objects. Such cultural biographies of shifting between whether and when a certain thing is a commodity can reveal a moral economy that, in Kopytoff’s view, lies “behind the objective economy of visible transactions” (Kopytoff, 1986: 64, 66).

Some authors point out that exchangeable objects circulate within different “spheres of exchange” (Bohannon, 1955, 1959) or within different “transactional orders” (Parry and Bloch, 1989). Both, “spheres of exchange” and “transactional orders” refer to “morally charged systems of value in which objects circulate either appropriately or

inappropriately” (Jamieson, 2003: 202). Objects from the same “sphere of exchange” are transacted – “conveyed” – by people freely and their comparative value is easily calculated (Sillitoe, 2006: 1). Exchanges of things from different spheres – “conversions” – can be problematical, although they do happen (Baric, 1964; Bohannan, 1955; Sillitoe, 2006: 1). As Jamieson (2003) shows “conversions” are “morally charged and generally seen as inappropriate” (Jamieson, 2003: 202).

In his work on the Tiv Bohannan distinguishes three major “spheres of exchange”: subsistence items, prestige goods and rights in persons. Each sphere includes commodities that are not seen as equivalent to commodities from other spheres and are therefore not exchangeable (Bohannan, 1955, 1959). As Sillitoe (2006) points out each of these spheres comprises “different objects, different sets of moral values and different behaviours” (Sillitoe, 2006: 3).

In Kopytoff’s view categorizing objects into different “spheres of exchange” is a consequence of an inadequate technology of exchange (Kopytoff, 1986: 72). He argues that in cultures where the exchange technology does not allow “optimum commoditization”, such as brass rods among the Tiv in comparison to a well-developed monetary system, some objects are too disparate to be compared in terms of their value equivalence and, consequently, it is impossible to place them in a single commodity exchange sphere (Kopytoff, 1986: 71-72). However, continues Kopytoff, in complex societies, too, there exist “some discrete spheres of exchange” (Kopytoff, 1986: 77). Kopytoff’s approach does not explain the existence of the “spheres of exchange” in cultures where money is used as a universal means of exchange and

where it is therefore possible to place all the exchangeable objects into one exchange sphere.

In contrast to Kopytoff's technological determinism Sillitoe (2006) suggests to generalize the differentiation of exchangeable objects into subsistence goods and wealth items each belonging to a discrete "sphere of exchange" and circulating independently from each other (Sillitoe, 2006: 6). Sillitoe points out that the "spheres of exchange" model reflects the dichotomy of economic exchange of everyday subsistence goods and social exchange of wealth items. Whereas subsistence goods are used for individual and household reproduction, wealth items are to be continually given away and invested in social exchange. In this understanding, valuables as "tokens of sociability" are given and received only in contexts of reciprocal ceremonial socio-political transactions (Sillitoe, 2006: 14).

In Sillitoe's view the insulation of the two "spheres of exchange", when one is not supposed to exchange subsistence goods for valuables and vice versa, practically separates the production and exchange of everyday subsistence items from production and exchange of valuables (Sillitoe, 2006: 6). This separation prevents politically ambitious individuals who would perform exceptionally well in wealth transaction to extend control over the subsistence of households. On the contrary, it is with the wealth transactions where competition for political statuses takes place (Sillitoe, 2006: 18).

A similar argument to the "spheres of exchange" is suggested by Parry and Bloch (1989). They distinguish two related yet insulated "transactional orders", also referred

to as “cycles of exchange”, that, too, refer to differing moralities of appropriate or inappropriate exchanges (Jamieson, 2003: 202). Parry and Bloch propose that, on one hand, there are transactions concerned with “the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic” order and these transactions are seen as morally positive (Parry, Bloch, 1989: 2). On the other hand, there is a domain of short-term individualistic transactions where individual acquisitions and competition take place and these exchanges are seen as morally undetermined (Parry, Bloch, 1989: 21). However, if that what is obtained in the short-term cycle is used to reproduce the long-term cycle, it becomes morally positive. And, equally, if the short-term transactions threaten the reproduction of the long-term social and cosmic order, they become morally condemnable (Parry, Bloch, 1989: 26-27).

The mediation between the two “cycles of exchange” is not uncomplicated. If the long-term cycle “is not to be reduced to the sphere of individual, they need to be kept separate”, insulated. But if the long-term cycle is to be sustained by the short-term transactions, they need to be kept related. Therefore there exists the need for transformative processes within the transactions through which the existing moralities of the long-term cycle are reinforced (Parry, Bloch, 1989: 26). One of such processes is “cooking” money where women symbolically purify money through removing it from the individualistic and commercial sphere dominated by men and invest it in collective consumption of household articles. Such purified money is used for the benefits of kinship dominated by cooperating consanguineally related women (Carsten, 1989).



I use the concepts of “spheres of exchange” or “transactional orders” and the resulting transformative processes necessary to mediate between the two spheres to show how cosmetics when taken out of the commodity sphere and re-contextualized as valuable is used by the researched collectives of women to reproduce their group and its particular morality of cooperation, trust, reciprocity and equality. I use the above concepts to also explain the various strategies through which money that is expected to be paid for cosmetics is used to reinforce mutual bonds among women participating in the shared socio-political transactions of cosmetics.

### **Ritualization**

Kopytoff understands that commodities can be singularized by “being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere”. He suggests that this can happen through two processes, sacralization on one hand and restricted commoditization on the other; the latter meaning that the exchangeable objects “are confined to a very narrow sphere of exchange” (Kopytoff, 1986: 74) that corresponds to the sphere of ceremonial valuables or wealth objects (Sillitoe, 2006).

Gregory (1982) points out that gifts are produced and exchanged as symbols. Their symbolic meaning is acquired in the process of personification where the consumption and reproduction of gifts is in Gregory’s understanding “organized as if they were people” (Gregory, 1982: 103). He gives several examples to show the personification of gift production drawing on ethnographies of Papua New Guinea: special layout, orientation and division of the gardens used for gift production and set of beliefs that unless these rules are followed the food for gift production will not grow, positioning

of the clans onto the garden layout, likening of the yams to men and women, use of magic, etc. (Gregory, 1982: 101-102).

When looking at the two processes described by Kopytoff what they have in common is that they are both *ceremonial* exchanges. Similarly, when considering the specific rules that guide the gift production described by Gregory their common characteristic is their non-instrumentalism - one of the main characteristics of ritual. Therefore I would suggest understanding both the singularization of exchangeable objects and the personification of the gift production as an outcome of the process of ritualization.

Power points out that the term “ritualization” was used in studying animal communication by Huxley to describe the process by which “movements that serve as signals derive through operations of formalization, repetition and stereotypical exaggeration from movements that originally served some other instrumental function” (Power, 2014: 198). Dyssanayake (2009) points out that these operations alter behaviour found in ordinary, practical contexts. Thus by looking and meaning something else attention is drawn to such manipulated behaviour that now “communicates a new social message” (Dyssanayake, 2009: 535). For example, preening of feathers does not mean self-grooming anymore but it signals courtship behaviour or the wings flapping does not signifies preparation to fly but the readiness to defend the territory (Dyssanayake, 2009; Power, 2014: 198). Power stresses that “ritualization is essentially driven by the observer interested in assessing the behaviour of some other individual” (Power, 2014: 198).

She further points out that ritualized behaviour only serves for communicative display and it becomes a signal. As such it transmits information to observers of such behaviour (Power, 2014). Such conspicuous attention attracting signal provides accurate information about the quality the observer is interested in (Dissanayake, 2009, Power, 2014). I use the theoretical framework of ritualization to explain the collective singularization of cosmetics in the researched female collectives as well as its operating as a signal of commitment to these collectives. This commitment represents the collective morality of shared cosmetics transactions.

### **Ritualization of cosmetics exchange**

In the researched setting women I worked with engaged in selling and buying direct sales cosmetics. Typically, a representative would register with the company by filling in the form and she could start distributing their cosmetics. Ideally, she would first buy the cosmetics from the company for the cost price and then sell it on to her clients for the price displayed in the company's catalogue. The difference between her cost price and the price in the catalogue represented her profit. Therefore, the more cosmetics she could sell to an evermore increasing number of her clients the higher her gain would be. From this vantage point, cosmetics is a commodity and the researched direct sales cosmetic companies encourage, instruct and motivate their representatives in maximizing their profits and their number of clients. Such ideology encourages individualistic competition amongst the representatives through height of profits and number of clients. It consequently encourages competition amongst their clients through the best individual purchases. This type of transaction where profit motivated representatives and their clients engage in correspond to the short-term

cycle of exchange discussed in Parry and Bloch (1989) where individual gains and competition have their place. However, what I observed in the researched setting were often activities that could be attributed rather to the long-term cycle of exchange concerned with the reproduction of the small female collectives and their specific morality.

The representatives I worked with occupied an ambivalent position on the confines between the direct sales cosmetic companies and their female clients. They acted as mediators between the commodity exchange of cosmetics bought from the cosmetic companies on one hand, and the specific form of exchange that took place in the small collectives of women to whom they sold it on, on the other. The ambivalence of their position manifested itself in their constant negotiation of competing demands and expectations of the profit oriented competitive ideology embraced by the direct sales cosmetic companies, their chance to earn some money and their commitment to the small collectives of women to whom they sold the cosmetics on. Respecting the former two conferred economic advantages onto the representatives, whereas favouring the latter one secured those benefits that resulted from being part of the small female collective. Women in the small collectives tested representatives' preferences on a fortnightly basis with every new catalogue launch and with every distribution of cosmetics. Representatives I worked with managed the conflicting demands differently and they gained the two differing types of advantages to varying degrees.

At one end of the spectrum the representative was selling cosmetics to her female clients for the catalogue price. Her clients were scattered and did not form a collective.

This representative was at the time of the research on maternity leave and, simultaneously, her and her family moved to a new residential area, where she was looking for new clients. However, when she was still working, she used to sell cosmetics at her office at her cost price:

*“At work and to my friends I used to sell it for a discount price of 10%, and I have a friend to whom I sell it without any rebate, but that’s really a very good friend of mine, the one who made me join Avon and she helped me a lot in my life (...) and to my sister I sell it without rebate and to my mum. I won’t make money at my family’s expense, that’s a bit... I used to sell to my colleagues for discount price of 10% but now, that I’m on maternity leave, I told myself that I can ask full price, so I ask full price. I can’t afford the discount.” (Research participant Nr.16, age 37, Avon representative, Civil Service employee on maternity leave)*

In her account the representative makes clear that despite the fact that now she sells cosmetics to her female clients for the catalogue price, it was not always the case. To her colleagues at her previous work place as well as to her friends she used to sell it with a ‘discount of 10%’ that is at her cost price. The 10% represent her achievable profit that she voluntarily gave up. She gives an economic reason that now she is on maternity leave with a very low financial support from the state and she ‘can’t afford the discount’ anymore. It is important to note, however, that her new clients are dispersed in the new residential area the representative has recently moved into and therefore, unlike her colleagues at her previous job, they do not form a collective.

An opposite process can be seen at work in the example of a representative who started to sell the cosmetics for the price displayed in the catalogue. However, as the relationships between her and the female collective got more intimate and sharing this representative began to sell the cosmetics to these women at her cost price refraining from any profit she could have made. One of the women from the collective she sold cosmetics to made a following remark:

*“We used to pay the price displayed in the catalogue, at the beginning. But then Zuzka came to us and said that she feels a bit funny about it and that she’d like to give it to us for her price.” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)*

In the words of the representative sharing with the group of women was more important for her than making profit:

*“I don’t want to make profit out of it. I rather, as if I was giving it as a gift, I have done something for someone, even if it’s nothing more than that discount. Well that’s the difference. I could, but I don’t want to make money out of it. I rather give it just like that. I don’t want to ask those people for extra [money]. I don’t want to make money out of them. I don’t want to make money out of them. I find it embarrassing, or I don’t know. Maybe the one, who sells it for the full price doesn’t care. I sell it, because I do care about that person, and we went through some situations together, whether it’s girls from work or my neighbour, with whom I live twenty two years. I care about those people. (...)” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, waitress and university student)*

In the above example the representative knows that she could make a profit out of her sales but she *‘feels funny’* about making it. One of her girlfriends confirms her statement. Rather, the representative chooses to ‘sell’ cosmetics to her girlfriends at her cost price. With those women she shares experiences as well as cosmetics and mutual closeness of relationships. She is one of them. She perceives the ‘selling’ of cosmetics as if *‘giving a gift’* to her girlfriends. She stresses several times that she could continue making profit at their expense but she does not want to. She finds it embarrassing to earn money out of women with whom she became so close and about whom she cares.

The above quotes from ethnographic material are not at all atypical. Interestingly, a half of the 16 representatives I worked with sold cosmetics to the small collectives of women for the cost price giving up their profit completely. Another half of the researched representatives sold cosmetics for the catalogue price therefore making profit. However, these profit making representatives adopted strategies that kept their profits and number of clients permanently low. These strategies contradicted and subverted the competitive profit-growing ethos of the researched cosmetic companies. Women from the small collectives appreciated these strategies and valued them as morally positive. And, conversely, the researched women and their representatives alike condemned the purely profit oriented selling of cosmetics as immoral:

*“(...) but those big bags they surely have all of them, they have catalogues there, so they could present them everywhere they go, to make the highest profits. I have a feeling, that there [in the meetings] they all sell for the usual price [as displayed in*

*catalogue]. I think that they don't give it with a discount [for the cost price] to anybody, not even to their daughter [laughs]. And I find them strict, some of them are like, they want to earn more and more, and you can't get rid of them. They make you buy something but they won't give you a discount or anything [a small present or a free sample]. (...) You can see that they want everything for free and if they could they would sell it to the client for a higher price than displayed in the catalogue. (...) And I know, that there was a teacher and she, when there was something on sale for a very cheap price, and she knew, that some [of her clients] sometimes bought it, so she bought it and then, when someone ordered it in the next catalogue, she sold it to her for that displayed price and this way she made a much higher profit. This way she stocked herself up and then she sold it for much higher prices." (Research participant Nr.3, age 25, Avon representative, client liaison officer)*

The research participant refers to some other representatives that she regularly sees at the monthly business meetings. She comments on their devotion to the company corporate culture demonstrated through the pursuing of profit. Her statement clearly shows disapproval and criticism of this strictly money-oriented behaviour focused on the highest profit at any costs. The representative who made this judgement even disagrees with selling cosmetics for the displayed catalogue price implied in the expression that profit motivated representatives would not 'give it with a discount to anybody, not even to their daughter'. By discount she means her cost price. Despite the fact that the representative laughs while stating her words she is serious about her disagreement. She herself sells cosmetics at the cost price and often adds small presents of cosmetic samples for her girlfriends.



Representatives applied the profit lowering strategies in ritual situations of collective catalogue browsing and collective distribution of purchased cosmetics. One such strategy was making sure the number of the representative's clients stays permanently low. The representatives achieved this by making the catalogues scarce. As one of the research participants puts it, she refrains from offering the catalogue to her customers. Instead, she makes the catalogue available only if the women from the collective directly ask for it:

*"I don't offer the catalogue at school. I must admit that I'm not that type of a person that would make it for profit. Here, just the closest colleagues come to see it but I don't bring it in like, here, my colleagues, have a look. Maybe I'm not a good business woman or I don't have time to dedicate myself to it because I know there [in Avon] there are women who earn thirty thousand on profit each month, that's just for them, right. So I've never done it that way. More likely, some of my colleagues know that I'm doing it and they come up to me and ask whether I'm still doing it and they order something, like now before Christmas. That they come up to me and then I bring in the catalogue." (Research participant Nr.17. age 51, Avon representative, primary school admin officer)*

In her description the representative stresses that she is not profit motivated and she demonstrates it by pointing out that she does not prompt her clients to see the new catalogue. Only her 'closest colleagues' who share the insider information, that she can make the catalogue available to them, 'come to see it'. Further, she does not spread the information that she is an Avon lady among the other colleagues at school. This knowledge is reserved for the small collective of close colleagues.

Simultaneously, she dissociates herself from those representatives who have adopted the profit-making ideology and strategies of the cosmetic company. She herself leaves the decision to make a purchase with her completely dependent on the willingness of her colleagues. If they really wish to buy something, they have to find her, never the other way round.

Another example of this strategy is a representative who sells direct sales cosmetics to her close colleagues at school and is very selective to whom she gives the catalogue to browse:

*“Well, I can tell that, actually, my friends are also my customers and, actually, those ones, who aren’t my customers, well, they aren’t such good friends of mine. So, [I sell Avon] to my better friends and maybe I offered to them, whether they’d like to buy Avon and they remained my customers and those ones, whom I didn’t offer it, because they aren’t as such friends of mine, or, I don’t know. I do have, I do have customers among them too, but they became my customers on their own initiative like ‘oh, you’re doing Avon, I’d like it too’ and so. So that’s the difference, they are my better girlfriends.” (Research participant Nr. 8, age 49, Avon representative, primary school teacher)*

In this example the representative clearly distinguishes between her clients who are at the same time her ‘better girlfriends’ and other female staff at school where she teaches. She initially offered the Avon catalogue to these friends who accepted it and started to order cosmetics from her. She did not address the rest of her female colleagues as her potential customers. Although she does sell to some of the other

staff too, she stresses that she did not offer the catalogue to them in the first place and they came up to her from their own initiative. Such choosiness prevents the representative from increasing the number of her customers and keeps her selling activity low key and focused on the few colleagues with whom she is close.

Another profit lowering strategy representatives from my sample used was to discourage their clients from making a purchase if they themselves thought the particular cosmetics were not of good enough quality.

*“I don’t know, I can’t tell whether I’m a good one or a bad one [Avon lady]. Avon lady (...) is actually a salesperson, a businesswoman. She should have a business-like attitude (...) I’m not quite such a good salesperson, because I can be critical about their products, because as I’m also the consumer of them, I can see it also from this point of view and I’m critical about some of their products. So I don’t know whether a good sales person would [do it]. But on the other hand, my clients appreciate this and they say, good that we know, you wouldn’t let us buy something that isn’t good. (...) when I bring it here, in the lobby, then I prepare it all for them including the packs and they look at them straight away what’s new or, then we talk about it, that ‘oh, this, do you know this? I noticed this’ and when I say yes, and that I have verified it on myself, I tell them whether I’m happy with it or not. I’m such a representative, well, they know that, that if I try a product and I’m not happy with it for various reasons, then I tell them, that it didn’t do me any good, or the colour doesn’t last and I wasn’t happy with it, I had to return it, so I tell them, ‘if I were you I wouldn’t buy it.’”*  
*(Research participant Nr.8, age 49, Avon representative, primary school teacher)*

In this example my informant disavows the business-like attitudes of those representatives who have emulated the profit-making strategies. As she puts it she can be '*critical about Avon products*' which in her view is not compatible with good practice of a businesswoman selling these cosmetics to increase profit. She knows these products well, because she sells them as well as uses them together with her two daughters. Thus when making sales she can combine two different points of view, one of a customer and one of a salesperson. However, she puts these two perspectives to use that favours the three of her close colleagues at school to whom she sells cosmetics. She calls her colleagues her '*better girlfriends*'. Her involvement with this group is confirmed in the opinion of her colleagues who '*know that she wouldn't let them buy something that isn't good*'. The representative's trustworthiness is further confirmed by the fact that she herself has tried those cosmetics and she is therefore making judgements about them based on her own bodily experience with them.

Because representatives have access to the current as well as the following catalogue they would often advise their clients to wait with the purchase of the chosen product until the next catalogue launch if the price of the same product would be lower or if there is any other advantage for the client. This behaviour required extra work from representatives in that they needed to look ahead and compare prices and keep in mind all the offers from the current as well as from the following catalogue. Representatives regularly employed this strategy despite the fact that this way they often jeopardized the scale of their profit that directly depended on the amount of money their clients spent on cosmetics from one catalogue. None of the discussed practices of discouraging from purchase were followed by an offer of a more

expensive product from any of the catalogues, whether current or subsequent. As one of the research participants puts it:

*“(...) she (the Avon representative) always tells me, don't buy this, for example, this fragrance, because it will be on offer in the next catalogue with a free small bottle that you could put in your hand bag (...) she recommends it (...)” (Research participant Nr.15, age 52, primary school head teacher)*

In the following example the representative rationalizes the behaviour from the above example in terms of the financial advantage her client would make. Comparing prices in different catalogues was a stable component of this representative's practice:

*“(...) I'd point out to them, what is on sale and if it's, for example, at the turn of a campaign and I already have the catalogue for the next month I always have a look at that product, what they want now, whether it's not for a better price in the next month, so she'll be always better off, that colleague of mine.” (Research participant Nr.17, Age 51, primary school admin officer, Avon representative)*

When representatives bought the cosmetic products from the cosmetic companies, cosmetics took on the properties of commodity and the process of purchasing it is to be understood as a commodity exchange. The research participants saw the incorporation of cosmetics in the commodity sphere as appropriate only within the transaction between the representatives and the cosmetic companies.

However, when sold by the representatives to the women in the small collectives, the profit maximization of the representatives stopped being their driving force. Cosmetics lost their commodity status and were transformed into gift-like objects that were exchanged between the representatives and the other women without the profit motivation. If the participating women observed any of the profit and competition motivated behaviour in this type of exchange they condemned it as immoral. The representatives acted as mediators between the commodity transaction reserved to take place with the cosmetic companies and the gift-like exchange that took place in the small collectives. In their mediating role, representatives applied transformative profit renouncing and profit lowering strategies through which these cosmetics were “singularized” (Kopytoff, 1986) – taken out of the commodity sphere of exchange and embodied in the ritualized collective circulation within the female collectives.

At the two main ritual occasions of collective catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics, cosmetics were incorporated into formally stable repetitive procedures and behaviours. Participating women handled and manipulated them with exaggerated gestures. In their ritual re-contextualization cosmetics are collectively shared. They become the property of all the women participating in the ritual (I discuss the collective cosmetic rituals in detail in Chapter four). Whereas prior to the ritualization cosmetics were seen as commodities, now they have become a ritual symbol of the small female collectives (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1912/1995; Turner, 1967). They assumed a communicative function – they became signals of cooperative intentions and commitment of the participating women to each other.

## Cosmetics as valuables

The described ritualized exchange of cosmetics is not necessarily “driven by economic-like demands for obtaining material resources” (Sillitoe, 2006) because similar items can be purchased individually from High street shops. The women I worked with often combined catalogue shopping with buying cosmetics in High street shops. However, they saw these two shopping strategies as qualitatively different. As a result they clearly distinguished between what cosmetics they bought in stores from what they ordered from the catalogues. They would often stress that “*certain things I never buy in the store*” in the course of the interviews. Whereas store shopping was aimed mainly at family provisioning with everyday cosmetics, catalogue cosmetics had a special status that resulted from the emotionally loaded collective ritual situation.

In collective cosmetic rituals the former cosmetic commodities were endowed with special properties that were referred to as ‘*great*’, ‘*better*’ than any other cosmetics, and none of the other cosmetics was as ‘*good*’ as these ones. These properties clearly set off these cosmetics from the ordinary ones bought in High street shops. The following interviews were chosen from many similar ones:

*“(...) maybe they use something that doesn’t have to be as good. Maybe she uses something that isn’t good and if she had it from Avon it could be better. It may be the same with me, that I’m using something that I believe is great but if I tried something else, I’d find out that it’s even better (laughs) and I think what a great thing I’ve got or how beautiful I am! (...) there’s higher contentment with Avon products, for example, when I clean my skin with their cleansing gel I feel that my skin is really*

*clean and maybe uptight and after putting on their body cream my body really smells lovely.” (Research participant Nr.3, age 25, Avon representative, admin manager)*

*“(…) we are choosy, because you can buy other cosmetics but they are not as good in my view (…) and I’m saying it because I’ve tried it and it’s better. And people who buy these cosmetics are more demanding then others, maybe. But maybe not. Maybe they use something even better that I don’t know.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

Women in the researched small circles collectively re-contextualize the direct sales cosmetics into something extra-ordinary. They see them as highly efficacious and better than any other cosmetics. These properties, however, remain cosmetics’ hidden qualities and the specialist ritual knowledge about them “is not freely given” (Gregory, 1982: 102). It is held and passed down only in the ritual situations within the trusted female collectives. This exclusive availability together with costliness of effective and optimal navigating of the cosmetics market restricted the access to such ‘*best quality cosmetics*’ and thus made them scarce and therefore valuable (Sillitoe, 2006). The access to such valuable cosmetics was important in achieving attractive looks, a type of “beauty magic” (Malinowski, 1929/2002: 186; Richards, 1956: 90; Power, 1999: 92). As one of the research participant puts it:

*“(it is) like a first aid kit or something similar for a modern person (…) what to do, when one has a certain beauty problem.” (Research participant Nr. 2, age, 26, office manager)*



As a result, women who used such '*good quality*' cosmetics were '*one more beautiful than the other*'. Such ability to be '*beautiful*' would confer advantages to the women from the small collectives in their relations to men.

A degree of anxiety can be seen in the first two statements above in that the research participants aspire to access the best cosmetics available to them. However, in their view there is always a possibility that there might be something even better on the market. Therefore the endeavour for the best available cosmetics never ends. In this uncertainty again cosmetics with desirable but hidden properties are scarce.

When distributing cosmetics representatives created with their female clients relationships of indebtedness in that they regularly delayed payments for the ordered cosmetics. On one hand, such practice fostered ties of reciprocity between them. On the other hand, delayed re-payment is another characteristic of transacting in valuables. To make immediate returns when transacting in wealth items is seen by the participants in this social exchange as inappropriate (Malinowski, 1922; Sillitoe, 2006). The framework for this delay was created by the cosmetic companies in that the representatives have a two week window for paying for the cosmetics that they ordered to sell on to their girlfriends. However, the representatives I worked with employed this possibility in their own way. As a rule they never asked their clients to pay for the ordered cosmetics immediately at their distribution thus each time delaying the payments. Some representatives would set a date for their girlfriends when the money was due and this date was always remote from the distribution date:

*“(...) so some of them try those fragrances and so, and then they have a look at how much it costs (laughs) although they preliminary know it, they ordered it, but they forgot it or so, and then we agree, when it’s sufficient to pay me the money (...)”*  
*(Research participant Nr. 8, age 49, primary school teacher, Avon representative)*

Other representatives would obscure when they would like to receive the money for the cosmetics. In the following statement the client needs to ask her representative several times how much money she owes her and when is she supposed to bring it in to pay for the cosmetics she has already obtained. Even if the representative’s colleague knows the sum, she needs to wait up to two weeks to be able to repay the debt:

*“(...) of course I get all excited that I will have it (cosmetics) and then I have to find the money to pay for it (laughs). And then it happens, that I say to Janka, so let me know how much, and she says, well, you still have time. And I don’t like to be in debt, so every day I bother her to tell me how much I owe her and then, sometimes it takes two weeks and I have to keep it in mind, that I owe her for Avon, because she doesn’t want it immediately (...)”**(Research participant Nr. 15, age 52, primary school head teacher)*

Gregory (1982) suggests that the gift-debt relationship is one of the characteristics of gift economies. White (1994) describes such a gift-debt situation amongst Turkish women who work in piecework ateliers knitting garments. Here, too, ties of reciprocity amongst the female workers are created through series of debts in that money for finished work is not expected to be paid immediately. A distance in time is

needed between the finished work and the payment for it. White points out that although women who work in these ateliers know each other from the neighbourhood it is this relationship of indebtedness that creates ties of reciprocity and solidarity amongst them. By putting off payments for their work, women “stress the open-ended reciprocal nature of their relationship” (White, 1994: 89). White notes that immediate payment for the transaction causes the loss of its social value because it prevents the creation and maintaining of reciprocity of social relations (White, 1994). Similarly, the insistence of the representative that her colleague has time to pay for the cosmetics is aimed at maintaining the relations of reciprocity open. As Graeber points out, open reciprocity “keeps no accounts because it implies a relation of permanent mutual commitment” (Graeber, 2001: 220). In the case of the women in the small collectives and their representatives setting aside immediate payments for the ordered cosmetics opens-up ways for developing and maintaining open-ended reciprocal social bonds between the representative and her girlfriends. Similarly to the Turkish women from the piecework ateliers the researched women too know each other from work. But not until they started to engage in the gift like ritualized exchange of cosmetics that their relations intensified and they created and maintained ties of reciprocity amongst them. The stretching out of the payment period for the ordered cosmetics left women owing to their representative and was an intrinsic part of the practice aimed at creating and maintaining reciprocal bonds within the small collective.

### **Reproduction of the female collective and its morality**

Representatives who employed the profit nullifying and profit lowering strategies saw themselves as part of the small collectives of women to whom they sold the cosmetics.

This becoming of ‘one of the girls’ was marked in the interviews by referring to themselves and to their clients as ‘we’ or ‘us’:

*“I tell you I don’t do it that much, to sell it, to make money, not at all, not even when I registered with them. I wanted it because there’s always something I can choose and there’s always the discount for the Avon lady and actually, I do it just for my close ones, the closest ones really, I mean for us [at school] and for my closest family. It’s not an opportunity for me to make profit.” (Research participant Nr.17, age 51, Avon representative, primary school admin officer)*

In her statement the representative makes clear that selling the respective direct sales cosmetics does not represent an opportunity for making profit. She sees her clients as her ‘close ones’ actually as her ‘closest ones really’. She means her close colleagues at the primary school whom she refers to as ‘us’ implying that she herself, while being a representative, is one of them. She adds that she does sell cosmetics to her close family as well. In both cases she uses the words ‘close’ and ‘closest’ to describe both, her closest colleagues at work as well as her family. On one hand, she keeps these two categories of people apart, on the other, the closeness of the relationships between these two groups and her gains importance as both are set right next to each other implying similarities of these relationships.

Another such example is represented by the collective of women and their representative who regularly meet at the representative’s sauna:

*“Well, when we go to sauna, she’s (the representative), she’s got a special status for us (...) and it all evolved so that now we are a group of people with a common interest. We meet in sauna. And we don’t meet only in sauna, we meet elsewhere as well, but we are a group, it’s a closed circle. We don’t like to admit someone from outside, because every time someone new is there we can’t talk about our topics. That means that if one of us would invite someone from outside the circle would be impaired and we wouldn’t be able to talk about things we do when we are together, when we really trust each other. So it has evolved that we don’t do it, none of us tries to bring someone from outside. We almost call it a club, kindred souls, or something, doesn’t matter. But that’s how it is and it’s not just a feeling we have, it’s a defined thing. And we have agreed that if there are more people than just the four of us then the whole thing is disturbed. So it’s a closed circle. (...) and if there’s someone else we can’t discuss our topics and we feel like as if something didn’t fulfil that was supposed to. Curious isn’t it?” (Research participant Nr. 9, age 35, sales executive)*

In the above example the women meet in a sauna on a regular basis. The incentive to meet up there could come from any of the four women at any time, including the representative. As they themselves put, they usually meet up there when one of them *‘is in a pickle’*. The shibboleth *‘come to sauna’* can be uttered by any one of them. When they meet up they discuss literally *‘everything’*. They are intimate discussions that require absolute trust among the participating women. If there were someone *‘from outside than just us’* the fulfilment of the whole session would not occur. Naked they talk about men, sex, relationships, problems, fashion and cosmetics. As my informant puts it:

*“Darling, you have to imagine, that we are there totally naked but that’s not just physical nakedness, that you’re sitting in a sauna completely naked and you can see into your friend’s - wherever you want to (laughs), but those are really intimate topics, from sex, like ‘he made such a movement and it made me feel like this and this’ and all of us comment on it. Or that someone called me or when Ivana has a lover outside her marriage, we talk about that and that’s true for all of us (...). (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

Nakedness here means an absolute openness and trustworthiness. Through nudity total security of the information and safety of the women present is guaranteed. The research participant uses the term nudity not only in the physical sense of naked bodies. The present women are naked in that they do not hide anything and simultaneously they are expected to be literally wide open in every sense and as such they can be seen through by all the other women present. In these sauna sessions the aspects of ritual and *communitas* become clearly discernible. In the informant’s statement it is clear that these women do form a ‘*closed circle*’. They are even aware of it and they do not want anybody else to intrude on their closeness and intimacy among themselves when in sauna. It is clearly their time and their space.

The respective direct sales cosmetics represent an inseparable and omnipresent component of each sauna session. The representative has the catalogue always handy. The products are there on display. But as my informant puts it, she does it in a ‘*non-intrusive way*’. When she goes to prepare tea for her friends, she offers the catalogue to them to have a look at it if they like to. If one of the women complains about a beauty problem the representative offers a cosmetic solution to it.

The representative provides her own sauna to these women free of any charge; she creates comfortable atmosphere with candles, fragrances, teas and fruit. She is a certified masseuse and she often offers massage to the women present free of charge. She imposes substantial costs on herself in terms of consumed electricity and water to run the sauna, and her own time and energy. The women at times order cosmetics but sometimes do not order anything. No attempt is being made here to maximize the representative's profitability.

All of the participating women, the representative and her customers alike, experience each other's closeness in nakedness and in intimate talks. In these talks women exchange the confidentialities about each other. In their own words they '*are really intimate topics*'. These exclusive sauna sessions differ profoundly from their commercial counterparts precisely in the intimate and confidential information the participating women exchange among themselves. In the enclosed intimacy, secretiveness and shared bodily practices these regular sauna sessions carry similarities with female seclusion rituals (Maggi, 2001; Turnbull, 1984). After sauna the representative regularly pampers her friends by giving them massage or handling their beauty problems that were confined while having sauna. The collective nakedness among the women played an important role in sharing their most intimate bodily experiences and knowledge. Sitting together naked these women saw everything on their bodies, beauty as well as its faults. They knew each other very well and this knowledge applied as much to their bodies as to their personal lives. After having sauna the representative used to massage her friends, touching and stroking their naked bodies, becoming to them as intimate as ever. The only more

intimate experience between her and these women would be sexual intimacy (Godelier, 1980).

In sauna monetary relations are transformed into relationships of shared reciprocal closeness and the money that is needed for the transactions of cosmetics is symbolically “cooked” (Carsten, 1989; Jamieson, 2003). Carsten (1989) discusses an example of “cooking money” amongst the women in the Malay fishing village of Langkawi. Here women through collectivised consumption of the same household articles, in particular articles associated with kitchen and hearth, put money to use for developing and maintaining of cooperative bonds amongst themselves. These cooperative relations are embedded in relationships of “kinship and locality” – it includes female kin as well as female neighbours. Through the collective economic activities of participating women money is removed from the individualistic and purely commercial context and circulates in economic transactions that are rooted in the “morality of kinship”. Through such morally charged economic activities women in turn collectively save money to buy exactly the same household article for each of them. Such equal and shared consumption avoids the accumulation of money by single households and neutralizes the possible competitive, “individuating and divisive effects” money could have (Carsten, 1989: 135).

In the researched setting similar collectivising and levelling effect is fulfilled by the shared circulation of cosmetics. At ritual occasions of catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics women collectively often buy exactly the same cosmetic articles and as a rule they generously share all the purchased cosmetics. Representatives give up their business attitude in favour of reciprocal cooperative



relations with their girlfriends. As I showed in the sauna example cosmetics circulate together with intimate information that is shared with the whole collective. This knowledge that is now a collective property of all the participating women is constructed as secret. Its sharing requires trust amongst the women. Trust and reciprocity within these small collectives that come to existence through shared cosmetic rituals result in cooperation amongst the women that centres not only on beauty but extends to other areas of these women's lives. All the women participating in this cosmetic experience regularly monitor each other's behaviour scanning for clues of commitment to their group: each of them has to share, cooperate and reciprocate - this is the moral economy of the cosmetic exchange. If the conspicuous signals of cooperation and sharing are missing the participating women condemn the whole transaction as immoral.

In these small collectives the transacted cosmetics are the collective property of all the participating women. Invested with collective morality of reciprocity and cooperation, the shared ritual manipulation of cosmetics is "equalizing and levelling" and at the same time "it inhibits domination" (Sillitoe, 2006: 2) by any of the participating women, clients and representatives alike. It reproduces the female collectives and their morality of sharing and cooperation and, simultaneously, neutralizes the individualistic competitive behaviour favoured by the direct sales cosmetic companies. Like in the examples of Malay and Turkish women, the business relations and the use of money are ritually transformed to foster solidarity amongst the women in the small collectives. In their transformation monetary relations and the transactions in cosmetic valuables, the creation and maintaining of delayed debts re-payment are all represented amongst the researched women as "bonds of kinship" (Bloch, 1989;

White, 1994: 141). Within their small collectives the researched women become '*like sisters*'.

## **Conclusion**

In his work on anthropological theory of value Graeber suggests that “the most valuable objects in gift economies are valued mainly because they embody some human quality” (Graeber, 2001: 211). In the case of researched female collectives the cosmetic valuables accommodate trust and mutual support women can draw from their bonded alliances. These alliances come to existence through shared beautification practices and obligatory collective manipulation of cosmetics both of which are delivered in regular collective rituals. Through this process of ritualization cosmetics pass from the sphere of commodity exchange into the sphere of gift exchange.

However, in the researched setting the gift-commodity distinction was not clear-cut. Cosmetics were manoeuvred within the “gift-commodity continuum” (Kopytoff, 1986). When looking at the practices and the relationship between the cosmetic companies and their representatives, we find more of the commodity exchange behaviour. And, on the contrary, the behaviour found amongst the women in the researched small collectives corresponds more with the gift exchange. The changing gift-commodity status of the direct sales cosmetics renders them “ambiguous” (Gregory, 1982; Kopytoff, 1986). This ambiguity leaves space for the manipulation of the status of cosmetics by both the cosmetic companies as well as by their representatives and the small female collectives.

On one hand, the researched cosmetic companies manipulated the status of cosmetics on the gift-commodity axis by extending periods of payment for the purchased cosmetics thus creating space for possible development of relations of indebtedness between them and their representatives. Through this possibility of indebtedness they asserted relationship of domination over their representatives. However, the profit motive characteristic for the commodity exchange (Gregory, 1982) remained intact. It was supported by the companies' structure, ideology, practices and training aimed at their representatives.

On the other hand, women and their representatives adopted a series of strategies that shifted the status of the cosmetics towards gift objects. This shift took place in the collective cosmetic rituals. In these rituals the contradiction between cosmetic companies' quasi-gift relations and the emergent gift relations amongst the researched women was resolved: whereas cosmetics sold to representatives by the companies is de-ritualized, in the small female collective for the cosmetics to pass from the sphere of commodity exchange into the sphere of gift exchange collective cosmetic ritual needs to take place.

In these rituals women constantly influenced each other's behaviour through scanning for signs of ritual participation and commitment to their alliance. Yet the participating women did not exert their influence over the other ritual participants individualistically. On the contrary, this influence was collectivised and egalitarian – owned and exerted by the whole coalition of participating women. In its collectivised form such influence undermined the profit motive of the cosmetic companies and

opened up the space for mutual trust, commitment and support. These are the “sacred structures” that should not be measured by money (Graeber, 2001).

In this chapter I focused on the economic relations of the cosmetics exchange. I pointed out that cosmetics are exchanged as commodity only between the representatives and the respective cosmetic company. When it comes to transacting cosmetics between representatives and women from the small collectives, the business like relations undergo a series of ritual transformations. The result of such transformation is the re-contextualization of cosmetics – they are re-defined as gift-like valuables that are ritually exchanged in the closely bonded female collectives. An intrinsic part of these transactions in wealth is the creation of debts for the ordered cosmetics between representatives and their girlfriends that are to be always repaid with delay.

In their re-contextualization cosmetics and the transactions associated with them are abstracted from the individualistic competitive shopping practices that aim at the highest achievable profits and best individual purchases. On the contrary, they are inserted into a web of social relations and obligations that create bonds of solidarity and cooperation among all the participating women. The singularized cosmetics pass from the sphere of economic exchange into the sphere of ceremonial social exchange. Representatives act as mediators in this process in that they facilitate the transition of the cosmetics from the commodity sphere into the sphere of valuables through a series of transformative practices. On one hand, they keep the number of their clients and the height of their profits permanently low. On the other hand, they give up their profit altogether and sell the cosmetics at their cost price. They also create the

obligations in the form of debts. Consequently, instead of favouring their own individual gains in short-term cycle of transactions, they prioritize the long-term transactional order that reproduces the small female collectives and their specific morality of cooperation, reciprocity, equality and commitment to the group. The representatives' obligations to do so are tested by their girlfriends every fortnight in the ritual situations of collective catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics. At these ritual occasions cosmetics are re-appropriated and used by the female collectives to create a levelling space where cosmetics are obligatorily shared and manipulated. Within this space and through the collective ritual practice cosmetics become a signal that communicates the commitment of all the participating women to the female collective that has re-appropriated them. Cosmetics become the ritual symbol of the bonded group of girlfriends.

In the ceremonial exchange the respective direct sales cosmetics are vested with magical properties of efficacy and beautification potency. The shared cosmetics are constructed by the women as the most effective ones in achieving the desired beautification which makes them scarce and therefore valuable. The transacting in cosmetic valuables is a socio-political exchange in that women who take part in it form cooperative alliances through which they support each other in times of need.

Gregory points out that gift giving is about "achieving dominant position in a network of exchange relations" (Gregory, 1982: 76). Similarly, Sillitoe (2006) in his analysis of "spheres of exchange" suggests that the sphere of political and ritual exchanges of valuable items is the area where "competition for political status and social success takes place" (Sillitoe, 2006: 18). But unlike in the Melanesian examples analyzed by

Sillitoe, in the direct sales context women did not compete with each other through cosmetic exchange. On the contrary, through collective appropriation and distribution of valued cosmetic items they together achieved and controlled equal access to the cosmetic resources that was followed by the levelling of their attractiveness within the respective small group. Such re-contextualized cosmetics become the collective and collectivising property of the whole female alliance that takes part in purchasing them. They are used to reproduce the female collectives and their specific morality of group commitment, cooperation and equality of quasi kinship ties that in the ethnographic literature are referred to as “fictitious kinship” (Blacking, 1959; Power, 2000).

## Chapter four

### **‘And we all knew that, wow, what we are doing’: the collective cosmetic rituals**

Amongst the women I researched collective cosmetic rituals were the essential behaviour that created intimate bonds and commitments to their small collectives. There were two main occasions when women launched their rituals: collective catalogue browsing and collective distribution of cosmetics. These rituals were organized bottom-up by the women themselves and took place both with and without the companies’ representatives. I argue that in these rituals women created specific forms of collective ritual gender characterised by ambiguous male and female attributes that differed from the requirements of the quotidian femininity. When in ritual women used their “collective bodily counter-power” (Finnegan, 2008) to claim their own ritual time and space. By regularly participating in the collective cosmetic rituals women learnt a ritual template that enabled them to become part of any such collective across Slovakia.

In this chapter I use the concepts of “non-instrumentalism” (Boyer and Lienard, 2006; Rappaport, 1979; Whitehouse, 2012; Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014) and “collective emotional high” (Durkheim 1915/1975; Collins, 2004) to interpret the observed behaviours of collective catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics as rituals. I compare the instrumental precursor action with its ritualized behaviour to help me distinguish the observed rituals from the instrumental selling and buying behaviours.

### **The interpretive framework: ritual “non-instrumentalism” and “collective emotional high”**

Rappaport (1979) points out that ritual can be distinguished from other non-ritualistic types of behaviour through ritual specific formalism, redundancy, performance and non-instrumentalism (Rappaport, 1979: 174). The view that ritual is formally organized behaviour without instrumental function is shared by others (Boyer and Lienard, 2006; Rappaport, 1979; Whitehouse, 2012; Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014). Rituals are non-instrumental, also referred to as “causally opaque” (Whitehouse, 2012) or “goal-demoted” (Boyer and Lienard, 2006), in the sense that ritual behaviour does not have an easily discernible causal process within its sequence of action; it is “the way things are done” (Whitehouse, 2012). These ritual specific formal characteristics Rappaport (1979) coined the “obvious aspects of ritual”.

Some anthropologists point out that ritual behaviour can occupy shifting positions along a continuum of highly formalized rituals on one end and barely formalized rituals on the other (Bateson, 1936/1965; Collins, 2004; Connerton, 1989; Rappaport, 1979, 1999). For example Bateson (1936/1965) distinguished within the observed *naven* rituals small scale rituals reduced to gestures and exclamations compared to those with large, elaborate ritual displays. Lewis (2002) points out that most rituals amongst the Mbendjele Yaka Pygmies are “woven into daily life so subtly that they are almost invisible; they occur so informally that they are easy to miss” (Lewis, 2002: 126-127). Devisch shows that the healing rituals among the Yaka are, at least partially, improvised (Devisch, 1993: 39) and Katz shares similar observations about the healing rituals among the !Kung (Katz, 1982). These examples are consistent with Bell’s argument that formalism might not be intrinsic to ritual behaviour in general



and that ritual action can involve both formalized action and improvisation (Bell 1992, 1997).

Collins (2004) proposes that a high degree of formalism of ritual behaviour is often found in “formal rituals” that are “initiated by a commonly recognized apparatus of ceremonial procedures” (Collins, 2004: 49). In Collins’ view not all rituals are formalized to such a degree. He suggests that some rituals, those that he calls “natural”, come about “spontaneously without explicit concern that they are happening and without formally stereotyped procedures that would prompt them” (Collins, 2004: 50).

The shared experience of a collective emotional high – “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1912/1975; Collins, 2004) or synchronized emotional arousal (Bulbulia and Sosis, 2011; Konvalinka et al. 2011) is another important aspect of ritual behaviour. Rappaport (1979) understands collective effervescence as the indexical current emotional states synchronized by the formalized ritual performance (Rappaport, 1979: 180). In Rappaport’s (1979) interpretation ritual participants transmit information about their current emotional states to themselves and to other participants. In his view this information transcends the level of symbolism and becomes indexical. As such it indicates reliable information (Rappaport, 1979: 181). Knight (1999) brought forward a similar argument in that it is the indexicality of the body-signals transmitted by the ritual participants that assures the signal credibility. Following Rappaport (1979), Knight (1999) understands rituals as loud, multimedia, emotionally infectious and heavily redundant behaviours. By prolonging and repeating behaviours in the ritual displays ritual participants incur costs that can be

clearly observed. The costs of such displays enhance participants' credibility by testing the quality that they are advertising (Knight, 1999: 231). Unlike the use of words that Knight sees as low cost and therefore not intrinsically reliable signals, costly bodily displays in ritual performance that involve authentic emotions reliably demonstrate commitment to the group. Such ritually organized behaviour is collective and solidaristic and differs from the individual, competitive behaviour found outside ritual (Knight, 1991).

Here I use the concept of “non-instrumentalism” to show the difference between the instrumental shopping procedures aimed at profit and the non-instrumental ritual behaviour aimed at creating bonds and commitments amongst the participating women. I also show how the participating women assess the commitment to their group through regular participation in emotionally demanding ritual performances. I further show that only after trust is established among the ritual participants through taking part in collective ritual displays it is possible to use standardized linguistic formulae as the shorthand signals of group commitment. I use the concept of “collective emotional high” when researched women set apart ritual from ordinary everyday gendered behaviour as well as to show the potential of how such collectively ritualized behaviour is able to subvert the everyday femininity and work relationships.

### **Two types of ritual**

In everyday practices instrumental behaviour can be understood as an optimal strategy to achieve a goal. Among the women I studied the optimal ways of selling and buying cosmetics were set by the cosmetic companies. The representatives were instructed about the selling strategies in the sales manuals given to all new recruits and in the

regular monthly sales meetings. In the printed materials as well as in the meetings the actual selling procedure is represented as one-to-one sessions between the client and her representative. The representative would go through the catalogue with her client who would ask questions about cosmetics. Then the catalogue would be left with the client and collected ideally the next day together with the order. On the agreed date the representative would bring in the ordered cosmetics, give it to her client and collect the money. The client would inspect the cosmetics to check their quality such as, for example, the undamaged packaging or colour and possibly address questions to her representative. Then this particular selling procedure and distribution of cosmetics would be considered over. The aim of these optimized selling and buying behaviours is for the representatives to make the highest profit possible and for their clients to make the best buy possible – often represented by both parties as the best bargain. Such behaviour demands and encourages competition between representatives as well as between their clients. Representatives are encouraged to compete through the number of their customers and the height of their profits for best individual achievements. The clients shop individualistically trying to buy the best cosmetics to beautify themselves as individuals. In the understanding of many evolutionary psychologists such behaviour amongst women is interpreted as using the individual beauty advantage as a face value in female-female competition (Buss, 1994, 2008; Campbell, 2004; Ingo, Mize, Pratarelli, 2007).

However I found in my research that these optimized selling and buying procedures generating profit and individual advantage were the opposite of the spontaneous ritualized ways women themselves organized around the cosmetic practices into small bonded collectives. The observed shopping events were collective gatherings of

several women (usually three to four but at times five to six or more) where the representative could but did not have to be present. The collective decisions shared by all the participating women often led to overspending by the women. The representatives often lost their profit as they tended to sell cosmetics to these women at their cost price giving up the mark-up that would make their gain. During these events that I understand and analyze as rituals women collectively created a ritually specific female sociality where bonding and commitment to their collective had strong preference and precedence. When engaged in ritual, these women collectively subverted the strategies aiming at the maximizing of profits and advantage promoted by the cosmetic companies. Instead emergent group interests transcended individual interests.

As I suggested earlier (Fejdiova, 2016) there were two different types of ritual practices that occurred in the milieu of the studied direct sales cosmetic companies. Both centred on selling and purchasing of direct sales cosmetics. On the one hand, there were big formal institutional rituals of '*recognition*' called '*conferences*' that were organized at the national level for the sales representatives several times a year. Only representatives who have made profit high enough would qualify to attend these events. The guidelines for the expected profit margins were set beforehand in the companies' newsletters that were available to all the representatives. These '*conferences*' were organized and arranged by the cosmetic companies themselves. These events stressed not only the hierarchies within the company itself but among the representatives as well. At the '*conferences*' the best-selling representatives called '*leaders*' were publicly '*recognized*'. They were rewarded for their sales achievements by being called up to the stage where they gave a speech about their

success. They were applauded by the audience, at times with standing ovations and they received achievement awards from the company leaders. Representatives were awarded certificates; they '*won*' the right to attend the next year '*conference*'; they '*won*' the family holiday or they '*won*' the right to use the company car for the next year. The competitiveness and the hierarchical organization of the companies and of the whole selling process were reflected very clearly in these highly formalized, hierarchical rituals. All these institutional rituals centred on '*winning*' awards for the representatives who achieved the highest turn-over. They also aimed at motivating the '*conference*' participants to achieve ever higher profits. The formalized structure of these '*recognition*' rituals can be seen in specifically chosen spaces - often hotels in the mountains. Their beginnings and ends were clearly marked by addresses of the national company leaders. The opening addresses were followed by the success stories of chosen representatives and by the handing out of awards. The '*conference*' was then ended off by a celebratory banquet. These events were also characterized by the heightened emotional states of the participants manifest during the applause, through exclamations in the audience or tears on the stage when the moved representatives shared their success stories (Fejdiova, 2016).

On the other hand, these big highly formalized events were contrasted by the group levelling collective rituals organized from below by the cosmetics buyers. These informal rituals often took place at work places, cafés or cake shops or at the research participants' homes. They were small scale and typically about five or six women participated in them. When compared to the highly formalized corporate ceremonies described above these levelling rituals did not have an elaborate formal structure and they were often improvised (Fejdiova, 2016).

These rituals were further characterized by the relaxation of the work hierarchies. They were often short and typically lasted between ten to thirty minutes. Their length was often adjusted to the length of work and lunch breaks the women had at their disposal. However, I also observed cosmetic rituals happening outside the work environment that lasted up to two hours. Collective emotional high generated by the ritual participants, collective assertive loudness, uproarious laughter, exaggerated feminine behaviour and bonding amongst the ritual participants were crucial components of these rituals:

*“(…) one [of the women] was sitting and browsing it [the catalogue] and three others were standing above her, sometimes four, depending on whether there was someone with the authority to disperse them or not (laughs). (...) And it worked like this, the person [a female colleague] came to work and maybe it was straight at the first morning coffee or after the lunch break, that she took it [the catalogue] out and “oh, I have a new Avon catalogue!” and now they all swarmed together (laughs) and “Show me, show me!” and they started to leaf through it and now, I don’t know, “oh, what a lipstick!”, “Look, this would suit me!”, “oh no, it wouldn’t suit you!” and a similar hen gabble (laugh).” (Research participant Nr. 9, age 35, sales executive)*

The cosmetic ritual starts with the catchphrase known to all the women present ‘*I have a new Avon catalogue!*’ followed by all the purchasers dashing towards the woman with the catalogue. One of them is sitting and turning the pages while the others are looking at them while standing above her and talking and shouting often at the same time. This particular ritual takes place without the presence of the companies’ representative. It is initiated only by the purchasers themselves. They

orchestrate everything: ritual, orders and the distribution of cosmetics through a friend's friend. When no authority is present, they seize the entire office space. Their male colleagues grudgingly let them do it. All the women are expected to join in, and they do. Their emotional investment into the ritual is strong. They all shout over each other and laugh loudly. They are energized and they show it to each other through their bodily engagement in exalted movements. The tone and the pace of their conversation are exaggerated. Their gestures and overdone loudness differs from the expected normative feminine behaviour of everyday work practices (Fejdiova, 2016).

The observed cosmetic rituals varied in their length, extent and intensity but their form and content were identical in all the observed groups. The stable formal elements were seclusion of the researched women (actual or symbolic within a tight small circle with their backs towards the outsiders), collective catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics as well as an energetic collective emotional high of the participating women. The cosmetic rituals usually took place in spaces where the participating women felt they would not be disturbed, such as the back office of the coffee shop or in the teachers' room. The research participants referred to these places as '*our office*' or '*our lobby*'. The rituals were launched at fixed times usually every two weeks with each new catalogue or new order and under special circumstances, for example, when '*someone with the authority to disperse them*' was not present. These gatherings had marked beginnings and endings, often starting with the formula '*I've got the new catalogue!*' or '*Have you got the new catalogue?*' or '*I've got the cosmetics*' and finishing with the closing of the catalogue or putting the new cosmetics aside. All the women present in the ritualized space were expected to join in the collective behaviour. The formal elements showed a tendency towards

stylization, repetition, redundancy and stereotyping, all obvious aspects of ritual (Rappaport, 1979). The recurrent ritual content was represented by the sharing of intimate bodily information, the use of a specific coded language referring to cosmetics and beautification, by making collective decisions about what to order and by the collective manipulation of cosmetics that accentuated sensory experiences centring on the body such as mutual touching, the smelling and putting on of cosmetics.

These observed stable elements constituted a ritual template that the cosmetic purchasers learnt while participating in cosmetic rituals. The researched women knew exactly, what was the expected and correct behaviour at any time while in the ritual. The ritually acquired template enabled the studied women to join any such small collective formed on the basis of collective direct sales cosmetic purchase anywhere in Slovakia:

*“I knew an Avon lady, but she’s from [a far off town in Slovakia]. She’s my sister’s daughter in law. I also had a neighbour and she was selling Avon, but she moved away (...) so here, at work, amongst the colleagues we keep ordering it.” (Research participant Nr. 24, age 52, office worker)*

*“We used to order Avon at my previous work. Here, I’m here for about a year now. So at my previous work place a colleague of mine was selling Avon, so I was ordering from her.” (Research participant Nr. 24, age 38, office worker)*



In the above examples the research participants are now sharing cosmetics within the same such collective at their work place. Before they became colleagues, however, due to their social and professional mobility, they were successively members of several such small collectives at their previous work or at their previous or current place of residence.

All of the research participants, who were during the time of research in their early and mid twenties, learnt this ritual template at puberty. As teenage girls they experienced the introduction and establishment of Avon and Oriflame cosmetic companies on the Slovak market in the mid and late 90s. They learnt the template from their girlfriends at secondary schools, from their mothers, other female relatives and from the female friends of these relatives. These female adults often worked as the cosmetic companies' representatives or had a female friend who did. The young girls often worked as intermediaries between these relatives and their class-mates bringing to school the catalogues and the ordered cosmetics. Sometimes the young girls themselves worked as representatives. Thus often small collectives formed within their secondary school classrooms. The following examples were chosen from many:

*"I started to order at the secondary school, I was in the first year then (...) I was doing it for about three years and then I left it and when I came here to [this town], in the last year of the secondary school I started to do it again (...)." (Research participant Nr. 6, age 21, waitress and university student)*

*“I got into it at the secondary school. There was always a friend working for them, so she was like, choose something, girls (...) and then, for example my sister does it. And I had a colleague who did it. That was when I was still living in [the other town].”*  
(Research participant Nr. 11, age 22, office worker)

*“I used to work as a representative, when I was at the secondary school, but then later I didn’t have people around me [whom I knew and who would order from me] because I moved house, so I stopped. And then I started to work here and I started ordering again.”* (Research participant Nr. 12, age 26, office worker)

From the above examples it is clear, that the research participants started to form the small collectives centred on direct sales cosmetics at their secondary schools. The spatial mobility of the researched women as well as their ability to use the learnt ritual template predisposed and prepared them to join other such small collectives on leaving school.

Gengenbach (2003) describes a similar situation that emerged amongst women under colonial rule in Mozambique. Here, in the environment of patrilineal kinship, small groups of young girls at puberty were influenced by their girl friends in their age cohort to get tattoos. Through these tattoos women often formed bonds of friendship and reciprocity that linked them across generations. Women also moved freely across the country and tattoos were a way to join these networks of female alliances.

### **Expressive ritual displays**

When the women had enough time and a secure space they launched an expressive ritual performance. The following statement describes the situation of catalogue browsing of women who worked in a coffee shop. The cosmetic ritual took place during a work break and most of the women could take part in it. It was happening at the back office where there were *‘just us girls’* and no one from outside would intrude. The line manager joined in with her employees:

*“It’s a discussion about it, and each of us usually tells, that how great this [cosmetic item] is and what it is good for and how she uses it and through this then she persuades the other one, too, and this way we put together our observations. It’s lovely, such a feeling of catharsis, our hen moment. (...) because we are only girls here at work, so it’s usually here at work and it happens during a break, we take it out [the catalogue], and it’s our, it’s our pleasure and we browse through that catalogue and Zuzka is usually with us, our representative, and she tells us her experiences with the cosmetics, and she always describes it nicely, how great it is and we learn about it and we ask whether it really is like that and another one tells her story about it and then we just all agree on who will order what and when it will come and, such a lovely time. (...) when we do it together it’s about having a good time, we can enjoy it, we can savour it, we have time to talk about it, no one is looking at the time, how late it is. Then we forget the time and it’s our moment, when we can tell to each other ‘yes, this is good’, so it’s a time out a little bit.” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)*

When women launch this ritual at the back office of the coffee shop, each of them joins in. It is the collective expectation that each of them will engage in the ritualized language. At this occasion the behaviour of single women is organized by the whole group. The collective interest is manifested in the way the women *'put together their observations'* and in the way they all *'agree who will order what'*. The behaviour of each present woman is subordinated to this concern and they all join in through sharing the experience: *'each of us tells'* and *'one persuades the other'*. When they have *'time to talk about it together'* no one *'is looking at the time, how late it is'*. All of them together have a *'lovely time; a good time'*. Then they can *'enjoy it'*, in fact *'savour it'*. This time is time out of ordinary time. It is the ritually marked time that separates the everyday and ordinary from the times out of times, from time made eternal by ritual (Rappaport, 1979). For that particular moment, the participating women manage to stop the time – one of the defining characteristics of ritual (Sims, 2006). It is just them, girlfriends tête-à-tête, savouring the pleasure of it in a brief moment out of time. They *'forget the time'* and it is their *'hen moment'* when they bond through cosmetics in their ritual performance. In this brief instant, when the women forget the time and in their intimacy and sharing they stop it, they can tell to each other *'yes, this is good'*.

I observed another such well pronounced ritual with the group for which I worked as an Oriflame representative. It took place at the *'Avon hen party'* – a new marketing product of the company aimed at boosting the sales and recruiting new representatives, which was introduced during my research. Avon hen parties were available for about a year after their introduction although the company does not offer it anymore in Slovakia. In order to capture the difference between the instrumental selling

procedure offered top-down by the cosmetic company and the cosmetic ritual launched bottom-up by the women themselves I will contrast the relevant situations in which the Avon representative was present with the emotionally intense ritual performance that happened after she had left.

The party took place outside the work place at the home of the hosting woman. At the beginning the event was led by the Avon zone manager. The hostess prepared popcorn and beer as refreshments and jokingly commented on the choice of beer as something men would drink when watching football on TV. Women got together in the expectation of '*trying new cosmetics and having fun*'. However, there was also a feeling of nervousness, especially on the part of the hostess, because she suspected that she would be the object of the Avon manager's pressure to become one of her new recruits.

The event started with the arrival of the manager. After we were all introduced she opened her silver cosmetic case and laid out the products. We, the participating women but not the manager, then agreed amongst each other what cosmetics and procedures we liked to try. Then the zone manager explained and showed how to use the chosen products and how to achieve chosen effects through cosmetics. We, again just us women without the manager, then agreed who would be the one of us on whom the manager would demonstrate the correct use of make-up. Throughout the evening the Avon manager was trying to persuade the hostess to become part of her selling network at several occasions. It made the hostess feel uncomfortable and prevented her from enjoying the party. In retrospect, when talking about it amongst us we all commented on how intrusive and annoying her pressure was.

The women referred to the zone manager organizing the party as *'auntie'* or *'teacher'*. She clearly represented the authority of the cosmetic company and was not seen as *'one of the girls'*. After she left, the women present started gossiping about her *'straight after the door closed behind her'*. The women targeted several of the Avon manager's characteristics seen as inappropriate. They commented on how out-of-place she was for the setting in terms of her age:

*"I expected someone younger, of our age. That's what I associate with a hen party. With her it felt more like an old aunties' party". (Research participant Nr. 2, age 26, admin manager)*

Her behaviour was seen as inappropriate in that she focused on the hostess in order to persuade her to become an Avon representative in her own network and the hostess did not want that. The other women noticed it and commented on it:

*"I was glad that it finished, because I knew from the beginning what she was up to and I knew that she'd try to break Marika or someone else and that she will lobby for her goals, with which she came (...). Marika was nervous about it from the very beginning because she didn't want to do it [to become an Avon lady]. And Marika was poking me, like, save me or something. And I was praying for it to finish soon and for her to leave so that we could chat about cosmetics or even something else, just us alone without someone who would be watching us and trying to persuade Marika in the corner of the room about something. And because I knew what she would be up to and it proved true, I was myself nervous, I did mind it. And I was a bit disappointed because Avon could organize some events without wanting something for it. (...) even*

*if looking at it from the point of view of achieving bigger orders, it could be done nicely, [that] you try it and you realize that, yes, from that face mask my skin feels for the next three days like something, right? But not them, they are only interested in having more and more Avon ladies.” (Research participant Nr. 3, age 25, client liason officer, Avon lady)*

The above statements show a divide that separated the women from the Avon manager. To be able to have a ‘chat’, women had to wait for the manager to leave. With her present they felt as if they were being ‘watched’. It was not just the age difference that separated them. The women were very uncomfortable about the manager’s pressure when trying to push one of them to become a representative. There was a tension amongst the women when the manager was present. The conversation did not flow spontaneously. The women were always very self-aware. The unspoken pressure of ‘*wanting something for it*’ just did not connect with ‘*fun*’ usually associated with hen parties and anticipated by the women. A party like this was not ‘*done nicely*’. When the manager was not looking, the participating women were making faces and eyes at each other creating a secret alliance against the representative. Only after an hour and a half, when the zone manager left, the female collective took over and the cosmetic ritual started. The difference between the two situations is very clear. The party led by the Avon zone manager aimed at optimizing profit-making and new recruits compared to the collective cosmetic ritual in which money and profit gave way to the interests of the group:

*“When she (the Avon zone manager) left, the atmosphere relaxed (laughs) and we started to have fun. And we pillaged her [Marika’s] shoe box with cosmetics and*

*maybe it was more fun than with that auntie, because she had her objective, for which she was campaigning the whole evening, poor wretch (laughs) and we wanted just try it [cosmetics] and enjoy ourselves and without her it was more fun. (...) And from your reactions I would tell that you did have fun. You were yelling as if ... (laughs) (...) and then we applauded Marika 'our new Avon lady is here!'." (Research participant Nr. 3, age 25, client liason officer, Avon lady)*

When the zone manager left the atmosphere changed completely. Only then did the participating women *'started to have fun'*. The first thing the women did was to negate any sign of the company's representative presence through creating a counterpoint to her and her *'silver [cosmetic] case'*. They swarmed around the hostess and her shoe box full of cosmetics and started pillaging it. The shoe box stood in stark contrast to the shiny case not only in its appearance but also in its accessibility to the women. When they wanted to handle or try cosmetics controlled by the zone manager, the women had to employ deception to get their hands on it. The usual ploy was to ask a question about a particular product that they wanted to reach. But when just amongst themselves, women could and did take from the shoebox whatever they wanted without asking, opened it, smelled it and tried it on. The situation culminated with applauding the hostess and proclaiming her the *'new Avon lady'*. Only after these acts of re-appropriation of the space in the flat and of the whole event the real party started and women launched their cosmetic ritual:

*"(...) when she (Avon zone manager) left it was something as if a teacher would have left the school and we suddenly got all the school just for ourselves and we could talk, it was more relaxed, the authority wasn't there anymore (...) and then I felt we were*



*on the same wave length, that doesn't have to happen at each gathering, when we meet up like this [to hand out cosmetics], but then I really had the feeling that we were as if sisters or something like that, you know (...). That was great, when the woman left, then Anika had for us those small samples and it all gathered around the bed and we were either sitting on the bed or kneeling around it as if around a fire pit. And that was great and I remember such an emotion that we all smelled each other's perfumes and it was very spontaneous and pretty mad. (...) And we were so happy about it that, what a fragrance and what a sample! That was great. I really enjoyed it very much. And it was fun (...) like Anika was throwing at us those things [cosmetics] and we were squealing and I think we all knew, that, wow, what are we doing, you know, but we really enjoyed it very much. It was a very liberating feeling that maybe the world looks at women stereotypically, that a woman and cosmetics that's like, but there we could really express it because we were among us and all of us knew that is was important for us. Thus I wasn't scared to do 'uaaa, what a fragrance!!' and open it straight away and 'smell it!' and 'what cream is this?!' and so on. It was very familial and so maybe bonding. Although I didn't know Anika, I met her maybe once at Marika's place, but we didn't really talk then or anything. Also that we were joking together and that we were laughing together. Well, during that evening that group, who we were there, was very bonded, I think." (Research participant Nr. 2, age 26, admin manager)*

The instrumental selling and purchasing of cosmetics as represented by the company's representative and the expectations of the participating women for a cosmetic ritual do not go together. The women feel like pupils watched by a 'teacher'. But as soon as 'the teacher left the school' the ritual starts. Women mutually attune and synchronize

their emotions to the point that they feel it as *'being on the same wave length'*. Together they create a space where they can experience fictitious sisterhood: they feel *'as if sisters'*. As I have shown elsewhere (Fejdiova, 2016) around the double bed in the middle of the room women form an *'all-embracing circle'* that does not allow hierarchy or external control (James, 2003: 83). The bed represents their focal point, or as they put it, their *'fire pit'*. Around this imagined fire they sit or kneel with their own representative, who is one of them. Suddenly, women start to play a throw and catch game with cosmetics. The representative is throwing cosmetics at the women who are snatching it with squeals. Women create their own emotionally centralizing space and they go *'pretty mad'*. This collectively felt madness sets the whole event apart from quotidian ordinary behaviour. Behaving *'pretty mad'* means to be loud, unbound, wild and free because they all know that here and now they are equal. Secluded from the outside world they can dare to *'behave badly'* and they enjoy it. These women do not care about how they are seen by others. They know that they are safe that what they do is important to all of them. Then they can *'really express'* the joy and have fun. They are squealing, yelling, shouting, laughing and joking surrounded by the close and known bodies of their girlfriends moving in synchrony around the imaginary but felt *'fire pit'*. Women themselves comment that they behaviour is far from ordinary. All of them know that *'wow, what are we doing'* yet they do not stop because they *'really enjoy it very much'*. With overdone gestures that coincide with loud talk interrupted by sequences of screams and squeals women grab the cosmetics that fell on the bed, open them, smell them and try them on. They put it on each other. One smears the other. Yet they all make sure that all the women who are in the room join in. They smell cosmetics from each other's hands. They snatch them and they scream: *'What a fragrance!'* Then they open it straight away: *'Smell*

*it!*’ they yell again and all of them do. And as the research participant observes: *‘it doesn’t have to happen at each gathering’* yet that evening as a result of the collective joy women feel *‘very bonded’*. The difference in their behaviour with the Avon manager present and when they are on their own is striking. These women when *‘behaving badly’* are very far from the utilitarian and instrumental trying of cosmetics before purchase (Fejdiova, 2016).

### **Ritualized language**

Turner (1967) understands ritual symbols as the smallest units of ritual. Every ritual, according to Turner, has its dominant symbol through which the purpose of the ritual is realized. This symbol refers to values and principles of social organization. In Turner’s view such ritual symbols can be objects, activities, relationships, gestures, events, and spatial units. In line with Turner’s conception of ritual symbols the researched direct sales cosmetics is the main focus of the collective cosmetic rituals. They represent the main focus, ritual content, and the medium through which the ritual takes place (Turner, 1967). Like the Ndembu symbol of the muddy tree, cosmetics also mobilize women who ritually handle them. It guides their focus on their collective solidarity. It also distinguishes and separates the ritual participants as bonded girlfriends from other female and male colleagues who are excluded from the ritual. Cosmetics also correspond to the heterosexual aspirations of attractiveness of ritual participants in their relations to men outside the ritual. They also stand for the collective cosmetic ritual itself.

The cosmetic rituals interpreted in the previous section took place in those circumstances when the ritual participants were in a position to launch an energetically and emotionally intense and expressively rich performance. Many times, however, the observed collective cosmetic rituals, consistent with the observations Lewis made about Mbendjele Yaka rituals (Lewis, 2002), were very subtle in their expression while others, in line with Bateson's (1936/1965) argument about the *naven* rituals reduced to gestures and exclamations, were minimized to the exchange of specific ritualized language about cosmetics.

On the one hand, the exchange of ritualized language formed an inseparable component of the observed cosmetic rituals. These were obligatory linguistic formulae expected at both ritual occasions of catalogue browsing as well as of distribution of cosmetics. Often, however, they would stand alone. Cosmetics were the main focus and topic of all of these ritualized conversations. The research participants expected from each other to talk in a specific matching format of questions and answers about their own use of cosmetics and to give honest judgements about the suitability of particular cosmetics for the other women present. Because cosmetics, in line with Turner's (1967) argument, are the dominant ritual symbol, they operate as the ritual morphemes, the smallest ritual units, in Turner's understanding. We can therefore interpret these ritualized conversations as condensed miniature cosmetic rituals.

I observed one such ritualized conversation amongst the women in the coffee shop. Most of the women who regularly ordered cosmetics were busy serving customers. Nevertheless, three of them were standing at the counter, one turning the catalogue

pages and the other two standing from each side of her looking down at the pictures. The communication between them was very simple. A woman in the middle at each turn of the page in quiet voice said: *'Zuzka had this shampoo', 'Eva had this hand cream'*, referring to the female co-workers who have already bought the respective cosmetics. *'I had this mascara.'*, she continued. Turning to the woman on her right she said: *'This would suit you'*. The other two answered every such statement with the expected rejoinder: *'How did she like it?'* *'Did you like it?'*, or *'This looks nice. Would it suit me?'* The woman turning the pages said: *'I wouldn't buy it. Lucia had it and it wasn't very good'*.

Such situations of ritualized language use often popped-up unexpectedly and without planning or preparation. Whether the women have already seen the catalogue, knew the products in question or wanted to buy one was not decisive. And indeed, some women participating in such conversations would have already seen the catalogue while others would know the discussed products. Yet they all still took part in the exchange of ritualized formulae. Taking part in the ritualized conversations when they were happening was seen by these women as obligatory and all the women from the collective were expected to join in. In the ritual situations they listened to the formulae, showed interest in them even though they did not learn anything new about the cosmetics and gave the correct response. Interpretation of such behaviour should not therefore be reduced only to practicalities of gathering information about cosmetics with the aim of a good purchase. These standardized formulae were taught and used in the collective cosmetic rituals and only the women taking part, the insiders, knew how and when to use them. They represented the secret knowledge that belonged to the bonded and trusted female collective. The researched women

carefully listened for these formulae and always responded with matching questions or answers.

As Power (2000) shows for the secret language use in the Bantu girls' initiation ceremonies the ability to use secret language serves as a proof that the girl underwent the initiation ritual. The costs of the ritual were seen as guarantee of the reliability of the girls as allies within the female community (Power, 2000).

Among the Bantu speaking Bemba and Venda, girl initiates attended initiation schools where they were taught specific ritual knowledge which was constructed as secret knowledge (Blacking, 1969; Richards, 1956). Richards (1956) suggests that Bemba girls learnt a secret language of rhymes, songs and linguistic formulae that referred to the *chisungu* initiation ceremony. According to Richards, the knowledge girls gained in the *chisungu* initiation was not practical or instructive. Instead it proved that the girls had passed through the initiation rituals because this was the only way they could gain this knowledge (Richards, 1956).

Among the Venda, according to Blacking (1969), initiates learnt specific ritualized *milayo* riddles that came in a question and answer format. The initiated girls were expected to know the correct answers to matching questions. Power (2000) points out that *milayo* riddles operated as passwords to certain privileges of association. Blacking (1969) shows that the ability to recite *milayo* supported a woman's claim to the benefits of the Venda female support network. As Power (2000) points out a girl could only learn *milayo* by attending the *vusha/domba* initiation school. What she

gained in return was the access to support from her fellow women in the female networks.

Power (2000) stresses the costliness of the initiation ceremonies. The girls' kin had to pay for ritual experts and food for the ritual feasts. The girls were removed from the labour force for long periods of seclusion and they underwent hard ritual tests of conduct (Power, 2000: 85). Knight (1998) suggests that costly ritual displays reliably demonstrate in-group solidarity. Power (2000) suggests that in the situations of the girls' initiation schools costly rituals operated as frameworks for the correct use of the secret language. According to Power (2000) the learning of this secret language within costly ritual trials of behaviour and the ability to use it correctly served as evidence that the girls had passed through the ritual (Power, 2000: 87). Power shows that the secret language incorporated references to ritual actions, objects and taboos and the ability to use it proved that girls passed through the initiation ritual schools. Only after the girls mastered the secret language they were seen as reliable members of female alliances (Power: 2000). Power (2000) points out that during the initiation schools red cosmetic were used amongst the girls and the ritual associates to mark out ritually established coalitions.

In the studied setting a costly ritual performance centred on the collective manipulation of cosmetics which also preceded the use of the secret language amongst the research participants. Like in the case of the Bantu girls initiation schools where the ability to use a secret language operated as a signal of the girls' reliability in the ritual alliance of women (Power, 2000), the correct use of ritually acquired secret language amongst the cosmetics purchasers reliably demonstrated their

commitment to their cosmetic coalition. The secret linguistic formulae used amongst the women I studied represented the proof of belonging – only the insiders, those women who have been through the cosmetic rituals knew its expected correct use. By using the secret language the women in cosmetic collectives effectively protected their boundaries, clearly distinguishing the ones who were in from the outsiders. The way to the benefits ensuing from being part of the bonded cosmetic collectives was opened up only to those women who underwent the collective cosmetic rituals and proved it by regular and correct use of the secret language. Participating women mutually monitored the use of the required formulae effectively and repetitively recognizing and re-creating the boundary between the ritual participants and female outsiders. They knew exactly who was taking part in the collective cosmetic rituals:

*“(...) the one who doesn’t order [cosmetics] (...) she doesn’t ask for my opinion, ‘tell me, what does it smell like?’, right, or ‘what’s it like?’, ‘for how many uses?’ or so, she only goes through it [the catalogue] and nothing. The one who does buy it and spots, I don’t know, something new in the catalogue, she asks me straight away ‘what’s it like?’ (...) so that’s the difference (...) the one who buys it always asks for my opinion, or what it’s like or whether I liked it or whether I have tried it on, so.”*  
*(Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, waitress and university student)*

Here, the representative sums up the expected behaviour of her girlfriends reflected in the ritualized use of language. Women who do not buy the cosmetics yet nevertheless go through the catalogue do not say the anticipated sentences. They only ‘go through the catalogue and nothing’. On the other hand, women who buy and use the cosmetics



know what to ask and when. They are expected to ask about smell, usage, quality, satisfaction or who has already *'tried it'*. These questions are addressed to the representatives and to her girlfriends alike and both parties are expected to deliver accurate and honest answers. These coded utterances represent shibboleths that help the women recognize which one is participating in the collective cosmetic practices. Women carefully listen for the anticipated questions and matching answers effectively monitoring each other's speech. What is tracked down in the quoted example are not as much properties of the cosmetics but whether the participating women continue to show their commitment to the group. Use of ritualized speech represents a mutual test for admission into the collective. Each woman needs to maintain herself as its member through the regular use of the ritualized language. Its knowledge and use show the willingness of the participating women to become and stay part of the female collective and respect its boundaries.

Contrary to ritually bonded girlfriends, the outsider women were differentiated and not trusted when it came to beauty matters. With these women talking about cosmetics was seen as inappropriate, something that is not talked about:

*"With the other women, with whom I don't talk about cosmetics, so to them I would only say 'you look good' but I don't ask them 'what do you use' or so. (...) We wouldn't say things [to them] that we would say to each other. That's the biggest difference."* (Research participant Nr. 2, age 26, admin manager)

This example demonstrates that there are pieces of information not shared with every woman. Whereas with women who are known to the research participant to regularly

buy and use the direct sales cosmetics, she is ready to and does talk about the cosmetics in great detail. However, with other women she is self-conscious in both her own exposure and in gathering information about women who are not seen as part of the small collective. Information about cosmetics and its use is seen as sensitive and it is reserved only to the trusted girlfriends with whom she shares the ritualized consumption of cosmetics. Women who do not participate in the cosmetic gatherings are seen as *'the others'*, they are the outsiders who do not belong to the group. The sharing of 'beauty secrets' in this context implies trust participating women have in each other.

### **Against the everyday habitus**

Rituals are understood as emotionally arousing behaviours (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1912/1975; Whitehouse, 2012; Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014). The studied collective cosmetic rituals were characterized by intense exalting and euphoric emotions. The researched women engaged in shared jokes and loud laughter that represented a building-up towards the collective emotional high experienced at these rituals. All the women present were expected to engage in sharing jokes and uproariously laugh at them. Bakhtin (1984) studied the collective and collectivising popular culture of laughter and carnival of the European folklore represented in the literary work of Rabelais. In his work he points out that shared laughter and jokes owned by the collective exhibit group levelling properties and carry in them a collectivising agency. Through laughing and joking together the research participants expressed their willingness to be on the same level with each other, or as the women themselves put it *'on the same wave length'*, prepared to give up the existing work

hierarchies and the advantages that came with them and to be *'like sisters'*. At times the shared laughter created among the women feelings of euphoria that they then afterwards referred to as something that *'felt really good'* or *'the fun we have there!'*. When in collective rituals research participants stopped engaging in the separating hierarchies and individual differentiating interests of their work environment that operated outside the ritual time. The line managers and head teachers joined in with their employees, the representatives with their clients. As the shared laughter and collective emotional high took over, the hierarchies dissolved and the ritual egalitarianism took over. The women taking part in these rituals formed one equalized collective - a levelled fellowship of ritually bonded girlfriends.

In his analysis of the “medieval and renaissance culture of the market place” Bakhtin (1984) shows that the carnivalesque culture of shared laughter has the power for a restricted period of time to turn the existing world with its hierarchical order upside down. The laughter that carries such potency is collectivized, exaggerated and uproarious (Bakhtin, 1984). As Bakhtin further points out it permits the authority and hierarchy to relax and it favours the emergence of a temporal collective culture of reversal.

Through their shared unbound ritual euphoria the research participants crossed the borders of the ordinary. United through the medium of cosmetics they temporarily reversed the mode of everyday work routine. In their shared performance of mutual grooming and beautification the studied women created beautiful ritualized bodies that for the duration of the ritual time performed as collectivized and collectivizing totality. Such collective ritualized body is the focus of the “medieval culture of

laughter” analyzed by Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1984: 88). This body is in Bakhtin’s words “grotesque”. Its body parts are “grossly exaggerated” (Bakhtin, 1984: 293). They stick out from the body and are accompanied by references to sexual organs and sex. Its hierarchy is turned upside-down, the lower stratum takes the place of the upper. This body is simultaneously dying and reborn. It goes out and beyond its limits, it transgresses itself and it connects to other bodies. Thus in Bakhtin’s understanding such body is never individual; it is always collective and collectivizing. Yet such body is also never just one body, it always comprises a dual aspect by combining logical opposites. So, in Bakhtin’s words the “grotesque body is always and simultaneously both, old and young, male and female, human and animal” (Bakhtin, 1984: 322-323). Bakhtin, as a literary critic, used the term “grotesque” against the single, individual, closed and strictly limited body of the “new bodily canon” found in “the in art and belle lettres and polite conversation of modern times” (Bakhtin, 1984: 319). Yet I suggest that what Bakhtin observed in his analysis of Rabelaisian literature is the collective *ritualized* body with its dual properties of both, old and young, male and female, human and animal. It is this duality that distinguishes the collective ritualized body from the individual quotidian one. References to lower bodily stratum with its “grotesque bodily processes” (Bakhtin, 1984: 355) and associated fluids prevent that body to be seen as sexually attractive and thus available. On the contrary, this “grotesque” sexually ambiguous and exaggerated collective body represents the ritualized reversal of attractiveness that culminates in its sexual unavailability. Correspondingly, the decorated bodies of the researched women were not just attractively cosmeticised. They were simultaneously exaggerated in their femininity and they assumed attributes of the masculine creating ritual dualism and sexual

unavailability. I believe that it is this ritual dualism and sexual unavailability that form the fundamental attributes of the Bakhtinian “grotesque”.

Following the analysis of initiation rituals amongst the Khoisan and Hadza hunter-gatherers, Power and Watts (1997) advanced an argument according to which during initiation ritual the ritual participants perform both, male and female, human and animal at the same time. Female initiates enact the roles of males and male initiates obtain female attributes. According to Power and Watts, such gender ambiguity is the property of ritual gender – “gender of power”, and “ritual potency derives from a unified gender embodying both female and male characteristics” (Power and Watts, 1997: 549). Like the popular ritualized culture of carnival and market place analyzed by Bakhtin, initiation rituals among the Khoisan and Hadza “turn apparent opposites into conceptual equivalents” (Power and Watts, 1997: 553). The categories of male and female, human and animal become fused. The ritual power is expressed through the imagery of blood, death and nakedness. Yet the potentially erotic significance of the ritual exposure of Khoisan and Hadza women is in Power’s and Watts’ understanding ambivalent. As Power and Watts stress, in the everyday circumstances no Khoisan or Hadza woman would so expose herself and therefore the possible erotic interpretation needs to be re-considered (Power, Watts, 1997). In the ritual context this collective exposure carries connotations of maleness and animality not heterosexual availability (Power and Watts, 1997: 554). This ritual gender ambivalence found among the Khoisan and Hadza could be seen as corresponding to the dual body in ritual mode of the European festive folk traditions analyzed by Bakhtin. The collective ritual body is simultaneously both, male and female, human and animal and sexually unavailable.

Amongst the Ihanzu women of Tanzania Sanders (2000) noticed in the rain making rituals carnivalesque gender ambiguous characteristics that he defines as “gender complementarity”. And Gluckman (1954) observed such a “ritual reversal” amongst the Zulu women in the “rituals of rebellion”. In Slovak ethnographic material we find examples of gender ambiguity and anthropomorphism in the processions of masks around winter solstice and in the carnival period and nuptial rituals, the latter two stressing the mock, comic, in Bakhtin’s understanding “grotesque”, aspects of cross-dressed bodies (Bockova, 1988; Bogatyriov, 1973; Feglova, 1998; Horvathova, 1986; Lescak, Sirovatka, 1982)

We find this collective ritual bodily dualism amongst the research participants when taking part in the collective cosmetic rituals. On the one hand, women engaged in collective beautification practices that were aimed at the maximum attractiveness of the women present. These collectively created beautified bodies, however, cannot be understood only in the one aspect of beauty and availability because they displayed exaggerated female characteristic, male aspects and properties that could be linked to the bodily lower stratum.

James suggests that ritual gains its power “partly from speaking against and ironically with ‘ordinary’ habitus” (James, 2003: 79). Similarly Bakhtin (1984) proposes that the collective ritual body is always transgressive. The ritual behaviour I observed was consistent with these propositions. As I have shown elsewhere (Fejdiova, 2016) in the ritual performance the studied women established a temporal counter-culture of opposition to and exaggeration of the expectations of everyday femininity. Collectively they created a form of hyper-femininity that inflated and exaggerated the

elements of the required everyday practices associated with work and personal gender relations with men and they opposed it. In ritual mode the research participants exaggerated their gestures and amplified their talk and laughter up to the point of squealing. *'Like crows'* they swooped down on the cosmetics right away. When talking about their ritual behaviour women themselves clearly recognized that their behaviour was far from ordinary: *'it was pretty mad'* and *'we all knew, that, wow, what are we doing!'*. They grabbed cosmetics, snatched it from each other and started putting it on straight away; with squeals they smelled it. The exalted gestures and amplified sounds were all behaviour intended for this ritual time (Fejdiova, 2016).

Yet as I have shown (Fejdiova, 2016) this femininity assimilated elements of masculine assertiveness. The masculine components of the collective ritual behaviour were reflected in the throw and catch games cosmetic purchasers played when throwing cosmetics at each other. They drank beer because *"that's what men drink while they watch football"* and they adopted femininely unattractive positions when smelling and trying on cosmetics and browsing the catalogues. This hyper-femininity combined both elements feminine as well as masculine and it was not gender specific but ritual specific. Thus in collective cosmetic rituals cosmetic purchasers displayed gender ambivalent characteristics. Collectively they performed both male and female simultaneously. They generated ritual "gender of power" that unified both of these categories of attributes (Power and Watts, 1997: 556) in the similar way the principle of duality of the collective ritualized body unified female and male attributes in the style of "grotesque" that Bakhtin (1984) noticed and emphasised in the European festive popular traditions.

The ritualized hyper-femininity emerged only within the ritual time and space. When the cosmetic rituals came to an end, the ritually created gender returned back to its polarized un-ambiguous form of quotidian femininity. Yet during these rituals women temporary expanded and amplified the gendered signal to such an extent that it became vested with a potential of collective agency. It carried in it the power of a ritually bonded collective of women sharing their fantasy together. Yet any such ritual performance was fragile and could be easily sabotaged by just one person present and not engaging in it.

In the ritual performances women immersed themselves into the world of senses, play and jokes through which escaped the ideology of hierarchy. Amongst themselves they established an egalitarian environment where they engaged in the assertive, uproarious laughter and strong shared emotionalism. Contrary to the expected behaviour at work characterized as serious, modest, quiet, individualistic, achievements oriented, competitive and respecting the existing work hierarchies, the observed ritual behaviour represented its opposite. It was playful, full of jokes, immodest, loud, sharing, focused on displaying commitment to the group and cooperation. It levelled the existing work hierarchies and created an egalitarian space where the research participants became collectivized through the shared cosmetic ritual. As one of the research participants puts it:

*“A woman would scratch the eyes out of the other woman, they don’t understand it, they don’t want to see it. Men stick together, the problems bring them together. A woman at work would do anything to show off. She’ll scratch the eyes out of the other one. Women can’t unite, we don’t support each other (...) Women can best relax when*



*they are among themselves. Therefore it is vitally important to have such a network because it will support you. For us, when we don't go to sauna for a week, we miss it. And there we babble about creams, bags. It's very recuperative. Maybe not that much having sauna but the talking we do there. We meet there and we always listen to each of us [...]. And then you go home totally in high spirits. And the fun we have there! "*

*(Research participant Nr. 9, age 35, sales executive)*

In this statement are manifest two opposing modes of social practices among women. On one hand, following the norms of 'structure' (Turner, 1969), women are divided in competition with each other. They '*can't unite*' and '*they don't support each other*'. At work they would do '*anything to show off*'. In this world of competition anything goes – they would '*scratch the eyes out of the other woman*'. On the other hand, however, there exists an alternative, a different mode of being together as women where this competition is out-weighed by cooperative behaviour in the situations of an all female egalitarian "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969) in cosmetic rituals. It is precisely here in "anti-structure" where the power of the female collectives is embodied. As one collective beautified body women can be together, laughing, relaxing and supporting each other. The elation resulting from these shared ritualized cosmetic practices is '*very recuperative*'. To be part of such a collective is for women '*vitally important*' because there they can rely on mutual support of their girlfriends. In the ritual mode women reverse the world of "structure" (Turner, 1969) of everyday working routine and competition. Regardless of their work and social positions they all engage in playful behaviours centred on manipulation of cosmetics and of bodily appearance that is intertwined with humour and jokes and followed by waves of shared uproarious

laughter. They focus on their bodies that they collectively elaborate according to their own aesthetic criteria.

Through the collective cosmetic rituals the research participants were transformed into an empowered group of supportive allies. When the rituals stopped they carried in themselves the memory of their mutual support and their collective ritual agency. When they congregated again they rekindled that spirit. As one of my research participant said, each time after the cosmetic ritual in sauna with her friends she was *'leaving in high spirits'* full of confidence because she had the support of her girlfriends. In an image of her walking home she heard not only her own footsteps but also the steps of her girlfriends as if they were walking alongside her.

### **Women's collective agency**

Following Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the transgressive collective body in popular carnival festivities Finnegan (2009, 2013) in connection with female ritual collectives among the Yaka, BaAka and Mbendjele hunter-gatherers shows how these hunter-gatherer women benefit from the subversive power of their ritually established collectivized body. Finnegan proposes a ritual dialogue between male and female ritual collectives, a kinetic interchange of managed ritual oppositions that circulate social power between the sexes (Finnegan, 2013: 701). In her view, the ritual repartee between forest hunter-gatherer men and women undermines men's own ability to dominate women (Finnegan, 2009). Finnegan (2013) points out that it is the collective female body in ritual through which Mbendjele and other forest hunter-gatherer women assert power. She shows that in the collective ritual performances these

women stress their procreative body, its bodily fluids and their desire (Finnegan, 2013: 702). In their collective rituals women stress the power of sex, procreation, laughter, bodily openness, egalitarianism and aesthetics (Finnegan, 2013: 703) – the elements of the Bakhtinian grotesque. When these rituals start, men are expected to withdraw and free the space for women who publicly and collectively challenge men's claims to power (Finnegan, 2009). Yet as Finnegan (2009) shows this challenge assumes a form of a “sensual repartee” - a ritual conversation between the male and female ritually established collectives through which each collective can temporarily claim power (Finnegan, 2009: 37). Among the egalitarian Hadza hunter-gatherer in Tanzania Power (2015) suggests to understand the female initiation ritual *maitoko* and female *epeme* ritual as a “counter-action” by women and girls, who as a group chase men away with sticks and in this way contest men's claims to control ritual power (Power, 2015). Following Finnegan (2008) Power sees both of these ritual performances as examples of women's counter-power which operates as a response to the possible threat of male dominance (Power, 2015: 353).

In a very different cultural environment of contemporary Slovakia I observed periodic collective cosmetic rituals of women that resonated not only with the transgressive collective ritual body analyzed by Bakhtin but also with the collective use of the “bodily counter-power” (Finnegan, 2008) analyzed amongst the hunter-gatherer by Finnegan (2008, 2013) and Power (2015).

This collectively generated power can have tangible displays - that of the collective female body taking up time and space through the medium of ritual performance. I recorded such a situation in an office space shared by men and women. Women

strategically chose exactly the time, when the boss was not present and therefore the opportunity arose for the work hierarchies to somewhat relax allowing for chance to emerge that would equalize the working relationships between the male and female co-workers:

*“ (...) one [of the women] was sitting and browsing it [the catalogue] and three others were standing above her, sometimes four, depending on whether there was someone with the authority to disperse them or not (laughs). And I also remember (laughs), I also remember some male colleagues, who very much enjoyed themselves in taunting them, like “Ah, a new Avon catalogue has arrived, there won’t be anything done here for the next two hours!” and so on.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

Women in their ritual mode temporarily claim the office space and men, however much they fuss and mutter, are forced to retreat. Yet they reserve their right to push back by taunting and teasing the women present throughout their performance. When the ritual finishes, women return to their spaces defined by the everyday work hierarchies until one of them brings in the new cosmetics or the next catalogue. Researched women use their collective ritualized body and its agency to oppose the individualized and individualistic bodies of the quotidian non-ritual practice. Their “bodily counter-power” (Finnegan, 2008) is demonstrated in pushing the male colleagues to the edges of the ongoing event, seizing the entire space and fill it with the collective presence of the beautified yet assertive, loudly joking and laughing women launching their ritual. In this saturation of their time and space the cosmetic ritual takes place. Their male colleagues make sure they thoroughly avoid everything

associated with such rituals. As one of the research participants commented on with much of amusement:

*“(...) or it went round [the catalogue], it always got to me as well, and always only to women. It never went to men, because, they were scared of it as if it was a plague or something (laughs). But I’m not surprised, because it’s a symbol of femininity, an Avon catalogue. That’s something like in the Middle Ages, I don’t know, female gloves or fan, fan is maybe even better (laughs). Anyway, Avon catalogue is a symbol of something eminently feminine. Men, they wouldn’t even touch it. I think they wouldn’t touch it even if I asked them ‘please, be so kind and take it home to your wife so she can have a look’ (laughs). Because that’s like a stamp, like ‘gee, a men who’s got an Avon catalogue in his bag!’. Forget it.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

In her words the catalogue is something ‘*eminently feminine*’, a distinctive female attribute. No matter how much the male colleagues keep teasing their female co-workers each time a new catalogue arrives ‘*Ah, a new Avon catalogue has arrived, there won’t be anything done here for the next two hours!*’, the ritual power of the female collective symbolized by it needs to be carefully avoided. Men ‘*wouldn’t even touch it*’ not even if asked to ‘*take it home to their wives to have a look*’. In this work environment Avon is ‘*like a stamp*’ that differentiates the women in their ritual mode from their taunting and teasing male colleagues. But no matter how much the men push back, at the end they do clear the space for the women to have their go at their cosmetic frenzy. The possession of Avon (whether catalogue or cosmetics) in the hands of their female colleagues signals the requirement of ritual respect. The

objecting men, '*scared of it as if it was a plague*', are made to beat a retreat, for now. In these moments intended for women only, men nevertheless respect the ongoing ritual action, let it happen and accept their second-rate position in the situation that soon will dissolve: when the ritual finishes women will draw back and men will be able to occupy again their everyday working space.

This situation resembles the “sensual repartee” between male and female ritual collectives that Finnegan (2009) proposes as a means of managing tensions of power between men and women among the egalitarian hunter-gatherer Mbendjele, Yaka and BaAka. Loudly joking and laughing cosmeticized women tightly bonded into one collective body carry in themselves the potency to temporarily alter the power relationships between the sexes and collectively “reclaim the ritual time and space from the men” (Power, 2015: 353).

Research participants armed with the newly procured catalogue which they flaunt with amusement and triumph at their male colleagues to provoke their retreat, collectively claim the space and time to launch their cosmetic ritual. Men nevertheless taunt them ironically from a safe distance accepting that the ritual space has been carved out by the women. For the time of the performance, the everyday relations between men and women in the office change. The collective body of ritually energized women raucously laughing and joking creates an equalizing field within the ritual domain which offers an opportunity to tip the balance of the relations of forces between female and male colleagues in the office. With the absence of '*someone with the authority to disperse*' their female co-workers, men are left without protection and are exposed to the women's collective action through which they loudly occupy the

otherwise common office space. Men know that no taunting would stop these women from reclaiming the space and time from them. They will need to patiently wait for pushing back into their office chairs only after the women have exhausted their collective energies and calmed down.

Finnegan suggests that it is the ritual repartee of the loud female performance and male teasing that maintains the movement between the male dominance and “female bodily counter-power” (Finnegan, 2008, 2013). This corresponds to what Boehm (1999) suggests is the reversal of the relationships of dominance. In the situations I studied the “reverse dominance hierarchy” (Boehm, 1999) - when women collectively through their cosmetic ritual control the office space otherwise shared with their male colleagues - is restricted to the ritual time only. Like the grotesque ritualized body comes into existence or disappears with the occurrence or ending of carnival, the periodical rituals of reverse dominance hierarchy emerge as temporary interruptions to the office everyday routine. They also last only as long as the women’s cosmetic coalition launching their collective cosmetic rituals exists. When the ritual stops, the power relations return back to ordinariness, the office space is divided again according to its everyday hierarchical positions yet to be reclaimed by the women again in two weeks time when one of them brings in the new catalogue or the ordered cosmetics.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I focused on collective cosmetic rituals that took place while browsing the direct sale cosmetic catalogues and distributing the purchased cosmetics. These

rituals ranged from condensed rituals consisting of formalized linguistic exchange of secret ritual formulae known only to the ritual participants to well expressed emotionally intense collective ritual displays. The exchange of the secret language was conditioned by the participation in costly rituals. Its correct use was the reliable proof that women using them underwent the collective cosmetic rituals. Cosmetics played an intrinsic part of these rituals. They were bought by and distributed in the small collectives of women during the ritual time. It was also used as a means to create sensual experience of the participating women. Importantly, it marked and confirmed the intimate bonds the researched women created amongst themselves in their cosmetic rituals. Despite the fact that women bought and sold the cosmetics in these rituals they always made sure it was done '*nicely*' – their small collective had always priority to making profit.

As I showed earlier (Fejdiova, 2016) the institutional structure that made it possible for the collective cosmetic rituals to emerge was represented by the way the direct sales cosmetic companies operated. The representatives of both cosmetic companies were trained to use their social relations and personal networks for their business activities. It was the companies' expectation that representatives would exploit their networks and that financial distance would replace former closeness of personal relationships (Biggart, 1989). The structure and business principles of the two cosmetic companies as well as their promoted business practices in which all their representatives were encouraged at making profit. The companies' selling strategy was designed as a one-to-one interaction between the representative and her customer. The representatives were trained to support impulsive shopping behaviour of their clients and to maximise their profits. But the data I collected contradict the behaviour



expected by the cosmetic companies. Half of the representatives I worked with did not make any profit and sold the cosmetics to the small collectives of women at their cost price. The other half kept their profits permanently low through several transformative ritual strategies discussed in the previous chapter. The companies' structure and practices encouraged competitive relationships between their representatives as well as between their clients. But the collective cosmetic rituals intensified the relationships amongst the cosmetic purchasers despite the competitive context of the direct sales culture. Within the all female cosmetic collectives sharing of beautification practices became a priority. In the rituals women levelled any differentials in access to cosmetic resources and information, and collectively decided the best beautification strategy for each of the participating woman. Such an ethos of group solidarity contradicted the ideological input of the cosmetic companies. It transgressed the institutionalized and normative side of the individualistic competitive gender practices emphasized in the corporate cultures of both cosmetic companies. Appropriated by the cosmetic collectives, the shopping procedure assumed new meanings of showing and monitoring commitment to the group and levelling-up of beautification. Women collectivised by cosmetic rituals, instead of competing with each other through the individual everyday gender performance, together created ritual gender that belonged to the whole group. This ritual gender embodied female and male characteristics (Power, Watts, 1997) and was impersonated in a collective and transgressive practice. The institutional expectations of the corporate culture encouraged individualism and competition amongst the women in the direct sales cosmetics selling and buying process. But amongst the women I studied, collectivising solidaristic practices emerged that transgressed and reversed these expectations. The cosmetic purchasers collectively created a culture of resistance that

opposed the competitive direct selling practices. This ritualized resistance or counter-culture was conditional and episodic. It originated in the ritual performance and it only emerged through ritual egalitarianism amongst the participating women. When in ritual women levelled all their hierarchical differences. In ritual mode all the women were on the same level, or as they themselves referred to it '*on the same wave length*', senior and junior staff joining in together. This ritually established egalitarianism was further characterized by sharing, bonding and by committing to the cosmetic collective. The collective and collectivising dimensions of the event were underpinned by elation, excitement and joy. In these '*moments out of time*' the instants of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) emerged among the cosmetic purchasers. In their ritual mode the collectives of women, equalized, bonded, and intimately close forged relationships in which refusing to share was impossible (Fejdiova, 2016).

The equalized female collectives emerging through the shared cosmetic rituals that I studied in contemporary Slovakia bear similarities to the female collectives and their rituals described amongst the African hunter-gatherer groups by Finnegan (2009, 2013) and Power (2015). Both, the Slovak as well as African hunter-gatherer contexts are characterized by equalized, egalitarian relationships amongst the women in the ritual collectives, sharing, centring on collectivizing beauty and bodily aesthetics, gender ambivalence, female collective agency expressed through the ritually created collective body and the emergence of reverse dominance relationships within the ritual domain. But unlike the examples of hunter-gatherer female ritual coalitions where the intimate closeness and egalitarianism amongst the women operates on an everyday basis (Finnegan, 2009, 2013) the equalizing relationships within the female ritual collectives I studied were strictly temporary, reserved only for the ritual time. In

the examples of hunter-gatherer groups analyzed by Finnegan (2013), the female reverse dominance rituals can spring out at any moment. In the studied Slovak setting these rituals are tied to the two-weekly availability of the catalogue or new cosmetics and the relaxation of the existing work hierarchies, facilitated, for example, by the absence of the boss.

The studied ritually established bonded collectives of women carried in themselves the potential to temporarily level the existing work hierarchies between women and to reverse the relations of power between them and their male co-workers. In their rituals women generated an ambiguously male and female ritual gender that they controlled as a group. In ritual mode, the collective was endowed with ritual power that demanded to be respected by their male colleagues. Together, women claimed their time and space from their male colleagues to launch the ritual. Empowered by the solidarity of their ritual girlfriends, the researched women gained mutual support and cooperation from each other as members of a group of bonded allies rather than competitors.

The research participants often started to engage with the collective cosmetic rituals at puberty at secondary schools and continued throughout their young adulthood to the mature age either at university or at work. Similarly to the girls from *chisungu* (Richards, 1956) and *vhusha/domba* initiations (Blacking, 1969) and the girls' tattooing practices in Mozambique (Gengenbach, 2003), the secret knowledge and ritual skills they gained opened up the way to join any such ritual collective and reap the benefits ensuing from such membership. As found among the highly mobile

women in Mozambique the learnt ritual template gave trustworthiness to women when moving on to join another cosmetic ritual coalition.

The observed collective rituals varied in their length, size and intensity yet across all regions of Slovakia they were identical in their content and form. Women who regularly participated in these rituals learnt what seems to be a transferable ritual template that, similarly to the ethnographic examples throughout this chapter, enabled them to enter any such cosmetic collective across all regions of Slovakia, emerged in the context of direct sales cosmetics (Fejdiova, 2016).

In this chapter I have interpreted the behaviour of women collectively browsing new catalogues and purchasing cosmetics as ritual. This behaviour was uproarious and underpinned by humour and jokes. It centred on democratic sharing of cosmetics amongst all the women present. Through this sharing women created a form of ritual egalitarianism. While in ritual mode women generated ritual gender that incorporated both female and male characteristics and as a group they reversed the relations of dominance between them and their male colleagues.

## **Chapter five**

### **‘I already wondered why she keeps ordering them’: Showing and monitoring commitment to the group**

Many authors suggest that rituals operate as clear and reliable signals of commitment to the group (Knight, 1999; Power, 2000; Rapaport, 1979; Sosis, 2006; Sosis, Alcorta, 2003). The reliability of the signals comes from the costs participants impose upon themselves when taking part in the rituals. These costs in terms of, for example, time and energy spent when in ritual, can be clearly observed and they increase participants' credibility through testing the quality that they are advertising - the commitment to the group. Endurance of such costs reliably demonstrates this commitment (Knight, 1999).

In the previous chapter I discussed ethnographic examples of girls' initiation rituals that involved the manipulation of cosmetics where ritual participants endured such costs. Together with permanent body markings such as tattoos (Gengenbach, 2003) or scarification (Faris, 1972), time and energy spent in the ritual performance as well as ritual payments and provisioning for ritual feasts represent substantial costs for the ritual participants and their kin (Bellman, 1984; Blacking, 1969; Power, 2000). Knight et al. (1995) suggest that such energetically demanding rituals ensure emergence of trust among its participants. As Power (2000) shows the ritual costs in the ethnographic examples proved the initiated girl as trustworthy and allowed her to enter the networks of women's alliances. They also proved the reliability of the girls within such networks (Power, 2000). The initiated girls show through costly displays

of seclusion, ritual performance, food and payments that they are prepared to commit to the female support networks. The women from the networks can clearly judge from these displays which girls have met the commitments necessary for the entry into their networks.

However, unlike the girls and women in the ethnographic examples where the memberships in the ritually bonded alliances and support networks were guaranteed permanently through participation in initiation rituals, the women I studied took part in the collective cosmetic rituals repeatedly. The reason for such repeated testing for commitment to the collective was the mobility of the research participants as they often moved between jobs and regions and between different cosmetic coalitions. During these rituals women watched out for commitment displays by carefully monitoring each other's behaviour. They were interested in information about their expenditures of time, energy, money and about sharing cosmetic resources and beauty knowledge. They also carefully paid attention to the use of secret language and to the circulation of sensitive information about their own appearance as well as to sharing of beauty tips also constructed within their collective as secret advice.

The research participants knew each other from work. But it was the collective ritual experience that intensified their relationships. By regularly taking part in cosmetic rituals women bonded through beauty became trustworthy and committed allies.

### **The interpretive framework: Reliable signals of commitment and exchange of social information**

Power (2001: 267) suggests that rituals represent “a primary arena in which commitment to an alliance is demonstrated”. The way to demonstrate such commitment is by credible signals that are “easy-to-judge and hard-to-fake” (Bulbulia, Sosis, 2011; Power, 2009; Shaver, Bulbulia, 2016; Sosis, 2002). As Sosis and Alcorta (2003) show it is the cost of these signals that guarantee their honesty. Such signals are “costly to produce and therefore too costly for individuals to be able to fake” (Sosis, Alcorta, 2003: 267). Thus it is not worthy for individuals who are not prepared to carry such costs to imitate the signal (Sosis, Alcorta, 2003). Hence the willingness to perform a ritual that imposes costs in terms of energy, time and material investments on participants operates as a reliable sign of the commitment to the collective from each participant.

As Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) show the concept of honest signalling has been applied to explain human behaviour such as hunting, ritual, artistic elaboration and religion (Bird, Bird, 1997; Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005; Bulbulia, 2004; Gurven, Hill, 2009; Hawkes, 1991; Hawkes, Bliege Bird, 2002; Irons, 2001; Knight, 1999). It focuses on reliable, honest communication. As Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) point out, it shows how can such characteristics be communicated that are “difficult or expensive to observe directly and that vary in quality, degree or intensity between the signalling individuals or groups” (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 224). They suggest that such honest communication provides mutual benefits for all the participants in the exchange (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005). Thus receiver of the signal can reliably evaluate a characteristic of the signaller and the signaller gains from receivers’ evaluation of

the signal (Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997). As Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) point out the “participants in the social situation do better when giving an honest signal or paying attention to it than when lying about their intentions or qualities or ignoring the signal” (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 224). Thus individuals whose interests are competing can still mutually benefit from signalling their differences in quality (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 224).

Zahavi and Zahavi (1997) understand costly signals as handicaps – quality-dependent costs contained in communicative displays that only individuals with sufficient quality can sustain. This means that what is a handicap or a high cost signal for a low-quality individual can represent marginal cost for a high quality individual (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005; Sosis, 2002, Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997).

Bliege Bird and Smith suggest applying costly signalling theory to situations when “there is a particular hidden attribute (quality) to be communicated; when there are benefits provided to both signallers and observers; and when it needs to be demonstrated how signals of this attribute remain reliable” (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 225). Boone (2000) further suggests frequent signalling of coalitional membership due to its possibility to change with time.

Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) point out that although there exist parallel concepts in social theory such as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), “wasteful generosity” (Mauss, 1924), and “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899/1994) that show how costs secure trustworthiness of the signal, they do not address the reasons for the receivers to be interested in such signal. The authors further suggest that



signalling theory can provide systematic explanations of such behaviour by focusing on maintaining credibility in situations when individuals make “decisions about mates, allies, trust and conflict based on partial information” (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 222). Signalling theory can thus “offer new interpretations of such symbolic behaviour as aesthetic elaboration, rituals, transactions in wealth, conspicuous consumption or group commitment” (Bliege Bird, Smith, 2005: 231).

In the previous chapter I showed how the ritual operated as emotionally costly display of group commitment. Here, following the logic of the data, I break down and elaborate this interpretation by focusing on further costly aspects of the cosmetic rituals: financial costs ensuing from the cosmetics purchases, collective manipulation of cosmetics, and the exchange of secret bodily information and beauty knowledge.

Women regularly took part in the collective cosmetic rituals and incurred costs of time and energy in engaging in collective emotional displays and in advertising their use of the direct sales cosmetics they bought. They also sustained costs of money spent on cosmetics and they were facing costs resulting from sharing intimate bodily information of their own beauty flaws and knowledge of beautification. Through imposing costs on themselves research participants demonstrated to each other that they were reliable and trustworthy partners in the social exchange and committed members of their small collectives. The costs allowed women to make accurate judgements about the behaviour of their fellow women when monitoring each other’s ritual conduct. The reliability of their judgements was guaranteed by the costliness of the observed behaviour. The research participants were both displaying to each other these types of behaviour and seeking it out in the conduct of other members of their

collective. They regularly took part in the cosmetic rituals and spent money on the direct sales cosmetics with other women from their collective. They also showcased the use of the direct sales cosmetics to each other and they disclosed intimate bodily information about their beauty flaws to other women within their collective expecting from them to give the best advice they could in return.

The group commitment represented the hidden attribute women were searching for at both ritual occasions of catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics. The benefit the women observing the behaviour gained was reassurance about the trustworthiness, reliability and group commitment of the signalling women. The benefits for the women sending the signals were represented by the advantages these women obtained as members of their small collective. The credibility of the signals was guaranteed by their costs. These costs were represented by money spent on cosmetics, sharing cosmetics and access to it, and by sharing information about beauty flaws and beauty tips.

Dunbar (1996, 2004) suggests that exchange of social information operates as a mechanism for bonding in coalitions. Knight (1999), however, points out that words are signals that are not backed by costs and are therefore not intrinsically reliable. Power (1998) thus suggests that a mechanism is needed that is costly and can therefore guarantee the trustworthiness of the alliance members. This mechanism must be difficult to fake and at the same time easy to assess to fulfil such function (Power, 1998, Sosis, 2002). Power (1998) suggests that it is precisely costly (in terms of time and energy) ritual that guarantees trust within coalitions and defines their

boundaries. Only in such ritually established alliances is the exchange of social information reliable (Power, 1998).

Once trust and reliability of the women was guaranteed by their costly ritual displays, the exchange of intimate social information, namely the sharing of information about their beauty flaws and the pooling of beauty tips constructed as secret, took place. Power (1999) suggests that the costliness of exposing one's beauty flaws as well as of giving up information about how to be more beautiful to other women is best understood in the light of sexual selection theory. This information affects the attractiveness of women who share it and an attractive appearance is a trait that men look for in their future romantic partners (Buss, 1994). Thus the possession of such information carries in it the potential to influence the mate choice of the women who participate in the exchange. Giving up such valuable information to other women in the coalition means that women level their beautification results and equalize their chances of being chosen by potential romantic partners. These are the costs that women in the collectives face for exchanging these types of information. On the one hand, giving up beautification strategies would enhance the attractiveness of other women from the collective and the woman giving such advice would lose her possible advantage of being more attractive and therefore enjoy higher selectivity from men (Ingo et al., 2007). On the other hand, sharing intimate bodily information about imperfections could harm the reputation of the women in question. According to the understanding of evolutionary psychologists, attractiveness forms an important component of the woman's reputation and can be potentially misused by her female competitors (Buss, 1994; Rucas et al., 2006). The sharing of intimate bodily information amongst the research participants then has a double effect. It takes place

after the costly ritual has secured the reliability of the participating women yet still tests for the group commitment through exploring the readiness of the women to level the attractiveness of all the women in the coalition. The data therefore points towards what Walker and Vul (2013) call the “cheerleader effect”. Their findings suggest that women in a group of other women are perceived as more attractive then when seen outside it (Walker, Vul, 2013).

The women I worked with were mobile, often moving between jobs and regions in Slovakia. About a half of the women I worked with came to Bratislava from other regions of Slovakia. Most of them were also previously members of other such collectives. Therefore, following Boone (2000), we can expect that they would test each other’s commitment to their collective repeatedly. The ritual occasions at which the commitment displays took place were tied to a two-weekly schedule and alternated between new catalogue launch and the distribution of the newly purchased cosmetics. The cosmetic companies launched a new catalogue every four weeks. Yet towards the end of my research they changed it to every three weeks to encourage more sales. This way the companies managed to produce a separate Christmas catalogue. Many of the cosmetic purchasers were adverse to such change and they commented on the ‘*greediness*’ of the cosmetic companies in making higher profits. Yet despite this change in scheduling the catalogue launches by the companies the cosmetic rituals still tended to take place on a fortnightly basis. This two weekly time frame was important for women to repeatedly signal their trustworthiness in the ritual performances and thus forge in a relatively short time span a bonded reliable alliance.

### **Collective purchase of cosmetics**

When shopping for direct sales cosmetics women engaged in an array of behaviour that could not be explained as a utilitarian exchange. In the presence of other women from the cosmetic collective research participants were prone to overspending. They often bought what they did not use, did not need, or did not want. Frequently, all of them as a group bought exactly the same cosmetics. Such behaviour seemed at the first sight rather wasteful then economical or practical. I observed these types of behaviour repeatedly across all the researched collectives, irrespective of the presence or absence of a representative that could be seen as a trigger of such behaviour due to her financial motivation. As one of my research participants puts it, when puzzling about her mother's behaviour when it came to buying cosmetics:

*"(...) she's got a small bag, and she's got it tucked in and there she's got all those cosmetics, and it's interesting, that she, who hardly wears any makeup, she affords through those catalogues, I'd say, quite expensive things, you know, that range Giordani Gold, I know that it used to be very expensive, some time ago, I was surprised, those little colourful balls, and you put it on and it evens the skin tone and it gives you a feeling of having a bit of sun tan, that you're not so pale, I know it was quite expensive (...) and she's got in that bag, it's a toilet case, she's got there tucked in this Giordani Gold, lipsticks, eye liners, nail polishes, makeup (...) and she uses it when attending a ball dancing or a prom, but everyday she doesn't even use a mascara, nothing, just that one green eyeliner (laughs). (...) and she orders facial masks, that she never uses and then she chucks them and peelings. I already wondered, why she orders them, when she doesn't use them." (Research participant Nr.1, age 26, researcher)*

In the above example, the research participant's mother wears make-up only a few times a year. She uses neither facial masks nor peelings. Nevertheless, she regularly orders both of those spending quite some money on them. As the research participant puts it *'she, who hardly wears any makeup, she affords quite expensive things'*. She has already ordered a whole range of cosmetics that she hardly uses. When the expiry date passes she throws the ordered and unused products in the bin. Yet she still keeps ordering them. The research participant is trying to understand the reasons her mother could have for such wasteful behaviour: *'Why she orders them, when she doesn't use them?'*.

As a teacher, the research participant's mother is embedded within a collective of her female colleagues. As a group they prompt each other to enhance their attractiveness. Together they exercise, go on the same diet and they buy direct sales cosmetics. Through regular buying of the respective direct sales cosmetics, the research participant's mother imposes on herself costs that are represented by the amount of money she repeatedly spends on cosmetics. She purchases cosmetics independently of the fact of whether she use them or not. Through this behaviour she shows her commitment to the collective of her primary school colleagues with whom she shares the direct sales cosmetics experience.

The behaviour described above typically emerged within the ritual situations the cosmetic purchasers regularly took part in. In these collective rituals research participants as a group decided what cosmetics to buy. They also collectively manipulated and evaluated the newly acquired cosmetics. One type of such ritual was the collective catalogue browsing followed by the putting in of orders for cosmetics.

An intrinsic component of every such collective ritual buying episode was the mutual encouragement of the women present to make a purchase. Such prompting could come from any participating woman, clients and representatives alike, and was strongly supported by other women from the collective.

*“It’s a discussion about it, and each of us usually tells, that how great this is and what it is good for and how she uses it and through this then she persuades the other one, too, and this way we put together our observations.(...) and then we just all agree on who will order what (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)*

In this example the research participant describes a lively collective browsing through the catalogue with her girlfriends in the coffee shop where they work. It takes place during a work break when there are not many clients to be served and they all have enough time to safely talk about cosmetics and beauty in the seclusion of their back office. In these discussions each of them tells her experience with the respective cosmetics. Everyone depicts what products she has ordered, what they are like and how she is using them. And all the other women reciprocate through their own comments and observations. All of them, including their representative, and their manager pool the knowledge they have gained and they make it available to the whole collective. As a result, the decisions about what cosmetics to buy are not made by the women present individually. On the contrary, all of them need to *‘agree on who will order what’*. It is a collective decision that is respected by the whole cosmetic collective. Their representative, who sells the cosmetics to them at her cost price and so making no profit, is just one of them. Thus the profit motivation of encouraging her

co-workers to buy more does not work in this case. What seems to explain the observed situation better is the importance of and the respect for the group decision. All the women present conform to it. They all buy what they have agreed on. The money spent on such collectively agreed purchases reliably demonstrate the women's commitment to their small group.

I observed another type of such collective decision of purchases when the participating women collectively urged one of them to buy certain cosmetics. The prompted woman very often respected such collective decision and purchased the recommended cosmetics. I observed one such situation in a coffee shop where eight girlfriends were browsing the catalogue and chatting about it. At one point, one of them said that she would like to buy a new nail varnish. This announcement initiated a *'lively discussion'* when every woman present expressed her opinion and made suggestions about what colour the new nail varnish should have. The discussion ended up with a collective agreement of all the women present, with the exception of the one who wanted the new nail varnish. The group decision was then presented to this woman: *'Marta, we've got it! This is the one you will buy!'* She then ordered the collectively approved one. Such urging to make a purchase could be directed at any woman from the respective collective at any time. None of the women present in the shop was a representative, and so yet again the profit motive does not explain the observed behaviour. Rather, such prompting and reciprocal acceptance of the collective decision could be seen as a test for commitment to the group. Women accepting the collective decision and making the purchase that was agreed by their girlfriends demonstrate their commitment to and trust in their girlfriends through the costs of cosmetics in a reliable way.



Yet another type of situation of collective agreement about purchases was found in the research setting: All of the participating women, again often after an animated collective discussion, bought as a group exactly the same cosmetics. As one of the research participants puts it:

*“It happened to us, with my colleague, who is now at the till. She’s also so crazy, and she was going through [the catalogue] and I’m saying ‘I want this!’, [and she said] ‘I want that, too!’ and I said ‘Good, both of us want it!’ (...) and it continued in two weeks time, when I went to get the cosmetics (...) they didn’t have the one we wanted but they gave us a substitution and I asked my colleague whether she wanted it and she said ‘Of course, great, this is even better!’. I said to her ‘You’re like me, I don’t mind it either!’. But it was so, that we both agreed on something, something that both of us wanted (...) that, ‘I want it!’, ‘I want, too!’, ‘I want it, too!’ and then ‘Great, both of us will have it!’.” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, waitress and university student)*

Despite the fact that the research participant is a representative for one of the cosmetic companies, she sells their products to her girlfriends in the coffee shop where she works at her cost price giving up any profit she could have made. Yet again, the profit motivation cannot explain the observed behaviour. In this situation both women first express their desire to have the same cosmetics and they both agree that they will get it. An intrinsic part of this micro-ritual was joy and good feeling about that both of them will share the same cosmetics. Between the two women there was mutual agreement, encouragement and reciprocating through the cosmetics as well as willingness to let the other woman have what the representative herself was having.

Through such mutual generosity the two women equalized the access to and availability of the cosmetics resources between them. This fine tuned equalization of the access to cosmetics carefully and regularly applied by women in the collective cosmetic rituals, and thus to the ability to use them for beautification, suggests an interpretation in the light of other ‘equalizing mechanisms’ analyzed by Woodburn (1982) and Lewis (2008) in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies. I thus suggest we can understand this equalizing of access to cosmetics and beautification as the levelling mechanism that operates amongst the cosmetic purchasers in ritually forged cosmetic coalitions.

Another such example involves all the women from such a collective:

*“About two weeks ago, our colleague was [going through the catalogue] and we were talking about those fragrances, that if you buy one, you get the other one for the half price and that they are very good. And she had that fragrance with her, a small sample, so she showed it to us and we all tried it and it was fantastic. All of us agreed on it and we all ordered it, too.” (Research participant Nr. 18, age 32, primary school teacher)*

The research participant describes a situation when her, and all the other women from the same teacher’s room, browse the catalogue together. One of them discovers, in her opinion, a good buy and she alerts her co-workers to it. They all try it on. None of the women there is a representative, yet they all persuade each other to buy the same fragrance. Before they made the order all of them agree that it is ‘fantastic’. The individual decisions of the teachers are adjusted to the mutual agreement of their

cosmetic coalition. Conforming to the collective decision and effectuating such a purchase reliably demonstrates the commitment of the women present to each other.

The power of such collective enticement to buy when there are other women from the coalition around and the willingness to comply with it are apparent in this example:

*“Me myself, I wasn’t really interested, because I was receiving the catalogue by mail (laughs), but as if I, maybe, would give in to the pressure, that that catalogue circulated there and I myself looked through it, of course I already knew what was in it and at the end I chose, although if left on my own, if I had to make a choice I wouldn’t have chosen it and I wouldn’t have bought it. (...) So I went through that catalogue, I skipped the pages with the cosmetics in the usual price range and I went through the discounted ones once again and at the end I chose another set of eye shadows (laughs), that were discounted and if that catalogue wasn’t there and if my colleagues wouldn’t be choosing cosmetics and wouldn’t talk about it, I wouldn’t even think about buying it.” (Research participant Nr.22, age 26, Civil Service employee)*

Despite the fact that the research participant receives the catalogue by post, makes her own orders and *‘knew what was in it,’* in the work situation with her colleagues, of whom one is a representative, she goes through the catalogue again. At the end of the session she orders another set of eye shadows that not only she did not need but she did not intend to buy either before the whole ritual of browsing started. As she herself says *‘if my colleagues wouldn’t be choosing cosmetics and wouldn’t talk about it, I wouldn’t even think about buying it’*. Nevertheless, she does and as she points out, it is precisely because the other women were doing it. By ordering cosmetics together

with her two colleagues the research participant makes a clear statement that she is willing to '*give in to the pressure*' of the group. The money spent on the unneeded eye shadows represents the investment into her group membership. The representative again sold the cosmetics to her co-workers at her cost price, making no profit.

Frequently, the above mentioned collective strategies took part during the same cosmetic ritual. It is also important to note that women from the collectives were prompting each other to make a purchase only if they themselves thought that the cosmetics were '*good*' or that they will '*suit*' the other women.

### **Collective distribution of cosmetics**

Another type of ritual in which women demonstrated commitment to their group was the collective distribution of cosmetics. Women seized such an opportunity when the representative or another woman from the collective brought in the new cosmetics. During my research I did not come across any distribution of cosmetics that would involve women individually. It was always a collective event. For the cosmetic purchasers it was very important that the newly purchased cosmetics were distributed with the presence of all the other women from their collective. And it was not just for the '*fun*' emotional and exciting side of the whole event analyzed in the previous chapter. During every such collective handling of cosmetics participating women carefully monitored each other's behaviour. They systematically and carefully oversaw the sharing practices amongst each other in their cosmetic collective. The observed situations resemble the "vigilant sharing" mechanism described in meat sharing practices amongst the egalitarian hunter-gatherers by Erdal and Whiten (1996).

According to these authors vigilant sharing is a mechanism through which egalitarian hunter-gatherers ensure that each individual participating in meat sharing will get his appropriate share (Edwardes, 2010). Result of such overseen sharing amongst the cosmetic purchasers was an equalized distribution of cosmetics amongst all the women within their collective. One way the research participants applied the overseen sharing was by focusing their attention on the purchases other women in their collective have made:

*“We always look at each other’s purchased cosmetics. We are curious. She [the representative] leaves it here on the table and we come in and take our little bags [with the cosmetics] and we peek into the others’ bags, to see what the others got, because then you’re very interested in that. (...) It works like this, surely no one would allow oneself to go through it and unpack it and that ‘I will now put it on to see how it looks like’ but it’s about watching, what does it look like, the packaging, whether it’s really as big and you’ve got the first contact with it, and you can compare it, that maybe it looked better in the picture and ‘oh, it’s just this?’ or another time ‘wow, this is what it looks like, I want it too!’” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)*

When the representative leaves the cosmetics divided into small bags for each woman on the table in the back office, the women come in. They do not try the cosmetics on just yet. However, they curiously *‘peek into the other’s bags’*. They look at the bought cosmetics, its colour, size, packaging; they compare what the cosmetics looked like in the catalogue picture and what it is like now that they can hold it in their hands. And they compare what other women have bought and what they did not. It is expected

good manners that the ritual participants will allow their girlfriends to peek into their little plastic bags at the newly bought cosmetics and, reciprocally, that they themselves will show off with what they have purchased. This is the time when the women *'watch'* each other's purchases. In the research participant's words *'it's about watching'* because precisely at this time they are *'very interested in that'*. On the one hand, it is true that through this looking into each other's bags women learn a lot of practical information about the bought cosmetics represented by the statement *'what does it look like'*. The collective, ritualized and obligatory character of such careful *'watching'* that accompanies the enhanced curiosity characteristic for this particular time, however, suggest rather that such detailed surveying of the cosmetics in their girlfriends' bags also operates at a different level. Moreover, the result of such careful and repeated *'watching'* is a very detailed and accurate knowledge about who orders what cosmetics within the respective small collective. Through such attentive monitoring of other women's cosmetic purchases the research participants knew with precision how much cosmetics and what particular products their girlfriends were buying, efficiently tracking down their commitment to their collective via costly displays. Costliness is represented here by the financial value of the cosmetics. Such knowledge was usually very comprehensive and exact as is shown in this example:

*"Each of us has her range of cosmetics that she usually orders from. One orders foot care products, I order lipsticks, another orders hair brushes. It has already happened that we ordered the same thing." (Research participant Nr.27, age 35, secondary school headteacher)*

Yet it was not any cosmetics that were subject to such collective ritualized display and scrutiny. Only the direct sales cosmetics bought together with the other fellow-women from the same collective were subject to such ritualization. Because of their ritually specific status and the fact that women regularly showcased their purchases to each other, the possession of the direct sales cosmetics was a good marker for judging, on the one hand, membership in the collective and, on the other hand, the size of the group. The specific status of the collectively bought direct sales cosmetics is apparent from the following example:

*“Only if I have cosmetics, that also the other women ordered from Avon, just then we show it to each other, but otherwise, that I bought another brand of cosmetics and would come to work and say, I bought this, I don’t do that.” (Research participant Nr.26, age 34, Avon representative, Civil Service employee)*

Not only did women assess what others from their collective bought, they compared their own purchases to the orders of their girlfriends, too. They made sure their buys in terms of money and amount of products were high enough to match up to the purchases of the other women, yet not too high or not too low:

*“When I got the ordered cosmetics I checked who ordered what among the other girls and whether I’m in the upper or the lower line [in terms of amount of ordered products].” (Research participant Nr.19, age 22, university student)*

The research participant describes the situation after she has obtained the ordered cosmetics. She inspects the purchases of other women to see what products they have

ordered and who has made those orders. She then compares her own order to the orders the rest of the women have made. She was particularly interested in the volume of her own order. She wanted to know whether she was in the '*upper or the lower line*' among all the other participating women. By checking on her position in the collective the research participant makes sure her order is high enough so as not to call into question her commitment to this group. Simultaneously it should not be too high either. The reliability of her signal of commitment to her girlfriends is guaranteed by just the right amount of ordered cosmetics for just the right amount of money. She is careful neither to overdo it nor to understate it. Through her controlling for the adequate amount of her purchase she demonstrates her willingness to stay at the same level as her girlfriends. She is showing that she is not trying to out-compete them in any way, respecting the ritual egalitarianism associated with sharing of cosmetics within their collective. The observed situation can be explained by the model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) that predicts relations based on cooperation and sharing through cosmetics and beautification amongst women within coalitions. It also follows the logic of the counter-dominance argument developed by Erdal and Whiten (1996) that operates amongst the egalitarian hunter-gatherers. According to this argument any individual who would try to become dominant is prevented from such domination (Erdal, Whiten, 1996). Accordingly, the studied women are on purpose avoiding appearing dominant or achieving higher levels of access to cosmetic resources than their girlfriends within their cosmetic coalition.

An inherent aspect of the ritualized collective distribution of the bought direct sales cosmetics was their collective manipulation that the research participants referred to as '*trying on*'. This trying on had a reciprocal side to it. On the one hand, the research



participants impatiently and with curiosity tried cosmetics they themselves bought. On the other hand, however, it was expected that they will ask their girlfriends to try on their new cosmetics and that reciprocally their girlfriends will do the same. The studied women considered it bad manners when their girlfriends would not show interest in their new cosmetics and would not ask to try it on. This set of data again corresponds to the predictions of the model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) according to which women would collectively manipulate and share cosmetics within ritually bound cosmetic collectives. During the entire research I have not come across a single situation when a research participant would have refused to let other women from her collective try her new cosmetics. This collective reciprocal sharing of cosmetics involved aspects of elation, joy, excitement and collectively achieved emotional high. It also elicited exchange of questions about the appearance of the participating women as it is shown in the following example:

*“When I took it [the bought cosmetics] out, they swooped on it like crows. So I handed it out to them and they started to look at it straight away and they completely stopped listening to me by then and they were trying them on immediately, and putting it onto each other and ‘show me!’, ‘what is it like?’, ‘is it pretty?’ and this and that. And I took the money from them and they started twittering amongst each other (laughs).” (Research participant Nr. 21, age 21, university student)*

When one of the girls brings the ordered cosmetics to school, she hands them out to her best girlfriends during a break. They instantly ‘swoop on them like crows’, completely oblivious to what is happening around them. They look at them straight away, they show them to each other, they ‘try them on immediately’, and they put

them on each other. While they collectively manipulate the distributed cosmetics, they stop listening to the one who brought them in and they *'twitter'* amongst themselves about cosmetics. Yet they very much listen to questions that specifically target their looks when using the purchased cosmetics. These questions have a standardized format and come over and over again at any such occasion and in any group: *'What is it like?'*, *'Does it suit me?'*, *'Do I look pretty [in it]?'* or *'Is it pretty?'*. Importantly every such question elicits an obligatory and honest answer from the participating girls or women about the questioned appearance. On the one hand, through their honest answers about their girlfriends' looks women send a signal that clearly demonstrates their reliability within and commitment to this cosmetic collective. These women show that they are prepared to give up their own possible advantage they could have gained through their appearance where they could have been perhaps seen as more beautiful and better beautified than their girlfriends. The advantage would have come from their greater selectivity by men (Ingo et al., 2007). In the cosmetic coalition they share this advantage with their girlfriends. Yet there is another important dimension to this pooling of the beauty knowledge. Within the bonded collective such sharing operates as yet another mechanism for levelling the beautification outcomes and access to cosmetic resources and thus to beautification. In line with Erdal and Whiten's (1996) counter-dominance argument this levelling of beauty knowledge through sharing it in coalition prevents any woman from the collective to become more attractive than her friends.

A similar situation is illustrated in the following example:

*“Oh, they look at it straight away and they try it out and ‘am I pretty?’, ‘does it suit me?’ and so ‘will it be good?’ so they try it out straight away (...) and of course they look at the cosmetics, carefully (...) and they try it out, fragrances, ‘let me smell it!’ or hand creams, we have here a problem, that we’ve got very dry hands from water and usually they try it by asking ‘do you have a hand cream?’ or ‘that smells nice’ and this way they try it at the same time (...).” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, waitress and university student)*

When the representative brings in the ordered cosmetics and divides them among the women in the group they instantly look at what they have got. They immediately try it on and ask for opinion of their girlfriends. They want to know how they look, or more precisely, they want to see whether they look *‘good’* and they expect an honest answer. They let the other women try their newly ordered products and the other women in turn ask for permission to try them out. In these instances of collective joy it is understood as bad manners not to show cosmetics to others and not to offer it to be tried by other present women. It is also seen as bad form if someone omits to show interest in what others have ordered or forgets to ask to try it. In this particular group women working in a coffee shop suffer from dry hands due to a lot of washing-up. They often order hand creams that are prominent in the obligatory sharing of cosmetics. The hand cream sharing occurs within the rituals of the collective distribution of cosmetics. It can, however, spring out at any time while these women are at work. Anyone of them can ask the others *‘do you have a hand cream?’* or a little less directly: *‘that smells nice’*. All of them are expected to comply with such a demand. Reciprocally, when the others will need to sooth their dry hands, the one who asked before will be asked then in return.

Throughout this chapter I have shown that sharing of cosmetics and beauty tips were important aspects of the behaviour observed at collective cosmetic rituals. I have suggested that sharing amongst the cosmetic purchasers operates on one hand as a costly signal through which women demonstrate their commitment to the coalition. On the other hand, it works as a levelling mechanism that equalizes beautification and access to cosmetics among women in coalitions. This levelling through sharing cosmetics operates in a similar way as meat and other types of sharing amongst the egalitarian hunter-gatherers that were analyzed as mechanisms that promote and maintain egalitarianism (Lewis, 2008; Woodburn, 1982) and prevent ambitious individuals from domination (Erdal, Whiten, 1996). This sharing mechanism also links the model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) elaborated for the Pleistocene egalitarian hunter-gatherers with contemporary hunter gatherers and the studied ritual situations focused on sharing cosmetics and beauty tips amongst the cosmetic purchasers.

The observed sharing from the above example carries similarities with demand sharing, a concept that Peterson (1993) developed in connection with type of sharing that responds to ‘direct verbal and/or nonverbal demands’ amongst the Aboriginal Australians (Peterson, 1993: 860). Although originally developed as a concept operative amongst the hunter-gatherers, Peterson points out that it is not restricted only to hunter-gatherer groups but demand sharing can be found also amongst the less egalitarian populations such as Bantu speaking pastoralists and Melanesian horticulturists (Peterson, 1993: 871). Peterson also notes that demand sharing behaviour does not depend merely on need. He therefore suggests understanding it also as testing behaviour that establishes social relationships. Demand sharing

operates this way in environments where relationships due to their constant production and sustaining cannot be taken for granted (Peterson, 1993).

Such attribute corresponds to the character of the researched female collectives in which membership can and does change over time. Amongst the women I worked with most of them joined their current cosmetic coalitions after being previously members of other such collectives. For example one of the groups I worked more intensively with originated in the region of Eastern Slovakia at secondary school. Two of the original members moved to Bratislava to study at university. In the course of their studies they formed a cosmetic collective with another three young women from the same region. About the same time another three young women from Bratislava joined this collective. In another cosmetic collective that emerged amongst the waitresses in the coffee shop all of them were previously purchasing direct sales cosmetics with different collectives.

Altman (2011) shows that direct verbalized demand sharing is limited to ceremonial allies or partners. He further points out that demand sharing frequently occurs in situations where surpluses are very visible. Thus I observed demand sharing regularly taking place within cosmetic coalitions during the ritualized distribution of purchases with plenty of cosmetics available and usually very visible. Altman (2011) also suggests that in such situations of plenty demand does not create embarrassment but, on the contrary, when met it establishes closeness and solidarity. On the one hand, demand sharing in the context of female cosmetic collectives tests for the group commitment amongst the studied women. Women committed to the collective always share cosmetics with their girlfriends giving up the advantage of knowing, having

tried or owning certain cosmetics compared to their girlfriends. On the other hand, demand sharing operates as a levelling mechanism in the access to cosmetic resources and knowledge. Through demand sharing women equalize relationships amongst each other via sharing cosmetics and they ensure that all the members of the collective have equal access to them. Demand sharing in the context of studied female collectives thus not only did operate as a costly signal of commitment to the group but simultaneously it established and sustained egalitarian relationships among women in coalitions. It was also a counter-dominance mechanism preventing any woman to excel at beauty and beautification and so out-compete her girlfriends.

### **Talking about beauty: beauty tips and personal disclosure**

The women knew each other before the bonds of intimacy developed amongst them. They were often co-workers or school-mates. As Biggart (1989) points out the direct sales strategy uses the existing social relations for business purposes. This is reflected in the statement of one of the research participants:

*“(...) I think with her (the representative) it's like this, that people become her customers because they are her girlfriends. Or if they aren't her girlfriends, then pals, and if not pals, then good acquaintances. That's how it goes. You're not first her customer and then her friend but the other way round.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

Yet there is a marked difference in the quality of relationship between the members of the female collectives and their other female co-workers. First of all, it is the members

of the collectives who are offered the access to the cosmetic resources understood by the research participants as '*good*' yet are scarce and therefore difficult to obtain. This is also true of the access to the beauty knowledge, conceptualized among the studied women as secret and therefore available only to the trusted ones. The intensification of the relationships amongst the women from the collectives happened during the emotionally intense and financially costly cosmetic rituals usually launched on a two weekly basis coinciding with every new catalogue and with the distribution of ordered cosmetics. As a result of their regular participation in cosmetic rituals the relationships amongst the studied women intensified and became more intimate. In the process of increasing trust and deepening of bonds through collective rituals the business-like relations weakened or disappeared altogether. The developed intensity and intimacy of relationships were also reflected in the kinds of information these women exchanged amongst themselves as trusted members of a bonded group.

On the one hand, the studied women exchanged ritualized formulae about cosmetics that operated as the secret language discussed in the previous chapter. This type of information had a fixed form and content and was learnt while women participated in rituals. They operated as a short-hand signal of group membership – only those women who went through the rituals and thus paid the costs of becoming members of the collectives knew when and how to use these linguistic formulae correctly. They represented one of the mechanisms through which women patrolled the boundary of their collective and watched out for free-riders – the ones who would like to gain access to the benefits stemming from the membership of a bonded female collective without paying any costs (Power, 2001). On the other hand, the research participants exchanged information about cosmetics resources. As discussed above, the sharing of

this information was used to display and evaluate the commitment of the cosmetics purchasers to their collective.

There was yet another type of information that women expected from each other to share. They referred to it as to '*giving advice*'. It was information about their beauty flaws and tips on how to enhance their attractiveness. The former was seen as highly intimate and very sensitive information and as such required trust amongst the women in order to pass it down at all. The latter was seen as a property of the female collective and was exchanged only between those women who were seen as the coalition members. The exchange of both types of information was always part of the collective rituals of catalogue browsing and the distribution of cosmetics.

The information about the beauty flaws was seen by women as both confidential as well as handicapping their own attractiveness. The honest and best possible advice about how to improve their appearance obligatorily followed every such personally disclosing information and all of the women present were expected to give it. The research participants always stressed the need for close relationships amongst each other that were backed up by mutual trust for such a conversation to take place at all. This mutual trust created a safe environment where the processes of self-disclosure and giving and accepting advice were possible. The trust within the studied cosmetic alliances was created via costly collective ritual performances of catalogue browsing and the distribution of cosmetics. As suggested by Power (1998), it is precisely costly rituals that secure trust within a coalition and mark the boundaries of speech communities in which the exchange of social information is seen as reliable. Once trust and reliability of the women was guaranteed by taking part in the costly rituals,



the exchange of intimate social information could safely go ahead. Yet, within the studied collectives both types of information also operated as costly signals that demonstrated and confirmed the women's commitment to each other within their respective collective. The costs that women imposed on each other by sharing them are to be seen in the possibility of provoking a damageable effect if such information would circulate outside of the trusted collective.

As is apparent from the following example, both, flaws and advice alike, are information about the women's bodies that were seen by the interviewed women as highly intimate. The mutual trust for sharing such intimacies was seen as vital:

*“There must be a certain degree of trust. It's as if you confined it to someone, that even though it's just cosmetics, it's something intimate. And I wouldn't want to risk, that someone would judge me, to tell the truth. [It's intimate] in that it's essentially about the body. You know, as if you confessed to someone, that you beautify yourself, that in reality you're not that beautiful, but that you beautify yourself to be it, maybe that's it. Such a confession (...) maybe because it's about the body and (...) because that's mine, it's closely interrelated with my person. (...) To those other women I usually don't talk about cosmetics, so I tell them, I don't know, that 'you look good' but I don't ask them any further 'what do you use' or so. As if I distinguished between people, it's not about that I wouldn't want to know, but it's something intimate. I'd probably have a feeling that they would expect from me, that, I don't know. I wouldn't ask a person I don't trust. (...) I associate the world of cosmetics with people who are closest to me, because it's about beauty, that's closest to my person and maybe if I were a top model who looks great, then maybe I wouldn't have problems to talk about*

*it, the more because I have complexes or I can see my imperfections that I'm aware of, the more I'm sensitive about what concerns myself as much as cosmetics. That's why I talk about it only with certain people (...)."* (Research participant Nr.2, age 26, admin manager).

As I suggested elsewhere (Fejdiova, 2016) in the above statement the research participant stresses that for her to share the information concerning her appearance to the other women she needs to first trust them. In her view cosmetics are an intimate matter concerning her body. To expose this kind of information to someone else represents a risky confession that shows that she actually might not *'be as beautiful'*. So even though she says that it is *'just cosmetics'* her description gives evidence about something very important concerning the relevance of beauty and beautification for her. Her *'imperfections'* can make her vulnerable to others. Yet such shared and reciprocal circulation of beauty flaws is an obligatory constituent of the cosmetic rituals. It is expected from her and from her girlfriends alike to share it. All of them, her and her girlfriends understand that this information is secret and they share it only with the women they trust. She keeps the *'world of cosmetics'* only for those people who *'are closest'* to her. That is her girlfriends with whom she shares the direct sales cosmetics. The research participant sees cosmetics as the most intimate issue. They literary touch her body that she sees as inherently hers. When she reveals her flaws she is giving away information that could be used by other women. From the perspectives of evolutionary psychology, sharing such information can be risky in that it can harm the woman's reputation where attractiveness is seen as one of its most important attributes (Buss, 1994; Hess, 2017). Thus if such information is misused it can handicap a woman in relation to other women with whom she would compete

through appearance (Campbell, 2004). An alternative model of cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) predicts that women would compete through appearance with outsider women yet they would cooperate through beauty and beautification with women from their coalition. As can be seen from the above example, women do not talk about their appearance outside the cosmetic collectives. To share such information the research participant needs to really trust her girlfriends. Thus when she talks to the '*other women*' she makes sure that she does not get into a situation when she would have to share such intimate information. Yet if she does confine her beauty flaws to her girlfriends she expects that they will reciprocate with the best beauty tips they know. Such '*giving advice*' is another obligatory aspect of the collective cosmetic rituals. The intimate bodily knowledge, flaws and beauty tips alike, is constructed as secret within the cosmetic collectives. It only takes place with the closely bonded circle of fellow-women. By sharing the potentially harmful information with the group and by giving up the best beauty tips the women in the coalition show to each other that amongst them it is safe to do so (Fejdiova, 2016).

Disclosing the information about one's own beauty faults to the women from the coalition can be interpreted as a handicap (Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997). The woman shows to her girlfriends that she is beautiful enough to accept the challenge of a risk stemming from sharing this potentially damaging information. Yet she also demonstrates in a clear and reliable way her trust for the women in her coalition that such information will not be misused. On the other hand, sharing beauty tips could represent a drawback in that a woman opens up the possibility of lowering her own relative attractiveness within the group. Yet if trust amongst the women participating in the exchange is guaranteed in the ritually bonded and committed collective, the

sharing of beauty flaws can take place safely, without its potential risk. Thus the exchange of the intimate information about beauty flaws and '*giving advice*' should be understood as demonstrating trust and commitment and at the same time testing for them. Simultaneously it also carries with it yet another capacity for levelling-up attractiveness of the women in their coalition.

Interestingly, during my research I did not observe that research participants would enjoy prestige for being good beauty advisers. Rather, the reputation tended to be equally distributed among these cosmetic purchasers who variously gave advice depending on the concrete beauty issue and their individual knowledge of cosmetics and beautification. Thus woman who gave advice one time did not have to next time. Contrary to this informal system that emerged from the bottom up, prestige *was* enjoyed by representatives as part of the *formal* direct selling system in which representatives enjoyed prestige in direct correlation to the height of their profits. I met some of these representatives in the premises of both cosmetic companies and in the business meetings that I attended. Their clothes, makeup style as well as their manner of talking to me clearly showed their expertise in the respective direct sales cosmetic and in the direct selling strategy.

The two types of social information discussed above were constructed as secret and the research participant saw them as the property of their respective collective. They differed from the information about the third party (Dunbar, 1996) also circulating amongst the studied women that they referred to as '*gossip*'. The secret information circulated exclusively within the ritual context. By contrast, the cosmetic purchasers would '*gossip*' within as well as outside such context.

Dunbar (1996) suggests that gossip operates as a mechanism for bonding in coalitions. Yet Power (2000) points out that for gossip to operate this way another independent and simultaneously costly mechanism needs to be at work to establish commitment to such alliance. Following Knight (1999) she sees the participation in the costly collective rituals as the means for creating a ritually bonded “trusting gossiping community” (Power, 2000: 95). The ‘gossip’ that circulated amongst the women lacked the costliness of the secret knowledge recorded in the studied setting and was not used on its own to guarantee the safety of the collective boundaries. Yet it operated alongside the costly signals of group commitment. Its presence and excitement are apparent from the following example:

*“Oh, (we) totally gossip, really gossip about our common acquaintances. But those are really just gossips like ‘did you hear that?’, ‘do you know that him and her with her and him and because of this?’, ‘still, not anymore?’ and so on.” (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)*

The above example indicates kinds of gossip the research participants exchange with each other while having a sauna together. Such gossiping is an intrinsic part of every sauna session and its flow is initiated through talking about cosmetics that takes place at the beginning of each sauna session. When gossiping the women discuss in detail mainly the sexual relationships of their acquaintances. Questions such as ‘did you hear’ or ‘do you know’ introduce the awaited gossip information.

When passed down within the ritual, the exchange of social information including ‘gossiping’ follows a ritualized pattern: women present first exchange the highly

sensitive and confidential types of information that are backed by costs, and then they engage in gossiping:

*“For example (...) we go through the catalogue and she says ‘this is the new fragrance? What is it like?’ and I go like ‘oh, nothing special’ and she’s got problematic skin so we usually talk about that, like, now ‘this is new, order it’. And then we talk about celebrities who’ve got bad skin and so (laughs), or we start talking about clothes that actually is related to women. So from cosmetics we moved on to clothes and balls and things like that. Then the conversation warms up.” (Research participant Nr.32, age 31, Avon representative, secondary school teacher)*

In this statement we can see how all the components of exchanged information are interlinked and combined at the single occasion of catalogue browsing. The two girlfriends start with using the standardized formulae when talking about the cosmetics through discussing the new fragrances in the catalogue. Then they move on to the intimate topic of the *‘problematic skin’*: one of the friends points out her attractiveness problem, the other one *‘gives advice’* what to do with it straight away. Only then, when the boundaries of safety are re-confirmed and trust is yet again reasserted through mechanisms that show or impose costs on the participating women, the gossiping about famous people with *‘bad skin’* begins. Just then *‘the conversation warms up’* and they continue to elaborate the conversation about beauty through discussing clothes. The same pattern is apparent in the following example:

*“It’s quite funny, because those catalogues are starters, that you look at the cosmetics but suddenly, you realize that we started talking about what happened to us*

*yesterday. It starts with how she put on make-up or when she used it and we end up talking about what happened and, of course, we complain about our boyfriends, that's our topic that connects us all. It's a moment when we know that we can tell it to each other."* (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)

Here again amongst the cosmetic purchasers the catalogues are 'starters' of the conversation. First, the women talk about cosmetics - they comment on their use of them. This further develops into sharing of everyday anecdotes and culminates in a specific way of talking about their male partners. As the research participant puts it '*we complain about our boyfriends*'. This complaining represents a topic that together with cosmetics connects all the participating women. At this particular time all of them know, that they can share cosmetics as well as their complaints. They feel that they can talk about it right then when they have acknowledged the collectivity of their group.

In the above examples the talking about cosmetics represented a framework of further conversation. The participating women first re-established and re-affirmed themselves as members of their collective. Through sharing their beauty secrets the studied women kept track of each other's commitment to their respective group. Carefully monitoring each other's statements at the two main collective ritual events of catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics women were distinguishing which ones of them were still committing to the group and so effectively watching out for free riders. Through disclosing intimate bodily information and through sharing '*advice*' how to improve their flaws women in the group showed to each other that

they can be trusted and that they are prepared to share the scarce cosmetic resources as well as the valuable beauty knowledge within their group. They effectively advertised to each other their own qualities as reliable girlfriends. Thereafter the conversation reserved for the group starts to flow again - they begin to share gossip and other topics that '*connect*' them.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I focused on the ways research participants demonstrated their commitment to each other within cosmetic coalitions. They were interested in behaviour that was backed by costs. These costs guaranteed the reliability of the advertised information. Money spent on cosmetics represented honest clues for making accurate judgements about the levels of their girlfriends' engagement with the coalition. Women carefully monitored each other's purchases through attentive '*watching*' and '*trying on*' cosmetics. They took notice of the type and volume of orders made by other women as well as the ones they themselves made. As a result women could very accurately tell the types and amount of orders their girlfriends made and who was sharing cosmetics by letting others '*try them on*'. Detailed knowledge about availability, use and access to cosmetic resources was understood amongst the researched women as scarce and therefore valuable. By sharing such prized knowledge with their collective women imposed on themselves costs represented by giving up the advantage of individual beautification if keeping such information out of circulation. By pooling the information within their group women effectively equalized their access to it. Thus detailed knowledge about cosmetics other women bought allowed the cosmetic purchasers, on the one hand, to assess with



precision the extent of their cosmetic coalition. On the other hand, it levelled-up the beautification within the cosmetic collectives. Purely individualistic and competitive beautification within such coalition was untenable.

Another type of observed costly behaviour centred on disclosing intimate bodily information that revealed the beauty flaws of the research participants. The information carried with it the potential risk of being used against the confessing woman. Yet within the female collectives every such confession was followed by the best '*advice*' the other women present could give to better such a flaw. The costs of such behaviour are represented by giving up the advantage of being more attractive than the other women in the group. It also provided other women from the coalition with the potential to harm their reputation. By doing so the disclosing woman demonstrated trust towards her girlfriends. By sharing beauty tips her girlfriends in return displayed to each other their mutual commitment. This information exchange also operated as an effective levelling mechanism that equalized differences in beautification within their collective. It established and sustained egalitarian relationships among the cosmetic purchasers in coalitions with beauty and beautification at their centre. It also represented a counter-dominance mechanism preventing any woman in the collectives to stand out through beauty and beautification.

Important aspects of the demonstration of the commitment amongst the research participants was the sharing of access to cosmetic resources and the levelling of access to beauty knowledge both of which lead to equalized attractiveness within the researched collectives. They represented yet another means for achieving ritual

egalitarianism within the coalition through cosmetics. From the perspectives of evolutionary psychology women are theorized as individualistically competing with each other through beauty and beautification for male investment (Buss, 1994; Campbell, 2004). Contrary to this understanding these research data show that the cosmetic purchasers carefully created and maintained trustworthy egalitarian coalitions in which not only did they cooperate through beauty and beautification but through a series of mechanisms focused on sharing they levelled and cooperatively maximized their beautification within the respective coalitions. Collectively they created as beautiful a coalition as possible.

The studied women were highly mobile moving between different jobs and regions in Slovakia. Many of the research participants were previously members of other cosmetic collectives. These collectives were thus characterized by the possibility of women leaving them and joining other such collectives. Such situation is according to Boyer (2001) one of the characteristics of any coalition. Therefore, women demonstrated their commitment to such collectives repeatedly (Boone, 2000) with each catalogue browsing and each distribution of cosmetics. Through making use of costly signals in the researched groups women forged intimate relationships based on trust and on sharing of beauty knowledge. Similarly to the highly mobile women from the Magude district in Mozambique who created cooperative alliances with other women through tattoos (Gengenbach, 2003) the cosmetic circles operated as a mechanism that enabled mobile women to connect to reliable alliances in a relatively short time span.

In this chapter I analyzed the costly behaviour through which the research participants showed to each other their commitment to the cosmetic collective. I also discussed the levelling mechanisms that equalized the beauty and beautification of the coalition members. I have shown that women through both types of mechanisms, costly signals as well as sharing, established and sustained egalitarian relationships focused on cooperation through beauty and beautification.

## **Chapter six**

### **‘We notice, we notice such details’: The uses of beauty**

During my research the women I studied ordered cosmetics that ranged from make-up products through pampering creams to body and hair products. The research participants used and showcased these cosmetics strategically. On the one hand, through the medium of cosmetics, they enjoyed themselves within the collective of their girlfriends. They created for themselves pleasant bodily and emotional experiences. On the other hand, they strategically displayed the direct sales cosmetics and their use to each other and they also employed cosmetics to become more appealing to men in general and to their current or potential romantic partners in particular. Especially, they advertised the direct sales cosmetics purchased with their girlfriends to their current romantic partners.

In this chapter I focus on the ways the research participants used the direct sales cosmetics for beautification. I also explore the practices of displaying the use of cosmetics to each other, to men, and to their romantic partners.

### **Interpretive framework: Two Darwinian models**

There are two main approaches that interpret the ways women enhance and use their attractiveness from a Darwinian point of view. On the one hand the model represented mainly by the work of evolutionary psychologists (Buss, 1988; Buss, Schmitt, 1993; Campbell, 2004; Ingo et al. 2007; Low, 2001) understands the uses of beauty amongst

the women as a competitive practice. From this perspective women would use their attractiveness and beautification individualistically and in competition with other women. They would advertise their beauty individualistically to their potential or current romantic partners. This theoretical position predicts individualistic and competitive use of cosmetics with the exclusion of other women who are seen as possible competitors. This model would predict individualized and isolated uses of cosmetics and beautification, concealment of knowledge and access to beautification resources, and the monopolizing of beauty tips by single women. It would not predict any collectivized circulation of beauty knowledge nor any sharing of information about resources in order to make this information available to other women. There would also be no disclosing of attractiveness flaws because under the conditions of competitiveness amongst women such information could be used against the woman revealing it.

On the other hand, without underestimating the competitive dynamics amongst women an alternative Darwinian model proposes that while women compete with each other through the individualistic uses of beauty when outside of female collectives, once they establish coalitions through cosmetic rituals they form bonded collectives in which instead of competing with each other through beauty, they create ties of trust, reciprocity and cooperation (Power, 1999, 2009). This alternative model that Power (1999) named the Female Cosmetic Coalitions model predicts collective uses of beautification based on the cooperation of women within trusted bonded collectives. Women instead of improving their attractiveness individualistically would engage in collectivized beautification practices. Within their collectives women would share the information about the cosmetic resources and beauty tips as well as intimate

bodily information about their own beauty flaws. They would level their attractiveness differences by giving each other feed-back on their appearance and by sharing cosmetic techniques and resources. This model was developed for the evolution of modern humans undergoing severe reproductive stress owing to encephalization among egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Yet in contemporary capitalist conditions too, women still need to establish and maintain coalitions amongst themselves as they frequently face the urban isolation of big cities, high mobility that drives them away from their kin, and the need to provision their children. They need to gain access to various resources. The information about them often circulates within the cosmetic collectives. Women also need to attract and maintain male investment into their children. Similarly to the examples of Nuba, Yoruba, Ga'anda and Magude district women, many women in contemporary western cities need to cooperate with other women who are non-kin. One way to do it is to build cooperative coalitions through the collective use of cosmetics in costly rituals.

The beautification and its displays that the cosmetic purchasers engaged in had several dimensions. These various aspects of beauty improvement intermixed and gained preferences in different situations. First, the research participants engaged in beautification when just amongst themselves. Such experiences were characterized by pleasure, joy, and excitement. In these situations women displayed their beautified looks to each other. At these times the beautification practices were directed inwards at the women within collectives themselves. This inward dimension was characterized by generous sharing of beauty advice that resulted in the levelling-up of attractiveness of the participants. Only after this inward phase was completed did the cosmetic purchasers direct their beautification practices and their displays outward at men. In

this second phase the participants used their beautification skills and expertise to become more appealing to their male customers, employers and romantic partners.

In this chapter I use the concept of female cosmetic coalitions to explain the collective uses of beauty and beautification amongst the direct sales cosmetic purchasers. In line with the model I interpret the mutual displays of cosmetics and beautification women engaged in within their collectives. I analyze the aspect of equalizing attractiveness through collectivized beautification practices and sharing of beauty knowledge that I observed in the bonded collectives of participants and I also show how these women used their attractiveness in their relationships with men.

### **Sharing the pleasure**

Beauty and beautification were for the research participants important factors that motivated the purchase and use of direct sales cosmetics. The cosmetic purchasers talked about themselves as interested in the way they looked. They wanted to feel pretty, desirable and good about themselves and in their view the purchased direct sales cosmetics helped them to achieve it. Typically, women using these cosmetics talked about each other as *'interested in cosmetics'* because *'they want to be attractive'*, *'they want to look well groomed'* and *'they want to be pretty'*, *'they want to be seen as attractive'*. As the research participants put it:

*"It's a woman who does care about her looks or who cares about the cosmetics that she uses, the make-up or jewellery. She enjoys it, when she orders it. Because there are women who don't do it, because they aren't interested in it, they aren't tempted by*

*it. For example my sister.” (Research participant Nr. 27, age 35, secondary school headmaster)*

*“(…) it’s a woman who enjoys grooming herself (…) who is served, pampered by [it], that someone brings it to her.” (Research participant Nr. 5, age 22, university student and coffee shop manager)*

The endeavour to be attractive is not the only motivation for these women to engage in purchasing direct sales cosmetics. Such direct sales cosmetic purchase and use can be also pleasurable and enjoyable as it is obvious in these examples. A woman who cares about her looks and the cosmetics she uses experiences joy and pleasure when purchasing them. She is ‘*pampered*’ and spoiled by using them. Yet, importantly, she shares this pampering, enjoyment and pleasure within the collectives of women who all take part in it as a group. The pleasurable experience that women can achieve when engaging with makeup and beautification practices in a collective context has been also pointed out by some social theorists (Beausolleille, 1994; Gordon, 2003, Smith, 1990). These authors stress the women’s agency, creativity, skilfulness, competence and playfulness when engaging collectively with cosmetics and beautification.

Competence in aesthetic elaboration and pride in skilful use of cosmetics were important aspects of the direct sales cosmetics experience. The research participants understood them as part of their collective shopping and beautification practices through which they became more skilled and cognizant of beauty knowledge and use of cosmetics:



*“(...) the ones that use it are more skilled, because there’s a commentary with each product [in the catalogue], so they know more about those products as if they would when reading the label in the shop. And if they ask the Avon lady for advice they are surely more educated in this area compared to those ones who just chuck things in the basket in a shop.” (Research participant Nr.32, age 31, Avon representative, secondary school teacher)*

The research participant observes and learns the knowledge and skills concerning beautification and cosmetics as a result of being part of the collective that buys direct sales cosmetics. The catalogue descriptions as well as information that the representative passes on to the collective lead to increased beauty knowledge and skills. The women from these collectives see themselves as different compared to the women who buy cosmetics in shops and *‘just chuck things in the basket’*. They see each other as *‘more educated’* and more knowledgeable in the area of beautification. Collectively they gain advantage compared to those ones who shop in a store without the regular occasions to gain information and advice from their girlfriends. In their view due to their engagement with the collectivized catalogue shopping, they also have at their disposition a wider range of cosmetics to use for their beautification and to achieve various beauty effects as can be seen in the following example:

*“(...) before I started to order Oriflame, I wasn’t used to put makeup on. And now I use more, I use creams and cosmetics (...) and when I take my cosmetic bag there are not just two things but fifty. (...) so this I use for evening, this I use for a special evening, this is for day (...) so that’s the difference. (...) Sometimes, surely you have also such an impulse that I’d like to go out and enjoy an evening of fame, as they say,*

*that you want to be pretty, there I see the difference.” (Research participant Nr. 6, age 21, Oriflame representative, university student and waitress)*

The research participant compares the amount of cosmetics and her ability to use them before and after she started to work as a representative for one of the cosmetic companies. Since then she has learnt what cosmetics to use at what occasions and how to apply them. So when she feels like putting on makeup *‘to be pretty and to enjoy a day of fame’* she has the cosmetics as well as the knowledge to do it.

It is not only skills and expertise that differentiates the direct sales cosmetics purchasers from other women. It is also the quality of the cosmetics they now use and their access to them. As I show in Chapter three, these cosmetics bought in a collective context are understood by the purchasers as of exceptional quality. The necessarily exceptional properties of the direct sales cosmetics are understood as vital in maintaining and improving one’s attractive appearance. The cosmetics bought in a collective context are referred to as *‘good’*, *‘great’* and *‘better’* than the other cosmetics. These other cosmetics are represented amongst the research participants as bought by women individually in High street shops where women cannot rely on each other’s collective support. Such individually purchased cosmetics represent the opposition to the collective context of the direct sales cosmetics purchases. Women buying cosmetics individually need to count either on themselves as individuals or on the shop assistant who is seen as untrustworthy because *‘she would tell you anything to make you buy it’*. The female customers in a chemist shop lack the ritually forged trust that developed amongst the direct sales cosmetics purchasers. In an environment where women do not see each other as reliable and trustworthy partners they do not

feel encouraged to ask other women for support in the issues of beauty and beautification. They rely on such help only in the context of the collectivized direct sales cosmetics purchasing where they know each other and trust each other. As one of the research participants puts it: *'you don't go to a woman in a shop to ask her, excuse me, what do you use?'*.

The research participants in the interviews compare and evaluate not only the two different ways cosmetics can be purchased but they also discriminate between the two different purchasing modes. The women in my study set themselves apart from those women who did not engage in purchases in a group but bought their cosmetics individually. The results of such individual purchases are seen by the research participants as not good enough:

*"(...) maybe they use something that doesn't have to be as good. Maybe she uses something that isn't good and if she had it from Avon it could be better (...)."*  
(Research participant Nr.3, age 25, Avon representative, admin manager)

*"(...) we are choosy, because you can buy other cosmetics but they are not as good in my view (...)."* (Research participant Nr.9, age 35, sales executive)

The cosmetics bought by single women outside the collective context do not have the desired properties that would confer advantage onto the cosmetic purchasers. On the other hand, the cosmetics bought in the collective cosmetic rituals are *'verified'* on the bodies of the participants. Their quality is repeatedly tested and guaranteed at the most intimate level – their own bodies. Through their embodied and yet collectivised

experience, the women *'know'* those cosmetics and their attributes, which they connect with elegance, beauty, being well groomed and feeling good about themselves. All these characteristics are collectively supported by the women from the respective cosmetic coalition. According to the research participants, this qualitative difference between the direct sales cosmetics bought in collective contexts and the shop-bought cosmetics is an advantage that other women do not have. It allows the cosmetic purchasers to tailor an *'exact'* suitability of such cosmetics that they can then use for maximized beautification:

*“[The representative] can tell you exactly what is suitable for your skin type or the colour that suits you and you can try it on because she has the samples (...) and I can tell that my skin is much better since I’m using it” (Research participant Nr. 7, age 23, waitress)*

In contrast to a shop assistant from the example above, the representative, who goes through the collective cosmetic rituals with the other women, is seen as a trustworthy and reliable advisor. She sells cosmetics to her girlfriends for her cost price and the women know that she would not sell to them cosmetics that *'wouldn't be good'*. She knows her cosmetics and her girlfriends well, so much so that she can tailor onto them the use of suitable cosmetics with precision.

Watching other women using cosmetics was an important part of sharing the beautification practices amongst the cosmetic purchasers from the groups I studied. The research participants understood such collective teaching and learning of valuable knowledge and skills centering on beautification as a guarantee of improving their

attractiveness. One of the women learnt these skills and expertise from her colleague with whom she regularly went through the catalogue. Regularly, she used to watch her putting on make-up as well as making orders. This pooling of proficiency in beautification opened up for the research participants more options for improving their appearance:

*“(...) they taught me the skills a little bit, I used to use one lipstick, always the same, well, not that there was much of a choice then, so I’m more skilled in this area. I’m not an expert, I can’t put makeup extremely well, I don’t have the skills of a beautician, but still, I have eye shadow, I know how to combine them and still, it’s a certain brand, not just, you know. Although now there are good things or good brands at Chemists but I now know what suits me and what I can use in my age, I always choose something. (...) Well, as Janka [the Avon lady] was ordering through that catalogue, I saw that, buy this, this goes with that, buy this eyeliner, it’s brown if you’re using a brown mascara and so. She used to attend those meetings, she got a short beautician training there, so she could advise me, too, that this is to be done this way and I saw, too, how she was putting on makeup or what she used, and so you get a small training through that. Because I never used to put on much makeup, I didn’t need it. I used to put on some eye shadows, some lipstick or lip gloss, not much, but I never used to put on powder, but now I’ve bought it, too. I now know that when my face is shiny I should put it on. So that was a small beautician training I got from her (laughs), but I’m not an expert in it.” (Informant Nr.15, age 52, primary school head teacher)*

The primary school head teacher compares her skills and knowledge before and after she has become a member of a small collective of women who collectively order cosmetics. As she herself puts it '*they taught her the skills*' referring to her girlfriends. She also uses what she understands as good quality cosmetics, seeing these as '*a certain brand*' that is better than other products available in the market. She recognizes an improvement in her beautification practices. She now knows what to use and she learnt from other women in the collective makeup techniques to achieve a desirable effect. She has learnt how to combine colours and what is suitable for her age. By watching her administrative assistant who also works as an Avon representative she learnt how to apply make-up better. Now she knows for herself what make-up to put on in order to look presentable and well groomed.

This collectivized learning of beautification skills from each other as well as sharing of expert information that the women engaged in involved the cooperation of members of the collectives expressed through beauty. Not only did the cosmetic purchasers generously share their beauty knowledge with others in their group but they let the other women watch them in order to enable them to improve their own beautification skills. As I showed in the previous chapter, sharing of such intimate situations and information was understood by the research participants as highly intimate, requiring trust amongst the women in order to take place at all. Within the collectives there was no secrecy and no concealment about beautification. On the contrary, women were very open with each other in what they were doing and they did it in the presence of other women from their collective. The beautification techniques were generously shared within each studied cosmetic coalition. Yet, the women who were not members of these collectives were not invited to enjoy these

benefits. The acts of beautification were reserved to the members of the respective coalition only. The women kept the shared experience strictly to themselves. As they themselves put it: *'we show it to each other', 'we talk about it here'*.

### **Evaluating beautification amongst the women**

The intimacy of the shared beautification practices was in stark contrast to the way women evaluated the beautification expertise of women outside their collectives. The women I worked with were highly interested in the cosmetics these other women had access to. I noticed on several occasions in the premises where the respective direct sales cosmetics were sold that the women present regularly used to keep an eye on what cosmetics other women bought:

*"[when you get your cosmetics at the Oriflame service point] and you can also see what other women have in their baskets, when they are getting theirs (laughs). You know, looking over the shoulders. When they already had their products, and they had for example, so of course, I was looking at the products they had and I ordered them too, or even at some others, checking the size, how it looked, and when they had a new catalogue and went through it I was trying to look in it impatiently too, to see what will be there (laughs)."* (Research participant Nr.7, age 23, waitress)

The research participant talks about observing and assessing cosmetics of other women in the premises of the direct sales cosmetics company when she comes to place her own order. While she is waiting for her cosmetics to be handed over to her she regularly takes notice of the other women there and curiously observes what they

themselves have in their shopping baskets. She then compares their baskets content to her own order. She calls this combination of watching and evaluating *'looking over the [other women's] shoulders'*. While she is doing it the research participant's behaviour is not at all open. On the contrary, the *'looking over the shoulders'* invokes secretiveness and concealment of her behaviour. The other women should not notice. These assessments occur non-verbally and they are directed from the observer towards the scrutinized woman. It is also individualistic, impersonal and lacking any intimacy. The examining woman then uses the newly acquired knowledge for her own advantage to boost her own knowledge of cosmetics. Yet she shares her newly acquired knowledge with the girlfriends in her collective. This way all the female members of her cosmetic coalition can elaborate and enrich their beautification choices.

In the above situation the emphasis was on careful yet one-way, impersonal, and concealed observation of cosmetic resources of other women. 'Other' here means women that are not part of the bonded female collective. They represent the outsiders. In the following examples, however, we see mutual exchange of verbal information concerning beautification and cosmetics amongst the women who are part of the same collective. These descriptions vary from the above example in elaboration of the detail suggesting close relationships, trust and intimacy amongst the women in question. These examples also differ from the context of impersonal examination and evaluation above. They are characterized by strong mutual interest of the participating women in each other as well as by sharing amongst them:



*“When I come to see my friend and we are in her room, we talk, you know, like girls (...) and then she starts putting on make-up and we are about to go out together, I look through all her things [cosmetics] and I would say ‘oh, where did you get this, is it good, can I try it on?’ and I would then try it.” (Research participant Nr.7, age 23, waitress)*

*“I enjoy going through the cosmetics, when for example a friend of mine comes from England, they have different cosmetics, so I take out her, her cosmetic bag and ‘can I have a look at what you’ve got?’ (...) and she says ‘yes, have a look’ and I go ‘have you got anything new?’ and she says ‘no, I don’t’ and I notice something, that I didn’t remember or something that seems new to me and I would go ‘and what’s this?’ and we start talking about it, you know, ‘how good this is, a special mascara, blah, blah’. I like that, I enjoy looking at the cosmetics (...) I do that to my sisters when I come home. They have it in their bathrooms, so I look what they’ve got. And my sisters do the same. And they ask me ‘what do you have in that little bag, that new thing, what is it for a cream?’ and I say ‘a friend of mine gave it to me’, ‘really?’, ‘and where did you get this?’, ‘it’s a present’. I really enjoy it.” (Research participant Nr.2, age 26, office manager)*

In both cases there is obvious intimacy of the relationships between the women participating in the interaction. This closeness is reflected in the way these women behave when it comes to evaluating the cosmetics of their girlfriends. In these cases there is no hiding and secretiveness. Contrary to the previous situation, where the scrutinizing of the cosmetics resources of the other women was concealed, the looking here is very direct and immediate. Both women go through the cosmetics of their

friends, they touch them and they take them out of their bags. They look at them, open them and even try them out on their own bodies. They would ask questions about the effectiveness of the cosmetics and they would receive feedback in the form of an answer or an invitation to try it. There is an instructive aspect to such behaviour, where the women gather new information about cosmetics from their girlfriends. Yet it also represents an important indicator of the status of the relationships between the participating women where trust, intimacy, and sharing are made possible. In these situations women do not necessarily wait for the invitation from their girlfriends to examine their cosmetics. On the contrary, they demand such sharing and take their own initiative to do so rather independently. Their girlfriends from the bonded collective are not only relied upon to tolerate such behaviour, but to encourage it by invitation to have a look at their cosmetics, too. They are expected to share.

Not only did women survey and evaluate cosmetics belonging to both, outsiders as well as insiders, but they examined their beautification practices, too. They were especially good at noticing and inspecting the beautification results. This noticing and evaluating took place both outside the bonded collectives as well as inside of them. Yet there were marked differences in the way these two processes took place. The following examples show, how women assessed and commented on the other women's looks outside their bonded collective:

*“(...) some of them are extremely, that it makes you cosmetically blown away, some of the women, young and older alike, that are inappropriately (...) painted, and then you understand, that, oh, this is not the way to do it.” (Research participant Nr. 20, age 22, university student, Oriflame representative)*

*“(...) when I see one like that, painted, I say, [she looks] like an Easter egg.”*

*(Research participant Nr. 17, age 51, administrative assistant, Avon representative)*

These examples reveal the often unfavourable character of the remarks about the attempts at beautification directed at the outsider women yet which were never spoken to them. In their derision and belittling they were reserved for the trusted girlfriends only. The women themselves acknowledged the unpleasant character of their remarks referring to them as *‘badmouthing’*.

### **Displaying beautified looks to the coalition**

More surprising is the way the same two processes took place within the bonded collectives. This evaluating of the attractiveness was qualitatively different. The research participants openly looked at and scrutinized other women in their collectives in order to assess and comment on the appearance of their girlfriends. This practice was represented by the act of *‘noticing’* the way other women looked. The *‘noticing’* was accompanied by the immediate act of giving honest and trusted advice about the observed appearance. On the one hand, the advice was aimed at the improvement of the looks of the women participating in such interaction. On the other hand, it opened up the way towards the mutual consensus in appreciating or, by contrast, devaluing certain types of female appearance. Through the practice of *‘noticing’* the female collectives operated as correctives of the understanding of attractiveness as well as of beautification praxis that was perceived by the researched women as appropriate. Women who were scrutinized in their groups accepted on the basis of trust the

collectively agreed view about their own appearance. The following examples illustrate the practice of 'noticing' well:

*"(...) one of our colleagues had a new eye liner, she bought it in Oriflame and she came in the morning and we noticed it instantly, that she had something new and that it suited her. So we complimented her and she was pleased and maybe it persuaded her to use it and, we notice, we notice such details, those, you do notice, that someone is used to put the eye liner but she tried something different and now she comes to work unsure, and [she says] 'oh, maybe I over-did it, when I bought it, it also cost some money, so to make a use of it' but the other colleague tells her 'cool, it suits you, you look different' and she will continue using it. And on the contrary, if someone comes in and we'll say 'oh, not this' then she won't use it. (...) so when that colleague of ours came in and she had her eyes made up differently, we noticed it instantly, we noticed that she looked somewhat different, that it gave her a look of freshness and we all asked her whether she went on holiday or something, because she looked different."* (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop team manager and university student)

*"(...) for example, when I come to work and I stop here [at the counter], they are very attentive so they'll notice for sure, for example, I had new eye shadows, and they went 'show us, which ones you've got?' so I would close my eyes to let them see them and they looked at them immediately and then they talked about it, how long they last, because some eye shadows make little lines or the colour gets weaker during the day, so, what are they like, whether the colour suits me or not, so. It's always like that here. For example, today I came in and they went 'well, you look pretty today, do you have*

*anything new? Have you been to the hair dresser?’ and I said ‘no, I’m only wearing my hair down’ (laughs).“ (Research participant Nr.7, age 23, waitress)*

In both situations the reaction of the participating women to another woman’s appearance is immediate and overt. It is shown in statements such as *‘they are very attentive’, ‘they will notice for sure’* or *‘we noticed it instantly’*. In both examples women know their appearance will be inspected and evaluated but they do not mind it. On the contrary, they are waiting for it or even encouraging it by behaving in the way that they will ensure such assessment. Thus every time the research participant comes to work she *‘stops at the counter’* where all her co-workers can see her and comment on the way she looks today. The research participants take onboard the expected feedback that comes in a form of positive or negative comments on their looks. These observations favour or challenge certain types of appearance. Their acceptance is reflected in pursuing or giving up particular makeup or hairstyles, consequently encouraging the purchase and use of certain cosmetics within the female collectives.

Through mutual offering and accepting the opinions on beautification that studied women circulated within their collective the attractiveness distinctions among them were levelled and the information about the desired feminine look was pooled within their group. As a result women in these collectives felt they looked more attractive when accepting the beauty advice of their girlfriends. Yet if each of the single women in this group looked better because of the comments from their colleagues, the group as a whole would enhance their attractiveness. The improved appearance positively influenced the interactions between these women and their male customers in the coffee shop. The observed practices of *‘noticing’* and subsequent correcting of the

appearance of the cosmetic purchasers operated as a levelling mechanism to equalize and raise the attractiveness of the women within their collective.

Another aspect of this levelling mechanism is represented by the equalizing of the beautification *practices* amongst the women within the same collective as shown in the following examples. Here, the research participants understand the application of makeup through their close relations to each other. When other women in their work environment who are in their collective wear more makeup, they also tend to wear more and, vice versa:

*“(...) well in our department, there’s one man and two women, and one colleague is already around fifty, maybe even after fifty, and she doesn’t wear makeup and the other one is in her thirties, she wears a very subtle makeup, so I was thinking, why would I [wear it]. Because before at my previous work, girls came in, we were a good team, and each of us came in made up, one prettier than the other, that’s how it worked there.” (Research participant Nr.12, age 26, admin officer)*

*“Did women use to wear more make up in your previous job? Yes, one of them did and we drew the other in to make her wear it, too. We, actually, we used to have our hair done up every day, we used to be nicely made up. Yes, all kinds of eye shadows, four colours I used to wear. Now I wouldn’t enjoy it anymore. I put on only one and a little bit of the other, that’s it. Why don’t you use as much now? I don’t know, maybe because they [female colleagues] don’t really wear makeup. (...) You know, there we were only women and it was just three of us. So we were close to each other.” (Research participant Nr.13, 26, team coordinator)*

In these statements the equalizing and cooperative relationships amongst the women in their collectives are manifest through wearing make-up. To join in means to wear make-up to a similar extent as the other women from their collective do. As one of my research participants puts it *'we drew the other in to make her wear it [like we did]'*. The existence of close relationships amongst the women sharing the beautification practices at their previous work places are demonstrated through such expressions as *'we were close to each other'* and *'we were a good team'*. In these collectives there is a strong incentive supported by their female members to use make-up to boost one's attractiveness. The women encourage each other to put on make-up to achieve the best results and to be as much attractive as possible. In their own words they were *'one prettier than the other'*. At their current work place, however, the other women who buy direct sales cosmetics use little make up. The research participants accommodate to their current situation and wear little makeup, too. They express their new circumstances through words like *'I don't enjoy it anymore'* or *'why would I put on make-up'*. As colleagues they are evaluated in terms of work achievements by the male bosses, who are interested in *'how much they managed to do at the end of the day'* and not in the way they look. Yet the presence or absence of men evaluating women in terms of their appearance does not explain why women conform to the higher levels of make-up use to match other women from their collective when just amongst themselves, without the presence of male colleagues, as shown in one of the previous examples. Such collectivized, cooperative, and equalizing use of makeup points rather to the importance of the female collective in which the close relationships among the women present trigger and determine the levels of cosmetics use. The commitment to such collective expectation is tested and demonstrated through cooperative makeup use. Thus women can *'draw the other in'*, the other

responding positively so both sides can level-up the makeup use within their collective. This behaviour is in contrast to those office situations where women do not use a lot of makeup. When sharing the direct sales cosmetics experience all the female co-workers level-down their makeup use to '*very subtle*'. When it comes to the enhanced attractiveness within a tightly bonded coalition none of the women from the studied collectives wants to stand out or let the others down by not wearing makeup.

### **Displaying beauty and beautification to men**

The inward directed beauty knowledge that the research participants democratically shared in the cosmetic coalitions was informed, on the one hand, by their own experience and experiments with their beautification. The knowledge and skills they mastered were gathered from cosmetic catalogues, girlfriends or representatives. On the other hand, however, this expertise was also informed by the interactions of the research participants with men and directed outwardly at them. The cosmetic purchasers gained this competence from their individual or collective relationships with men in their private and professional lives and they brought this information in the collective and equally shared it amongst each other. Yet women themselves made the judgments about what was or was not attractive for men. They linked this information and their individual experiences with men and exploited it in their private as well as public relationships with them. They used the shared information and cosmetic resources to make themselves more appealing to their present and potential romantic partners as well as to their male clients or employers. The following example illustrates it well:



*“A typical woman who uses [Oriflame cosmetics] wants to be attractive and she puts on makeup, or anything on her face. The one who wants to be attractive will order it. (...) We are a group of girls and we all wear makeup, we all want to be attractive for someone, so we order these things more often, whether it’s a mascara or eye shadows or anything, right.” (Research participant Nr.10, age 21, Oriflame representative, university student)*

In this example the beautification practices unfold in the collective of women who share the direct sales cosmetics experience. They aim their beautification at someone outside their collective, or as they put it *‘they want to be attractive for someone’*. In this statement there is a clear distinction between the collective of girlfriends who buy the same cosmetics, and this *‘someone’* at whom they direct their beautification and who does not belong to their collective. Because it is women who make themselves attractive, this *‘other’* or as recorded in the statement the *‘someone’* usually means men as it is clear from the following examples:

*“... they want to make themselves up, to be more attractive for their boyfriends, because most of us here have boyfriends and for example, [I’m thinking] when my boyfriend will smell this on me, he will surely like it, or when he will notice this, I want to know his view on it. They all are curious, they all want to be pretty.” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, coffee shop waitress and university student)*

*“Maybe because we are here in a daily contact with clients and as we are women together, there’s also rivalry, I don’t know, but each of us wants to be pretty. Because*

*a colleague looks like this, she's made up like this. So every one of us presents herself (...), she wants to look well, well groomed. Especially male clients very much take on board how one looks (...). So maybe each of us will buy it [cosmetics] because she has a feeling that it will make her look more attractive, that it will enhance her self-esteem."* (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop team manager and university student)

*"At my previous jobs the more attractive she looked the better position she had (...) really, the more attractive the better position she had."* (Research participant Nr.12, age 26, team coordinator)

*"I had an option to become a manager because the [male] director fancied me."* (Research participant Nr.11, age 22, admin officer)

In these examples the research participants want to be more attractive to men. These men are their current romantic partners as well as male customers and employers. The research participants are aware of the advantages they could potentially or actually gain from their beautified appearance from men and they aim their beautification at them. They are all familiar with the fact that men do pay attention to female looks. As the cosmetic purchasers themselves put it *'the male clients very much take on board how one looks'*. The studied women thus beautify their looks accordingly.

In the first statement the improved looks are targeted at the cosmetics purchasers' romantic partners for whom they want to look *'more attractive'*. The research participant stresses the importance of her own partner as well as of the partners of

other women in her collective when using makeup. All of them want to be more attractive for their *'boyfriends'*. She considers the sensual experience of her own partner to be important when she will be wearing the purchased cosmetics. She contemplates his reactions when he will be aware of her new fragrance or when he will be noticing her new makeup item she will be wearing.

In the example of the girlfriends from the coffee shop better looks enhanced their self-esteem and improved their interaction with the male customers. The research participant is aware of the fact that men react to female attractiveness. As waitresses in a coffee shop, the women from this collective are in a regular contact with female as well as male clients. It is the latter, however, whom they try to impress with their looks. The respective cosmetics these women buy give them the feeling they can become more beautiful and through their beautified looks they enhance their self-esteem when in contact with their male customers. In the last two examples, the research participants and their colleagues make themselves up carefully on a daily basis. They are *'one prettier than the other'* and their appearance is reflected in the work positions they hold and *'the more attractive the better position she had'*. In the last statement good looks are a possible way to get promoted at work if they catch the eye of the male employer.

There was an interesting aspect to enhancing attractiveness that the research participants engaged in to impress men. This side of the beautification practices aimed at men involved displaying cosmetics to them. Importantly, when it came to the women's current romantic partners it was not any cosmetics but only the ones purchased collectively with the girlfriends from the respective collectives that were

the objects of such display. The women I worked with used to display on a regular basis their new cosmetics bought in the collective rituals to their romantic partners to make them realize *‘what an attractive girlfriend’* they had:

*“I show it at home to my boyfriend. Can you see, what an attractive girlfriend you’ve got! And I laid it all out [on the table], new handbags, cosmetics, everything. And he came in, in the evening and, [he said] please go to some of your girlfriends and leave me alone (laughs).” (Research participant Nr.12. age 26, team coordinator)*

These cosmetics purchased in a collective context were yet again set apart from all the other cosmetics available for purchase. They were precisely these cosmetics and not others that were the objects regularly displayed to the research participants’ romantic partners. The research participants made sure that their boyfriends would see these cosmetics:

*“It’s not something [cosmetics] that you buy [in a store] and chuck it in your bag but it’s something that ‘look what I’ve ordered’ and you can show off with it. You come home and you can proudly show what you have ordered. At least I always do it. I show it to my boyfriend.” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)*

The research participant clearly discriminates between the cosmetics bought individually in a shop and the direct sales cosmetics bought in collective rituals with her girlfriends. The cosmetics she wants to praise herself with to her boyfriend are not *‘something that you buy in a shop and chuck it in the bag’*. The process through which

she acquires the cosmetics for showing off with is very different from purchasing them in a store. With any direct sales cosmetics purchase all her girlfriends are involved. When she proudly shows them to her boyfriend, she reliably demonstrates to him her web of relationships that she ritually forged with other women.

I suggest that in these examples the attractiveness of the research participants is not formed by the studied women's appearance alone but also by their positioning within a ritually bonded collective of girlfriends consolidated around the shared use of cosmetics. This position is accurately reflected by the cosmetics these women bring home to show to their boyfriends to make them realize '*what an attractive girlfriend they have*'. It is important for the cosmetic purchasers that their current romantic partners know that they are purchasing cosmetics with their girlfriends. Cosmetics bought in such a collective context reliably demonstrate the cosmetics purchasers' embeddedness in a bonded female cosmetic coalition. These observed situations strongly resonate with the ethnographic example of the Tsimane in Bolivia. Amongst the Tsimane women who have an extended network of women helpers and are embedded in female alliances are found particularly attractive by Tsimane men. Such an extensive support network demonstrates a woman's ability to mobilize helpers for raising her children and this ability can then increase her reproductive success (Rucas et al. 2006).

### **Other coalitional benefits**

Cooperation through beauty and beautification opened up ways for cosmetic purchasers to secure benefits from being part of the cosmetic coalition. As I have

shown in this chapter any improvement of looks and in beautification skills was a very important gain. Women learnt from each other beautification skills and they obtained access to more cosmetic resources that they used for beautification. Through the levelling-up mechanisms that operated in the ritualized purchases of cosmetics women achieved equalized and improved beautification. From the perspectives of evolutionary psychology this in turn would lead to women enjoying higher selectivity from men (Buss, 1994; Ingo et al., 2007). The research participants could also demonstrate to their partners that they were embedded in a collective of female allies. Yet apart from this very important benefit focused on improved looks that could translate to enhanced mating success, women in the cosmetic collectives gained several other benefits from their membership that provided them with support in their personal and professional lives. The research participants themselves were aware of the importance of such support a bonded female collective can provide. As one of them puts it: *‘Women can best relax when they are among themselves. Therefore it is vitally important to have such a network because it will support you.’* The research participant refers here to the collective of her girlfriends that emerged through buying direct sales cosmetics in weekly gatherings in sauna. From her experience she knows that such a network provides support that is for her and her friends *‘vitally important’*. As she further says it can provide a counter-point to competitive relations among women outside cosmetic collectives. Yet when they are in the sauna the cosmetic purchasers talk about everything, their marriage, their work, their children. They all take turns and all of them *‘comment’* on what has been said. They give each other the best advice they can. So when one of them has an extramarital affair they all patiently listen and help with suggestions. The same is true for problems at work of the other one or the planned marriage of the third one. Collectively they created a safe space

where they can discuss and share everything and they always get each other's support and advice. They all know that an effective support network backs them when coping with many personal and professional issues. Another example illustrates it well:

*“We are a good collective here, we don't talk badly behind each other's back and we don't report to the boss either. We mustn't eat at the bar, right, for example. And when we've got a lot of customers that we don't have time to eat, then we eat secretly there, behind that coffee machine and we don't run straight to our boss like 'Lilli, Lilli, she ate behind the bar'. Or once, for example, I was ten minutes late for work, and none of us would go to our boss that I was late and that she should take those minutes down from my pay check. So, we don't report to our boss and we don't talk badly behind each other's backs.” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, waitress and university student)*

In this example the research participant describes the situation at the coffee shop where she works. She and the girlfriends, to whom she sells cosmetics at her cost price, formed a bonded collective. They regularly '*complain about their boyfriends*' to each other and they help each other out with the best advice they can give. They can also very much rely on each other when it comes to mistakes or breaks of discipline at work. If one of them makes a mistake or if one of them breaks the rules set by their boss, they stick together and they do not report the issues. As colleagues and friends they cultivate cooperative relationships. These relationships of liaison are expressed in the research participant's words '*we do not talk badly behind each other's backs*'. In the collective that emerged through mutual sharing of cosmetics they give each other significant support at work.

## **Conclusion**

In the studied environment of collective purchasing and use of direct sales cosmetics the competitive aspect formed only a part of the cosmetic purchasers' beautification practices. Another component was represented by the collectivized and group levelling practices of beautification.

One of the motivations for engaging with direct sales cosmetics was the quest for attractiveness amongst the studied women. Consistent with a body of work in social theory (Beausolleille, 1994; Gordon, 2003, Smith, 1990) they wanted to improve their appearance for their own pleasure and for the enjoyment of the beautification practices in the small bonded collectives with their girlfriends. On the other hand, they aimed their beautified looks at men: their current or potential romantic partners, employers, co-workers or clients.

The competitive aspect of their endeavour for beautification was present outside their bonded collectives and directed at '*other*', outsider women. These practices were characterized by concealment, secretiveness and indirectness. They focused on assessing the knowledge and expertise that the outsider women have mastered for their own beautification. The often unpleasant and adverse remarks the cosmetic purchasers engaged in when scrutinizing the outsider women point out the hostility the research participant held towards these other women.



This hostile position when judging the outsider women's looks starkly contrasted with the honest assessments of beautification results within the bonded collectives. Based on mutual ritually established trust women engaged in regular beauty displays that were thoroughly examined by the women from their collective. Utilizing the democratically shared expertise in beautification the examining women aimed to give a true judgment followed by their best honest advice. The inspected women always conformed to such advice. Through these processes of mutual beauty assessments and improvement the participants levelled their beautification results within their collectives.

The observed data suggest a double aspect to the beautification process and its display. On the one hand, a competitive dynamic emerged in those moments when the research participants secretly confronted the beautified looks of the outsider women. Such competitive behaviour is suggested by the body of work in the field of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1988; Buss, Schmitt, 1993; Campbell, 2004; Ingo et al. 2007; Low, 2001). According to this understanding, attractiveness in women is the most preferred trait sought out by men in their female romantic and sexual partners. Women would therefore beautify their looks in isolation and a competitive dynamic would develop amongst them through the individualistic use of beauty and its displays. The displays of the beautified appearance would be targeted at men who would be seen as potential sexual partners or allies. The research participants displayed their beautified looks to their husbands and boyfriends as well as to their co-workers and employers. In the respective small collectives women themselves made judgments about what was attractive for men. They brought in their knowledge gained from their interactions with men and then they collectively and democratically shared it amongst

themselves. The cosmetic purchasers also regularly directed the displays of cosmetics bought in a collective ritual context at their male romantic partners demonstrating in a reliable way that they are embedded within a bonded collective of female allies.

On the other hand, however, there were strong cooperative aspects to the beautification practices found inside the cosmetic coalitions. These cooperative and group levelling tendencies are in line with the argument of female cosmetic coalitions as suggested by Power (1999, 2009). According to this argument women would cooperate through beauty within a ritually bonded collective of allies. The competitive dynamics would develop between the women from different bonded collectives. In the environment of direct sales cosmetics the displays of beautification in its inwardly directed aspects were targeted at the women from the small collectives themselves. Collectively the cosmetic purchasers regularly assessed and corrected their beautification effectively raising the level of the beautified appearance of the whole cosmetic coalition. To do this, women democratically shared and equalized the knowledge and expertise they gained about cosmetics and beautification within their collective. This correcting and egalitarian sharing lead to levelled-up beautification of all the women in the collectives. It was demonstrated in the examples when the cosmetics purchasers learnt the beauty skills and expertise from each other and in accepting and carrying out the advice of their girlfriends about their appearance. This cooperation exceeded its focus on appearance and beautification and spread to other areas of women's lives. The research participants supported each other at work, often through spreading important information amongst them or covering up for each other. They also helped each other in their personal lives and in their relationships with their current romantic partners.

The two aspects of direct sales cosmetics use show that cosmetics amongst the researched women were not used only to become appealing to men. They were equally used to support the dynamic characteristic of the small bonded female collectives consolidated around collective and egalitarian use of cosmetics. This dynamic was aimed at sharing beautification strategies and at maintaining close relationships amongst the cosmetic purchasers through levelling their beautification. The practices analyzed in this chapter were thus also used amongst the research participants to signal to each other in clear and reliable ways that they were members of the respective collective and that in this female circle they could be trusted. Their trustworthiness was guaranteed by sharing the beauty knowledge and the cosmetic resources with the whole group. In the environment of the direct sales cosmetics the research participants built coalitions through shared beautification practices. The beautified appearance these women achieved through democratic sharing of cosmetics and beauty knowledge was a characteristic and measure of the quality of their respective coalition. In this environment beautification became the shared property of the tightly bonded collectives of women.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the thesis was to explore and understand the uses of beauty and beautification amongst Slovak women in the environment of direct sales cosmetics. I studied the specific sociality constructed amongst the cosmetic purchasers through democratic and egalitarian sharing of cosmetic resources, beauty knowledge and expertise. I have shown that the collective cosmetic rituals in which the research participants regularly engaged operated as clear and reliable signals of their commitment to the group. By periodically taking part in these rituals women proved themselves as reliable and trustworthy members of their cosmetic collectives. In the analysis of the data I followed the model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) that focuses on the emergence of cooperative relations amongst women through collectivized and equalized use of cosmetics in coalitions. In contrast to the understanding of beauty and beautification in social and evolutionary theory that conceptualize women as competitors that would use their beauty and beautification in isolation, individualistically and in competition with other women, I have shown that once women are united around the issues of beauty through collective cosmetic rituals they tend to cooperate rather than compete through beauty.

In the thesis I have examined the relationships that emerged amongst the cosmetic purchasers and their representatives in their cosmetic collectives. I have shown that the women I worked with generously shared cosmetics as well as ideas about beauty and beautification. I have shown that studied beautification practices were not solely targeted at a male audience. On the contrary, they were often intended for women only and they commonly took place in seclusion. Women constructed them as secrets

that they used to create and confirm bonds amongst themselves. I analyzed the processes that operated amongst the cosmetic purchasers in their coalitions and I identified and explained mechanisms through which ritually forged cosmetic coalitions emerged amongst the Slovak women in the environment of direct sales cosmetics. I have demonstrated that through ritualized purchase of direct sales cosmetics, and their collective manipulation and sharing women created relations based on intimacy, sharing and cooperation through beauty and beautification. This cooperation resulted in equalized beautification of the research participants. I interpreted the mechanisms demonstrating commitment and trustworthiness of cosmetic purchasers as costly signals - the commercial cosmetics operated as visible and reliable signals of female bonds in the group. I found mechanisms centred on sharing that levelled-up the beautification amongst the women in the collectives. Such shared purchase and use of cosmetics marked and guaranteed the relationships of trust and cooperation amongst the purchasers in their coalitions. Through the analysis of the data I elaborated the model of cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) within the contemporary environment of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia. I showed in detail how this model operated in a contemporary urban setting.

Underlying the analysis and explanation of the data was the question whether women within the environment of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia compete with each other through beauty and beautification or whether they cooperate. And if they do cooperate, under what conditions do they do so? What would be the characteristics of such cooperative behaviour? To answer these questions I drew on concepts from social anthropology while the ideas of evolutionary and biological anthropology framed the analysis of empirical data. Balancing the three approaches while staying true to the

data was challenging. Yet I believe that this interdisciplinary approach enriched the analysis of the data and added to the explanatory force of the argumentation throughout the thesis.

Sexual selection predicts a competitive dynamic operating amongst women for resources and male investment that are seen as the driving force of this competition (Campbell 2004). From this perspective attractive appearance is the most important trait men would look for in women and women would therefore display their beauty to men (Buss, 1994; Campbell, 2004; Low, 1979, Miller, 2001). This theoretical orientation predicts that women would use cosmetics and beautification individualistically and in isolation from other women. They would conceal beauty tips and cosmetics from other women and monopolize them for themselves. Cosmetic company representatives who would aim for the highest profits and the largest number of clients would thrive in such a context. Yet what emerged through the analysis of the empirical data led me to question these predictions. Half of the representatives did not make any profit and sold cosmetics at their cost price. The other half adopted several ritualized strategies to keep their profits and numbers of clients low. The research participants used cosmetics and beautification collectively. This sharing was based on their cooperation within trusted bonded collectives. Within their collectives cosmetic purchasers democratically shared cosmetics, beauty tips, and the intimate information about their own beauty flaws. They levelled-up their differences in beautification by giving each other feedback on their appearance and by sharing cosmetic techniques and resources. This cooperative dynamic was supported by the data through several areas of analysis.

First, I examined the economic relations between the cosmetic purchasers and their representatives. I have shown that the direct sales cosmetics occupied a changing gift-commodity position and that this oscillation rendered them ambiguous. This ambiguity opened up space for manipulation of the status of these cosmetics by both the cosmetic companies as well as by their representatives and the cosmetic purchasers. On the one hand, cosmetic companies created quasi gift relations between them and their representatives yet still emphasizing and encouraging the profit motivation. On the other hand, purchasers and their representatives adopted a series of ritualized transformative strategies that shifted the status of the cosmetics towards gift objects and changed the business relations between the representatives and their clients to intimate quasi kinship ties. These strategies were employed in collective cosmetic rituals in which cosmetics passed from the sphere of commodity exchange into the sphere of gift exchange through ritualization. Cosmetics were thus re-contextualized as gift-like valuables ritually exchanged in the closely bonded female collectives. Ritualized cosmetics were dissociated from the competitive profit selling and inserted into a web of mutual obligations that created bonds of solidarity and cooperation amongst the research participants.

Representatives adopted a series of transformative practices through which they acted as mediators in this process. They kept the number of their clients and the height of their profits permanently low, they sold the cosmetics at their cost price giving up their profit altogether and they created obligations between them and the purchasers in the form of debts. Instead of favouring their own individual gains in short-term cycle of transactions, representatives prioritized the long-term transactional order and through this the reproduction of the cosmetic collectives and their specific morality of

cooperation, reciprocity, equality and commitment to the group. The representatives' morality was tested by their girlfriends every two weeks in the collective rituals of catalogue browsing and distribution of cosmetics. In these rituals cosmetics were re-appropriated and manipulated by the collectives of women and obligatorily shared. They became a signal of the commitment of all the participating women to their coalition that has re-appropriated them and the ritual symbol of the bonded group of girlfriends. It accommodated trust, mutual support and commitment women could draw from their bonded alliances – “the sacred structures” (Graeber, 2001) that should not be measured by money.

In the ceremonial exchange the direct sales cosmetics were vested with magical properties of efficacy and beautification potency. Women represented them as the most effective ones for the desired beautification constructing these cosmetics as scarce and therefore valuable. The transacting in cosmetic valuables was a socio-political exchange in that women who took part in it formed cooperative alliances through which they accessed benefits of improved beautification and mutual support.

Gregory suggests that “gift giving is about achieving dominant position in a network of exchange relations” (Gregory, 1982: 76). Similarly, Sillitoe (2006) proposes that “the sphere of political and ritual exchanges of valuables is the area where competition for political status and social success takes place” (Sillitoe, 2006: 17). Yet in the studied context of direct sales cosmetics women did not compete with each other through the exchange of cosmetics. On the contrary, they appropriated and distributed them collectively. They controlled equal access to them and through this they levelled their beauty and beautification of all the members in the coalition. The



ritually re-contextualized cosmetics became the collective and collectivising property of the whole female alliance that took part in purchasing them. Women used them to reproduce their cosmetic collectives and the specific morality of group commitment, cooperation and equality of quasi kinship ties.

Through the analysis of women's collective rituals surrounding the purchase and distribution of cosmetics I wanted to understand the specific form of sociality that emerged amongst the research participants. These rituals took place on a fortnightly basis while women collectively browsed the catalogues and distributed the ordered cosmetics. They ranged from ritualized exchanges of secret language known only to the ritual participants to well expressed emotionally intense collective ritual displays. The participants learnt how to use the secret language in costly rituals. Its correct use operated as evidence that women using them underwent these rituals. Cosmetics and their collective manipulation were their inherent component. They were bought and distributed in the collective context of the cosmetic ritual. Women also used them to create collective sensual experience. Importantly, cosmetic purchasers used them to mark and confirm the intimate bonds forged in the coalitions through cosmetic rituals. The collective cosmetic rituals emerged within the institutional context of direct selling cosmetic companies. Their representatives used their own social relations and personal networks for selling cosmetics. They received training in how to use these networks to make a profit. Yet half of the representatives sold the cosmetics to the collectives of women at their cost price giving up their profit. The other half kept their profits low through ritualized counter-strategies. The cosmetic companies encouraged competition between the representatives and between their clients. Yet the research participants ritually forged relationships of cooperation. In the cosmetic collectives

the sharing of cosmetics and beautification became the most important concerns. In the rituals women levelled-up all the differences in access to cosmetics and to beauty tips. Collectively they decided the best beautification for each of the participating woman. Through such profound sharing they contradicted and opposed the competitive culture of the cosmetic companies. The direct selling appropriated by the cosmetic purchasers assumed new meaning of showing and monitoring commitment to their coalitions. In ritual performance a collective ritual gender emerged that became the property of the whole group. It incorporated both female and male characteristics. It was expressed through a collective culture of resistance to the competitive expectations of the cosmetic companies that equalized the existing hierarchies amongst the women. This ritually established egalitarianism was characterized by sharing, bonding and by committing to the cosmetic collective.

The women's collectives emerged through the cosmetic rituals in contemporary Slovakia and resembled female ritual collectives analyzed amongst the African hunter-gatherer groups by Finnegan (2009, 2013) and Power (2015). These ritual collectives in both cultural contexts are characterized by equalized, egalitarian relationships amongst women, sharing, collectivized beautification and bodily aesthetics with gender ambivalence. Female collective agency is expressed through the ritually created collective body and the emergence of reverse dominance relationships within the ritual domain. Yet unlike the examples of hunter-gatherer women and their ritual coalitions where the intimate closeness and egalitarianism amongst them operates on a daily basis (Finnegan, 2009, 2013), the equalizing relationships within the female ritual collectives I studied were temporary and emerged only during the ritual time. The female reverse dominance rituals in the

examples of hunter-gatherer groups analyzed by Finnegan (2013) could spring out at any moment. In the direct sales context these rituals were tied to the availability of the catalogues or cosmetics and to the relaxation of the hierarchies in the work places of the cosmetic purchasers. The collectives that emerged amongst the cosmetic purchasers had the potential to temporarily alter the existing relations of power between the purchasers and their male co-workers. Empowered by the solidarity of their girlfriends and collectively controlling the ritual gender of power (Power and Watts, 1997) women claimed their time and space from their male colleagues to launch their cosmetic ritual.

Women often started to participate in the collective cosmetic rituals at puberty and continued throughout their adulthood. The cosmetic rituals I observed varied in their length, size and intensity but their content and form were identical across Slovakia. Thus by regularly taking part in these rituals the cosmetic purchasers learnt its template. Similar to the girl initiates from *chisungu* (Richards, 1956), *vhusha/domba* schools (Blacking, 1969) and the girls' tattooing practices from the Magude district in Mozambique (Gengenbach, 2003) the acquired secret knowledge and ritual 'skills' opened up the way for cosmetic purchasers to join any such ritual collective in the direct sales cosmetic context across all regions of Slovakia and to gain benefits ensuing from such membership. As amongst the mobile women in Mozambique the learnt ritual template conferred trustworthiness on women when moving on to join another such ritually established cosmetic coalition.

To understand the way research participants demonstrated their commitment to each other within their bonded collectives I focused on ritual costs. Women looked for and

displayed costly behaviour to each other in ritual situations. Costs guaranteed the reliability of the communicated information. To be able to accurately judge their girlfriends' engagement with their collective women carefully monitored each other's purchases. They noticed the type and volume of orders their girlfriends made and they knew exactly what types and how much cosmetics each of them ordered. They also assessed their own purchases. On the other hand, women carefully monitored the sharing of cosmetics and beautification. The knowledge about cosmetics and beautification was represented by the cosmetic purchasers as scarce and therefore valuable. Yet they generously shared it with their girlfriends. Not only did women impose costs on themselves by giving up the advantage of individual beautification but they also levelled-up the beautification of their whole collective. The detailed knowledge of the orders and sharing behaviour of their girlfriends allowed the research participants to assess with precision the extent of their cosmetic coalition. Sharing also operated as a fine-tuned mechanism for the levelling of access to cosmetic resources and beautification.

Women also shared intimate information about their beauty flaws. Such exposure could be risky if used against the confessing women because it could harm their reputation where attractiveness is seen as one of their important attributes (Buss, Dedden, 1990; Campbell, 2004). But within the cosmetic collectives women stepped in with the best beauty tips they could provide. By sharing their beauty flaws women incurred costs by providing other women with a potential to harm their reputation. Women who shared beauty tips gave up their own advantage of better beautification. The confessing women demonstrated their trust towards their girlfriends. Their girlfriends in return reliably showed to them their cooperative intentions through

beautification. This sharing led to levelling-up of the beautification within the cosmetic collective.

Costly signals guaranteed trust and reliability of the cosmetic purchasers within their coalitions. Democratic sharing of cosmetics and beauty tips equalized the beautification within such collectives. They coordinated their beautification with their collectives and created as beautiful coalitions as possible. It also established and sustained egalitarian relationships among the cosmetic purchasers with beauty and beautification at their centre and it represented a counter-dominance mechanism preventing any woman in the collectives to stand out through beauty and beautification. The research participants moved between different jobs and different regions in Slovakia. The ritually forged cosmetic collectives were characterized by women leaving them and joining other such collectives as they moved on with their jobs and lives. Therefore women had to demonstrate their commitment to their collectives repeatedly with each new catalogue and each distribution of cosmetics.

The desire to be attractive was an important motivation for the cosmetic purchasers to engage with the direct sales cosmetics. Following the body of work in social theory (Beausolleille, 1994; Gordon, 2003, Smith, 1990) they wanted to improve their appearance for their own pleasure. They also very much enjoyed sharing the beautification practices with their girlfriends in their cosmetic collectives. Yet they also aimed their beautification at their current or potential romantic partners and male employers, co-workers and customers.

I observed strong cooperative aspects of the uses of beauty and beautification amongst the research participants that were reserved for the girlfriends in their cosmetic

coalitions. The competition emerged outside the bonded collectives and was directed at the outsider women. These practices were concealed, secretive and indirect and aimed at the examination of the cosmetics and beautification of the outsider women. Their hostility contrasted with coalitional displays of beautification to be judged by the purchasers that were followed by honest advice for improvement. This collective assessment of beauty and the subsequent advice for its improvement was yet another mechanism through which women within cosmetic collectives levelled-up their beautification as a group.

The competitive dynamic that emerged between the cosmetic purchasers and the outsider women is in line with the body of work in the field of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1988; Buss, Schmitt, 1993; Campbell, 2004; Ingo et al. 2007; Low, 2001). According to this understanding beauty is sought out by men in their female romantic partners. Women would therefore use their beauty and beautification individualistically and in competition with other women and aim them at men. The cosmetic purchasers displayed their beautification to their husbands and boyfriends as well as to their male co-workers and employers. Women regularly prided themselves with the collectively purchased cosmetics in front of their male partners. This way they reliably demonstrated how embedded they were within a bonded collective of female allies. Yet there were strong cooperative and group levelling aspects centring on beautification that emerged inside the cosmetic collectives. These data support the argument of female cosmetic coalitions as suggested by Power (1999, 2009) according to which women would cooperate through beauty within a ritually bonded collective of allies yet compete with outsider women. Amongst the cosmetic purchasers there were many situations in which they directed beautification displays

inwardly at the women from their cosmetic collectives. They regularly assessed and corrected each other's beautification effectively equalizing the differences amongst themselves and simultaneously raising the level of the beautified appearance of the whole cosmetic coalition. To do this the studied women democratically shared the knowledge and expertise they gained about cosmetics and beautification. They learnt their beautification skills from each other and they conformed to the beautification that was thought appropriate within each collective.

These two aspects of the uses of beauty and beautification show that cosmetics amongst the research participants were not just used to display to men. They were equally used to support the dynamic that emerged in the collective cosmetic rituals. This dynamic was cooperative and egalitarian and consolidated around sharing beautification strategies and maintaining close relationships amongst women in coalitions. Women levelled-up their beautification and shared cosmetics and beauty tips with their girlfriends. Sharing and levelling adopted in rituals were mechanisms through which the research participants built coalitions focused on cosmetics and beautification. In the environment of direct sales cosmetics beauty and beautification became a shared property of women in coalitions that guaranteed their quality.

Beauty and beautification knowledge and skills were one of the benefits women gained as members of their collectives that could translate into the higher selectivity from men (Ingo et. al., 2007). The cosmetic purchasers also supported each other at work, often through spreading important information amongst them or covering up for

each other. They further helped each other in their personal lives and in their relationships with their current romantic partners.

Cosmetics were selected in the human evolutionary past as mechanisms for building and maintaining female cosmetic coalitions which gave their members an evolutionary advantage manifest in the gaining of resources (Power, 1999). The medium through which these coalitions were built were cosmetics collectively applied in ritual performances. Yet as Barkow (1992) suggests our evolved psychology underlies behaviour that we can observe today. The connection between the coalitions that emerged in our evolutionary past and our present can be seen in mechanisms that I found were operating amongst the cosmetic purchasers through which they could bond and build cooperating collectives based on the shared use of cosmetics and beautification. The research participants gained advantages by collectivizing themselves through the medium of cosmetics into cooperating alliances. These advantages can be seen in the enhancement of their personal as well as professional lives, in their dealings with men and in forming alliances at their workplaces. These observed phenomena are the contemporary elaboration of the model of female cosmetic coalitions suggested by Power (1999) where coalitions are the emergent property of women coming together.

As suggested in her study on women and their hair by Weitz (2001) contemporary capitalist conditions with a strong emphasis on gender hierarchy, individualism, and female-female competition for resources and male investment do not represent an



environment that encourages women to build coalitions. Yet the collective ritualized practices centred on direct sales cosmetics as observed among the research participants point to an *existing* niche that women utilized to build cooperative alliances. Importantly, the studied collectives emerged from the bottom up as the outcome of the intensified cooperative relationships that emerged amongst the cosmetic purchasers. They were not created top down under the orchestration of the cosmetic companies. Securing intimate and trustworthy relationships among each other in cooperating collectives was one way research participants could negotiate their own relations as well as the power relations in their workplaces, with men and in the contemporary capitalist society as such. As they themselves put it: *'It is vitally important to have such a network because it will support you.'* The research participants negotiated through their cosmetic collectives the relationships with each other and between the other competing relations existing outside their alliance. Each of these women carried in her mind and in her practices the achievement of her collective in advising her about how to maximize her beauty. Despite the fact that these women had their own personal lives they shared the same work place where their appearance often did matter especially when negotiating relations with their male colleagues, customers or employees. They also used the information and skills they learnt in the coalition in their personal lives with their current or potential romantic partners.

Many social and evolutionary theorists suggest that competition among women through their beauty is the key aspect of their relationships. Yet the behaviour that emerged among the cosmetic purchasers in the context of the direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia contradicts such understanding. Women through the medium of the

marketed cosmetics formed ritually bonded collectives. The mechanisms operating within these collectives can be fully explained by the alternative model of cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999). The empirical data show that once women became collectivized through sharing cosmetics and beauty tips they formed collectives of bonded and cooperating allies. Cosmetics were shared and manipulated within euphoric episodes of cosmetic rituals. Within their coalitions women equalized their cosmetic resources and beautification strategies. As coalitions they reversed the expectations of cosmetic companies aiming at profit. Collectively they created ritual gender with ambiguous male and female characteristics (Power, Watts, 1997) that they employed as a source of their collective power when negotiating relationships with their male colleagues. What appeared to be business and economic relations between representatives and their customers instead through collective ritual performance took on the properties of a female cosmetic coalition. The strength of the ritually created bonds amongst women undermined the representative's motivation to make a profit - the guiding principle of the researched cosmetic companies.

In this thesis I have argued against the one dimensional understanding of uses of beauty and beautification amongst women. I have shown that competition and cooperation through beauty needs to be addressed with attention to the everyday beautification practices. Both aspects are present in women's uses of beauty and beautification. Whereas the data show that women tend to cooperate through beauty within ritually bonded cosmetic collectives it also points towards their tendency to compete outside them. In this thesis I have also elaborated the model of female

cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999) within the contemporary urban setting of direct sales cosmetics in Slovakia.

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*We were like sisters: Collective beauty rituals and fictitious sisterhood*

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*We were like sisters:*

*Collective beauty rituals and fictitious sisterhood*

Elena Fejdiova

**Abstract**

In this paper I present the results of an ethnographic study of collective cosmetic rituals among women in Slovakia. I focus on the internal relationships and dynamics that developed within small collectives of women through shared ritualized consumption of direct sales cosmetics. The analysis of the data is theoretically informed by sexual selection theory and Darwinian signalling theory. On the one hand the researched women used their beautification practices to be appealing to men. On the other hand, however, when launching their cosmetic rituals women used their beauty knowledge and cosmetic resources to form strong intimate bonds amongst each other. Through expected sharing of intimate bodily information constructed as secret and by carefully monitoring their ritual behaviour and commitment to the collective women showed to each other in a reliable way their cooperative intentions. By regular participation in these rituals women learnt what seems to be a transferable ritual template that enabled them to enter the wider cooperative networks of women across all regions of Slovakia. Whereas some theoretical approaches argue that women would use their attractiveness to compete with each other for men and resources I show that in the observed cosmetic rituals women created ties of intimacy, solidarity and cooperation through beauty that extended beyond the ritual context to



other areas of their lives. Cosmetics and its obligatory collective manipulation served as markers of their reciprocal cooperative relations. Researched women also reversed the competitive dynamics of the cosmetic companies that focused on highest profits and competition through beauty and favoured the group levelling ritual processes instead.

Key words: women, cosmetics, collective rituals, solidarity, cooperation

### *Introduction*

The direction of this research grew out of my interest in the relationship between women, cosmetics and beautification practices and in what became clear to me was a gap in the literature on women and attractiveness.

When reviewing the literature on the topics I realized that many feminist and gender studies scholars tend to see women as striving for perfect bodies with the consequence of objectifying, sexualizing and commodifying themselves (Bordo, 2003; Grosz, 1994). Women are seen as objects of male desire, displaying for their enjoyment and controlled by their gaze and agency (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003; Mulvey, 1989). In line with this understanding women would learn how to be feminine through images transmitted through the mass media that tell them what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviours are desirable (Bordo, 2003). The beauty ideals are seen as arbitrary and culturally constructed. These scholars further argue that women would individualistically show-off their attractiveness to men and compete

with each other through beauty (Wolf, 1990). Accordingly, women would pursue their beautification practices in privacy and isolation from other women which would then foster divisions amongst them (Wolf, 1990). If beauty forms the basis of women's identity, this makes them vulnerable not only to the approval of men but to the critical appraisal of other women, too. However this idea is based on theorizing representations instead of looking at everyday practices. Contrary to this view are authors who often base their arguments on qualitative studies of concrete women. In their view women can use their beautification practices as a way towards achieving agency, empowerment and pleasure (Beausoleil, 1994; Davis, 1995, Gimlin, 1996; Weitz, 2001). The findings of some of these scholars might suggest that there could be some collective aspects to the beauty experience that are shared amongst women (Dellinger, Williams, 1997; Masi de Casanova, 2004). Another corpus of theoretical approaches to beauty comes from the evolutionary psychology. These authors, contrary to the feminist and gender studies theorist, understand that although some beauty standards may indeed vary across cultures and can therefore be culturally constructed (Jones, 1996), there are some bodily features that are universally and cross-culturally seen as attractive and therefore cannot be an outcome of social construction (Buss, 1989; Buss, 1994). According to evolutionary psychology, female attractiveness is the main feature that men seek in women and women should therefore accentuate signals such as slim waists or symmetrical features (Buss, 1989). These signals are proxies for the future reproductive potential that men would look for in their future long-term partners. According to this view, and consistent with the feminist argument, women would use their attractiveness to compete with each other through enhancing their physical appearance through cultural means such as clothing, make-up and other forms of bodily adornments (Buss, 1994; Etcoff, Stock, Haley,

Vickery, House, 2011; Low, 1979, 2001). If the competition through beauty argument is correct we would expect individualistic use of cosmetics by single, isolated women. Women would also hide their beautification knowledge and cosmetic resources from each other in order to gain advantage over other women.

But when we look at concrete descriptions found in the anthropological literature on the use of cosmetics in ritual contexts it is surprising how these differ from the above mentioned theorizing about women and pursuing their beautification practices in isolation. Women anthropologists in particular refer to *collectives* of women who were involved in the beautification of initiated girls. This collective use of cosmetics amongst women in ritual contexts is often interpreted as marking off reciprocal cooperative networks of affiliation of their users. For example, among the African Ndembu during the female initiation ritual Edith Turner points out that a collective of women were involved in decorating the girl's body and hair with red ochre. She comments on the '*strong camaraderie*' that developed behind the scenes among the women who beautified the initiated girl (Turner, 1987). Another example comes from among the African Bemba where '*a form of beauty magic*' a purification ritual called whitening magic was held at the end of menstruation of the initiated girls. With the presence of women from the village, the girls were washed, dried and whitewash was applied all over their bodies and faces to make them beautiful (Richards, 1956). Among the Muslim Hausa there exists a special institution of bond friendship *kawaye* among the young girls that was initiated and confirmed by the exchange of oil and henna. One of the girl friends provided oil, perfume and henna and brought it to the other, so she could dress her hair (Smith, 1954). Amongst the women under colonial rule in Mozambique tattoos provided access to networks of reciprocal alliances among

the tattooed women that were used as resources in times of need. The desire to be attractive to men certainly mattered but the tattooed women represented it as a side effect. As women moved across the country tattoos were a way to create new networks of female *'fellowship'* (Gengenbach, 2003).

The above mentioned girls' initiation rituals were costly, lengthy and often traumatic. They were crucial in mate choice: the girls who failed to undergo initiation were seen as unmarriageable. But much of the cosmetic display occurred in secrecy and could not be directly seen neither by the members of the opposite sex nor by the members of the same sex who were the possible competitors (Power, 1999). So what was actually being advertised in these rituals and to whom?

My own observations of everyday practices centring on direct sales cosmetics amongst my female family members and girl friends also suggested sharing and cooperation through beautification rather than beauty rites carried out in isolation by individual women competing with each other through beauty. I became intrigued to investigate this contradiction between theoretical understanding of the relationship between women, beautification and cosmetics and the actual everyday practices that reflect this relationship. I wanted to understand the processes that were at play amongst the women who shared the beauty experience together. What was going on amongst them and why did they share it?

This article presents the interpretation of some of the key findings of my PhD research. It shows that the ritualized consumption of cosmetics encouraged bonding and solidarity amongst the participating women that resulted from taking part in the

collective cosmetic rituals. To interpret the data I use an alternative Darwinian model of female cosmetic coalitions (Power, 1999, 2009) that while acknowledging Darwinian female-female competition stresses female strategies of using cosmetics with ritual intent to create cooperating alliances and coalitions.

My analysis is based on ethnographic research of small collectives of women in urban environment of Slovakia's capital who were selling, buying and using Avon and Oriflame direct sales cosmetics. My focus was on sales representatives and their buyers. I worked with 42 women from 15 different small collectives aged 18 to 60. I conducted the research mainly at the work places of the studied women. At times I worked with the research participants in cafés or at their homes. The professions of the women varied from primary and secondary school teachers, headmasters, administrative workers, public services workers, researchers, waitresses, a journalist, to Civil Service employees and sale executives. Out of 42 studied women 16 were representatives of one of the studied direct sales cosmetics company and the other 26 women were their customers. For the period of research I myself became an Oriflame seller and through this a member of such a collective. I conducted an ethnographic study using Spradley's ethnographic method (Spradley, 1979, 1980).

Unlike in the UK where the Avon cosmetics is sold through Avon parties organized from above by the cosmetic company itself, in Slovakia the shopping procedure as encouraged by both studied cosmetic companies is a one-to-one encounter between a company representative and her client. Both companies recommend to their representatives to go through the catalogue with her client who would ask questions about cosmetics. Then the catalogue would be left with the client and collected ideally

the next day together with the order. On the agreed date the representative would bring in the ordered cosmetics, give it to her client and collect the money. The client would inspect the cosmetics to check its quality such as packaging or colour and possibly address questions to her representative. Then the selling procedure and distribution of cosmetics would be considered completed. The aim of these optimized and instrumental selling and buying behaviours is to make the highest profit possible and to make the best (often by both parties represented as the best bargain) buy possible. Such behaviour demands and encourages competition between representatives who should aim at the highest achievable profit. It also fosters competition between the clients through the best individual buys.

But these formally optimized profit and advantage generating selling procedures represented the opposite of the observed spontaneous non-instrumental ways women themselves organized around the cosmetic practices into small bonded collectives. The shopping events I observed were collective gatherings of several women (usually three to four but at times five to six or more) where the representative could but did not have to be present. The collective decisions of all the participating women often led to overspending for the clients and loss of profit for the representatives. Many sold cosmetics to the researched women at their cost price effectively giving up the override that would represent their gain. The observed collective practices that generated ritualized female sociality, bonding and commitment to the group had strong preference and precedence subverting the cosmetic companies' interests in maximising profit.

## *Attractiveness*

On the one hand, women I worked with were all very aware of the fact that men pay attention to female attractiveness and they enhanced it through cosmetics. In both following examples they acknowledge the advantages they could potentially or actually gain from their enhanced appearance that was aimed at men in general such as better work position or tips from male clients:

*“(...) So every one of us presents herself (...), she wants to look well, well groomed. Especially male clients very much take on board how one looks (...). So maybe each of us will buy it [cosmetics] because she has a feeling that it will make her look more attractive (...)” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop team manager and university student)*

*“At my previous jobs the more attractive she looked the better position she had (...) really, the more attractive the better position she had.” (Research participant Nr.12, age 26, team coordinator)*

But there seems to be collective as well as cooperative dimensions to such beauty enhancement. In the following description of the later situation from above the researched women incite each other to engage with beautification at work place:

*“(...) [in my previous job] one of [my colleagues wore make up] and we drew the other in to make her wear it, too. We, actually, we used to have our hair done up every day, we used to be nicely made up. Yes, all kinds of eye shadows, four colours*

*I used to wear. (...) we were close to each other (...) we were a good team, and each of us came in made up, one prettier than the other, that's how it worked there.”*  
(Research participant Nr.13, 26, team coordinator)

Here, the collective of women is marked through wearing make-up and to join in equals to start wearing it. But despite the fact that the result of wearing make up is the boost in attractiveness of the participating women so that ‘one was prettier than the other’ they are still ‘close to each other’ and ‘a good team’. This closeness and ability to create and maintain good team relations can be interpreted as manifestation of the cooperative internal relations of the researched women that developed and are maintained amongst them through shared and collectivized wearing of cosmetics. In this female collective the incentive for using make-up to enhance one’s attractiveness is strong. The women encourage each other to put on make-up to achieve the best results, to be as attractive as possible. The strength and cohesion amongst them can be seen in the power they have to ‘draw the other in to make her wear [make up]’ and through this make her part of their collective.

On the other hand, the women I worked with wanted to be attractive for their current sexual partners: “... they want to make themselves up, to be more attractive for their boyfriends, and for example, [I’m thinking] when my boyfriend will smell this on me, he will surely like it, or when he will notice this, I want to know his view on it.” (Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, coffee shop waitress and university student)



The sensual experience of their partners is important for the research participants. Smell, colour, touch and texture are all used to engage their boyfriends in noticing and acknowledging their attractiveness. So the women often choose cosmetics with regard to their partners: *“[my mum] asks my father for his opinion about what colour a lipstick she should get or what fragrance, because she wants that he will like it, because he will be smelling it.”* (Research participant Nr.21, age 21, Oriflame representative, university student)

An important part of engaging their current sexual partners in noticing their attractiveness was the regular display of the direct sales cosmetics bought with their girlfriends:

*“(...) I show it to my boyfriend. ‘See what a beautiful woman you’ve got?!’ And I spread it all out on the kitchen table, everything.”* (Research participant Nr.13, 26, team coordinator)

*“It’s not something [cosmetics] that you buy [in a store] and chuck it in your bag but it’s something that ‘look what I’ve ordered’ and you can show off with it. You come home and you can show what you have ordered. At least I always do it. I show it to my boyfriend.”* (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop manager and university student)

Here ‘look what I’ve ordered’ translates ‘look what I’ve ordered with my girlfriends’ and operates as a reliable signal of my research participant’s attractiveness. This attractiveness does not come just from the beauty knowledge and cosmetic resources

she can employ for her beautification. Because there is a collective dimension to it, namely the coalition of women with whom she shares the cosmetic experience, the attractiveness equally stems from being part of such a bonded female collective.

### *Ritualized consumption*

But being appealing to men was not the only reason the researched women would get together to share the direct sales cosmetics experience. An essential component of these practices was setting up a safe space where they created specific form of female sociality that centred on mutual trust, closeness and bonding. An inevitable condition for such sociality to evolve and thrive was the establishing, marking and confirmation of reciprocal cooperative relationships within their small circles through collective ritual practices.

I studied two different types of ritual practices centring on sales and purchases of cosmetics in the researched direct sales companies settings. On the one hand, there were big formal institutional rituals of '*recognition*' called '*conferences*' organized at the national level for the sales representatives. Only representatives who have made a profit high enough could attend such events. The guidelines for the height of profits were set beforehand in the companies' newsletters. These '*conferences*' were organized and orchestrated by the cosmetic companies themselves and stressed the hierarchies not only within the company itself but amongst the representatives as well. At these events the best selling representatives called '*leaders*' were publicly '*recognized*'. They were rewarded for their sales achievements by being called up on

the stage, applauded by the audience, at times with standing ovations, and they received achievements awards from the company leaders. These awards were represented by various certificates, by '*winning*' the right to attend the next year '*conference*', '*winning*' the family holiday or '*winning*' the right to use the company car for the next year. The competitiveness and the hierarchical organization of the companies and of the whole selling process were clearly discernible in these rituals. The whole institutional ritual centred on '*winning*' awards for the best selling representatives. It also aimed at motivating the '*conference*' participants to the highest profits achievable. These '*recognition*' rituals had a very clear formalized structure. The participants sometimes experienced heightened emotional states that were manifest during applauses, through exclamations in the audience or tears on the stage when moved representatives shared their success stories.

On the other hand, and in stark contrast to these big, highly formalized events were the group levelling collective rituals organized from below by the research participants themselves. These group levelling rituals usually took place at work places, cafés or at the research participants' homes. They were small scale including up to five or six women. With comparison to the above described highly formalized corporate ceremonies, these rituals lacked an elaborate formal structure and were often improvised. During these rituals the work hierarchies relaxed and the participating women became one collective. The observed ritual behaviours were often temporally restricted and lasted between ten to thirty minutes. However, I also observed cosmetic rituals that lasted as long as two hours. Essential components of these rituals were collective emotional high created by the ritual participants,

collective assertive loudness, uproarious laughter and exaggerated feminine behaviour (see also Sanders, 2000):

*“(…) one [of the women] was sitting and browsing it [the catalogue] and three others were standing above her, sometimes four, depending on whether there was someone with the authority to disperse them or not (laughs). (...) And it worked like this, the person [a female colleague] came to work and maybe it was straight at the first morning coffee or after the lunch break, that she took it [the catalogue] out and “oh, I have a new Avon catalogue!” and now they all swarmed together (laughs) and “Show me, show me!” and they started to leaf through it and now, I don’t know, “oh, what a lipstick!”, “Look, this would suit me!”, “oh no, it wouldn’t suit you” and a similar hen gabble (laugh).“(Research participant Nr. 9, age 35, sales executive)*

The cosmetic ritual starts with the recognized shibboleth *‘I have a new Avon catalogue!’* followed by all the present women dashing towards the woman who pronounced it. One of them is sitting and turning the pages the others are looking at them while standing above her talking and shouting often at the same time. This is all happening without the presence of the companies’ representative. It is launched entirely by the women themselves. All the women are expected to join in, and they do. The emotional input of the participating women is strong. They all shout and laugh loudly. They are all energized and they show it to each other through their bodily engagement in exalted, exaggerated movements. During such performance purchasing is decided collectively: *„One persuades the others and then we just all agree on who will order what.“* As a result women often overspend because they feel obliged to buy cosmetics recommended by their girlfriends or they all buy the same cosmetics, e.g.

same fragrances, lipsticks, nail varnishes etc. Women taking part in such rituals endure costs of time and energy in engaging in collective emotional high and of the money spent on cosmetics (Zahavi, Zahavi, 1997). Shared and reciprocal circulation of beauty knowledge forms an obligatory part of these rituals. Women refer to it as 'giving advice' that often follows the act of revealing one's beauty flaws. Such disclosure is expected by all the women taking part in the ritual despite the fact that it is seen by them as potentially risky:

*“There must be a certain degree of trust. It's as if you confided to someone, that even though it's just cosmetics, it's something intimate. And I wouldn't want to risk, that someone would judge me, to tell the truth. [It's intimate] in that it's essentially about the body. You know, as if you confessed to someone, that you beautify yourself, that in reality you're not that beautiful, but that you beautify yourself to be it, maybe that's it. Such a confession (...) maybe because it's about the body and (...) because that's mine, it's closely interrelated with my person. (...) To those other women I usually don't talk about cosmetics, so I tell them, I don't know, that 'you look good' but I don't ask them any further 'what do you use' or so. As if I distinguished between people, it's not about that I wouldn't want to know, but it's something intimate. I'd probably have a feeling that they would expect from me, that, I don't know. I wouldn't ask a person I don't trust. (...) I associate the world of cosmetics with people who are closest to me, because it's about beauty, that's closest to my person and maybe if I were a top model who looks great, then maybe I wouldn't have problems to talk about it, the more because I have complexes or I can see my imperfections that I'm aware of, the more I'm sensitive about what concerns myself as much as cosmetics. That's why I talk*

*about it only with certain people (...).” (Research participant Nr.2, age 26, admin manager).*

In the above statement the research participant stresses that for her to disclose the information concerning her attractiveness to the other women the essential condition of trust must be met. She understands cosmetics as an intimate matter concerning her body. To reveal this kind of information to someone else represents a risky confession that shows that she actually might not *‘be as beautiful’*. So even though it is *‘just cosmetics’* her description gives evidence about something very important concerning the relevance of beauty and beautification. Her *‘imperfections’* make her vulnerable to others. They are therefore understood as secrets and revealing them is done only to the women she trusts. The *‘world of cosmetics’* is kept exclusively for those people who *‘are closest’* to her. By this she means her girlfriends with whom she shares the same direct sales cosmetics. Cosmetics are seen by this woman as the most intimate concern. They literally touch the body proper, something that she inherently sees as hers. When she speaks about her flaws she is sharing information that could be manipulated by other women. Sharing such information carries with it potential risk because it can harm her reputation (Buss, 1994; Hess, Hagen, 2002) where attractiveness is understood as one of its most important components (Rucas et al., 2006). Therefore a misuse of such information can put a woman into a disadvantaged position in relation to other women with whom she would possibly compete. For the disclosure to occur there must be real trust amongst the women who share it. Under the circumstances of female competitiveness (Buss, 1994; Campbell, 2004) women would not talk about it outside the bonded and trusted circle of their girlfriends. Thus for the *‘other women’* she only reserves the type of conversations that do not require

any exposing and sharing of such intimate information. If the disclosure of beauty flaws occurs it is expected from the present women to reciprocate with the best advice possible. Because of the implied vulnerability of reputation of the disclosing women such intimate bodily knowledge, flaws and advice alike, is amongst the researched female collectives constructed as secret. It is reserved only for the closed circle of the trusted group of fellow-women. By exposing one's vulnerability to the group and by giving the best advice they could the women in the coalition send a reliable message to each other that among themselves it is safe to do so.

The outcomes of the collective cosmetic ritual performance shared within the trusted circle of women is felt as intimate closeness and bonding that some of the women I worked with compared to sisterhood:

*“ (...) and then I felt we were on the same wave length, that doesn't have to happen at each gathering, when we meet up like this [to hand out cosmetics], but then I really had the feeling that we were as if sisters or something like that, you know (...). That was great, when the woman left, then Anika had for us those small samples and it all gathered around the bed and we were either sitting on the bed or kneeling around it as if around a fire pit. And that was great and I remember such an emotion that we all smelled each others' perfumes and it was very spontaneous and pretty mad. (...) And we were so happy about it that, what a fragrance and what a sample. That was great. I really enjoyed it very much. And it was fun (...) like Anika was giving away those things [cosmetics] and we were squealing and I think we all knew, that, wow, what are we doing, you know, but we really enjoyed it very much. It was a very liberating feeling that maybe the world looks at women stereotypically, that a woman and cosmetics that's like, but there we could really express it because we were among us*

*and all of us knew that is was important for us. Thus I wasn't scared to do 'uaaa, what a fragrance!' and open it straight away and 'smell it!' and 'what cream is this?!' and so on. It was very familial and so maybe bonding. Also that we were joking together and that we were laughing together. Well, during that evening that group, who we were there, was very bonded, I think." (Research participant Nr. 2, age 26, admin manager)*

When the ritual starts women mutually attune and synchronize their emotions to the point that they feel it as *'being on the same wave length'*. Through the shared emotions they create a space where they can experience fictitious sisterhood. Here they are *'as if sisters'*. Around the double bed in the middle of the room they form an "all-embracing circle" that does not allow any hierarchy nor external control. It creates its own internally referential space where the ritual participants address to themselves, not to the external audience (James, 2003: 83). The bed is their focal point, their *'fire pit'* around which they sit or kneel with their own representative, who is one of them. With her they start to play a *'throw and catch'* game: she is throwing cosmetics at the women and they are snatching it with squeals. In their own emotionally centralizing space created by themselves for themselves they go *'pretty mad'*. It is this madness that sets the whole event apart from everyday ordinary behaviour. Here behaving *'pretty mad'* means to be loud, unbound, wild and free because they know they can feel equal and therefore they can dare to *'behave badly'* and they enjoy it. These women stop being cautious about how they are seen by others because they know they are safe amongst each other and what they do is important to all of them. Then they can *'really express'* all the joy and have fun. They are squealing, yelling, shouting, laughing and joking in the familiarity of the close and



known bodies that are moving in synchrony around the imaginary but felt *'fire pit'*. Women themselves reflect that what they are doing is not ordinary behaviour. They all know that *'wow, what are we doing'* but they keep doing it and they *'really enjoy it very much'*. With exaggerated gestures accompanied by amplified communication of screams and squeals women grab the thrown cosmetics, open them, smell them and try them on, even mutually: one smears the other. They all make sure, however, that all of them are in the circle and all of them do the same. They smell each others' samples and they snatch them from each others' hands. *'What a fragrance!'* they scream. They open it straight away and they yell again at each other *'Smell it!'* and they do. Although *'it doesn't have to happen at each gathering'* during that evening as an outcome of such collectively performed joy the group is *'very bonded'*.

The observed cosmetic rituals followed their own order which was similar in all the observed groups. Its elements were collective browsing through catalogues, use of specific coded language referring to cosmetics and beautification, collective decisions what to order, accentuated sensory experiences centring on the body such as mutual touching, smelling of cosmetics and putting it on, and exalted emotional states of the participating women. These structural elements showed a tendency towards stylization, repetition, redundancy and stereotyping, all obvious aspects of ritual (Rappaport, 1999). The cosmetic rituals usually took place in spaces where the participating women felt they would not be disturbed, such as the back office of the coffee shop or in teachers' room. The women I studied referred to these places as *'our office'* or *'our lobby'*. The rituals were launched at fixed times usually every two weeks with each new catalogue and with each distribution of cosmetics and under special circumstances, for example, when the boss was not present. These gatherings

had marked beginnings and endings, often starting with the formula *'I've got the new catalogue!'* or *'Have you got the new catalogue?'* or *'I've got the cosmetics'* and finishing with the closing of the catalogue or putting the new cosmetics aside. All the women present in such a space were expected to join in the collective behaviour. The observed women engaging in cosmetic rituals performed for each other. With the exclusion of men they signalled their cooperative intentions and trustworthiness to each other in a costly and therefore reliable way. In *'their lobby'* or in *'the back room'* the cosmetic ritual was seized by the women only. The competitive gender relations between women remained on the other side of the closed door.

The observed collective gatherings varied in their length, size and intensity but their content and form were identical in all the studied groups. By regular participation in these rituals women learnt what seems to be a transferable ritual template that, similarly to the ethnographic examples mentioned above, enabled them to enter the wider cooperative networks of women across all regions of Slovakia that formed in the context of direct sales cosmetics. These networks provided their female members with benefits that extended beyond the actual ritual context. The research women supported each other at work, often through spreading important information amongst them or covering up for each other as well as in their personal lives, in their relationships with their current sexual partners, sometimes even helping out with childcare.

### *Monitoring behaviour*

An intrinsic part of the observed cosmetic rituals was careful monitoring of the behaviour of the participating women. On the one hand, women were extremely interested in the other women's purchases: *"We always look at each other's purchased cosmetics. We are curious. (...) and we peek into the others' bags, to see what the others got, because then you're very interested in that. (...) it's about watching."* The result of such careful and repeated 'watching' was detailed knowledge about who ordered what cosmetics amongst the participating women effectively tracking down the commitment to the collective that was manifest through regular purchasing of the respective direct sales cosmetics. It was expected that women will allow others to look at the bought cosmetics and, reciprocally, that they themselves will show off with what they purchased. These women regularly displayed the ordered cosmetics to each other. But only the direct sales cosmetics that was bought together with the other fellow-women was seen as clearly demarcating the extent of the female bonded collective: *"Only if I have cosmetics, that also the other women ordered from Avon, just then we show it to each other, but otherwise, that I bought another brand of cosmetics and would come to work and say, I bought this, I don't do that."* (Informant Nr.26, age 34, Avon representative, Civil Service employee)

Not only women watched the purchases made by others, they assessed themselves within their collective, too. They made sure their orders were high enough to match up to the commitment to the group but not too high in order not to be seen as overdoing it or showing off: *"When I got the ordered cosmetic I checked who ordered what among the other girls and whether I'm in the upper or the lower line [in terms of*

*amount of ordered products].” (Research participant Nr.19, age 22, university student)*

Women I worked with regularly assessed each others’ attractiveness, too. But again, there were collective as well as cooperative aspects to it. This assessing of beauty was expressed in the act of ‘noticing’ the way women within a respective collective looked and again it was linked to the use of the collectively purchased direct sales cosmetics. Women expected it and encouraged it: “ (...) *when I come to work and I stop here [at the counter], they are very attentive so they’ll notice for sure, for example, I had new eye shadows, and they went ‘show us, which ones you’ve got?’ so I would close my eyes to let them see them and they look at them immediately and then they talked about it, how long they last, what are they like, whether the colour suits me or not, so. It’s always like that here.*” (Research participant Nr.7, age 23, waitress)

The same situation from above is in the following statement described by another coalition member: “(...) *one of our colleagues had a new eye liner, she bought it in Oriflame and she came in the morning and we noticed it instantly, that she had something new and that it suited her. So we complimented her and she was pleased and maybe it persuaded her to use it and, we notice, we notice such details, those, you do notice, (...) and the other colleague tells her ‘cool, it suits you, you look different’ and she will continue using it. And on the contrary, if someone comes in and we’ll say ‘oh, not this’ then she won’t use it.*” (Research participant Nr.5, age 22, coffee shop team manager and university student)

On the one hand, this '*noticing*' fulfilled the function of displaying the use of the collectively bought cosmetics. As seen in the second example, it was always accompanied by giving honest advice about the observed looks leading to the improvement of looks of the displaying women. On the other hand, it levelled-up the attractiveness distinctions within the observed female collectives. Here, it was expected that the information about the desired feminine looks would be shared and reciprocated.

An inseparable component of the observed ritualized cosmetic purchases was the use of formalized coded language that represented yet another form of testing for group membership. These were obligatory linguistic formulae expected at both ritual occasions of catalogue browsing and of distribution of cosmetics. They came in a matching question and answer or call and response (Gordon, 2003) format and they were taught and used in the collective cosmetic rituals and only the insiders knew how and when to use them. They effectively represented the secret knowledge that belonged to the bonded and trusted female collective. The researched women carefully listened for these formulae and always responded with matching questions or answers. There are ethnographic parallels of use of secret language in ritual contexts of girls' initiations such as *chisungu* among Bemba and *vusha/domba* cycles among Venda (Blacking, 1961; Power, 2000; Richards, 1956). In the initiation rituals the girls learnt a secret language of rhymes and riddles, that served as proof of passing the rite and opened up the entry into the female reciprocity networks. The use of secret language demonstrated and maintained the boundaries of a ritually established trusting „gossiping community“ (Power, 2000). Similarly, the use of the formalized coded language amongst the studied women clearly demarcated and sustained the

trusted circle of girlfriends. The researched women knew exactly who was taking part in the collective cosmetic rituals by listening for these obligatory formulae:

*“(...) the one who doesn’t order [cosmetics] (...) she doesn’t ask for my opinion, ‘tell me, what does it smell like?’, right, or ‘what’s it like?’, ‘for how many uses?’ or so, she only goes through it [the catalogue] and nothing. The one who does buy it and spots, I don’t know, something new in the catalogue, she asks me straight away ‘what’s it like?’ (...) so that’s the difference (...) the one who buys it always asks for my opinion, or what it’s like or whether I liked it or whether I have tried it on, so.”*  
*(Research participant Nr.6, age 21, Oriflame representative, waitress and university student)*

#### *Against the everyday habitus*

James points out that ritual derives its power “partly from speaking against and ironically with ‘ordinary’ habitus” (James, 2003: 79). During the ritual performance the studied women established a temporal counter-culture of opposition to and exaggeration of the expectations of everyday femininity. Collectively they created a form of hyper-femininity - a type of femininity that inflated and exaggerated the components of the expected normative everyday practice associated with work environment and personal gender relations with men and they opposed it. When engaging in mutual grooming women’s gestures were exaggerated, their talk and laughter were amplified, often assuming forms of squealing. *‘They were like crows’* swooping down on the cosmetics. When talking about their behaviour in these rituals

women themselves pointed out that they pushed their behaviour from ordinary to exaggerated: *'it was pretty mad'* and *'we all knew, that, wow, what are we doing!'*. Grabbing cosmetics, snatching it from each other and starting it putting on straight away, smelling it and squealing, using exalted gestures and amplified sounds were all types of behaviour intended for this ritual time.

But this femininity incorporated in itself elements of masculine assertiveness. These masculine elements were discernible in the throw and catch games women played when throwing cosmetics at each other, in the drinking of beer because *"that's what men drink while they watch football"* and in the often femininely unflattering positions they assumed while smelling and trying on cosmetics and browsing the catalogues. Because this hyper-femininity combined both, feminine as well as masculine aspects, it was no more gender specific but ritual specific with gender ambivalent characteristics (Power and Watts, 1999). It came to existence only within the ritualized time and space. When the ritual ended, the gender returned back to its polarized un-ambiguous norm. But as long as the cosmetic ritual lasted the gendered signal became so expanded, so amplified and it carried with it potential for so much collective agency that it took on another meaning – there was a power in it - that of a bonded group of women who shared their fantasy together. Yet this extravaganza was fragile, and could be easily eradicated by just one person present and not engaging in it. It was also temporal - it only lasted the time when the ritual took place.

These collective ritual practices carried in themselves the potency of reversal. The heightened emotional states, catching exaggerated laughter, following Bakhtin (1984), permitted the relaxation of authority and social hierarchy in favour of the emergence

of a temporal collective counter-culture. Whereas the behaviour desired at work was expected to take the forms of seriousness, modesty, silence, individualism, achievements, competition and showing of respect towards existing work hierarchies, the actual observed behaviour during the ritual time was distinguished by playfulness, jokes, immodesty, loudness, sharing, showing off commitment to the group, non-competition and levelling of work hierarchies. When in the ritual mode the participating women effectively reversed the mode of everyday working routine. Regardless of their status they engaged in playful behaviours centred on manipulation of cosmetics and of bodily appearance that was intertwined with humour and jokes followed by waves of shared uproarious laughter. They focused on their bodies and on the aesthetic elaborations upon them (Gordon, 2003). They employed their bodily senses in exploring the cosmetics just distributed. During these acts of exploration and enjoyment women often behaved frivolously. Through their shared bodily experience expressed in often mutual grooming aimed at maximum beautification of all the participating women, the studied women created a form of exaggerated femininity where the loud amplified assertive communication, including uproarious laughter, joking relationship and mutual grooming were used as mechanisms through which a levelling space was achieved where the female collective became prominent.

Through the collective cosmetic rituals the research participants were transformed into an empowered group of supportive allies. When the rituals stopped they carried in themselves the memory of their mutual support and of their collective ritual agency. When they congregated again they re-kindled that spirit. As one of my research participant said, each time after the cosmetic ritual in sauna with her friends she was *'leaving in high spirits'* full of confidence because she had the support of her



girlfriends. In an image of her walking home she did not only hear her own footsteps but she could hear the steps of her girlfriends as if walking alongside with her.

### *Conclusion*

In this article I explored the female sociality that unfolded amongst the researched Slovak women through the collective cosmetic rituals launched in the context of shopping for direct sales cosmetics. This sociality was characterized by sharing of beautification practices within the bonded collectives of women. The researched relationships of closeness were based on cooperation through beauty. Women regularly displayed to each other their cooperative intentions through a series of practices related to cosmetic resources, their purchase and use as well as to circulation of beauty knowledge. The willingness to cooperate within the bonded collective of women was regularly monitored through series of displays that enabled the women to gain reliable information about who was committing to the group. This reliability was guaranteed by costs of time, energy, money and of giving up individual advantage through beauty that the participating women imposed on themselves. Sharing of beauty secrets, using the coded language, displaying and manipulating the collectively bought cosmetics, showing and noticing the attractiveness and levelling it up within the bonded collectives were all practices applied by the research participants to track down the extend and strength of their cooperating cosmetic coalition. Not only did women displayed to each other. Through regular showing off of the collectively purchased direct sales cosmetics they showed to their current sexual partners that they were embedded within a bonded collectives of women. I interpreted the observed

phenomena in line with the assumption that women cooperate through collective sharing of beautification resources and information about attractiveness when they are part of boded reciprocating coalition. This assumption is in contrast with the idea that beauty is the main aspect of female intrasexual competition predicted by sexual selection theory and argued in many feminist writings.

The institutional structure that preceded and facilitated the emergence of the researched ritual situations was provided by the way the direct sales cosmetic companies operate. In this environment the business practices are accomplished through the pre-existing social relations and networks. It is expected that representatives will exploit their personal networks and that due to such exploitation financial distance will replace former closeness of personal relationships (Biggart, 1989). The whole structure and ideology of the researched cosmetic companies as well as the promoted practices of their representatives are aimed at encouraging profit. The selling strategy the representatives are encouraged to follow is designed as a one-to-one interaction between the representative and her customer. The representative is assisted to support the shopping with the intention of making a gain. But the collected empirical data show behaviour that contradicts these institutionalized expectations. Half of the representatives in my sample did not make any profit at all selling cosmetics to the collectives of women at their cost price. The other half of the representatives kept their profits permanently low through several counter-strategies. Far from fostering competitiveness among women through pursuing the highest possible profits and through aiming at the exclusivity of the best possible purchase effectuated by single women the observed beautification practices intensified the relationships among the researched women. In the studied cultural setting the

collective appropriation and sharing of these practices became a priority. The observed prioritizing of the collective and of committing to it represented the non-institutionalized counter-culture of opposition to and reversal of the competitive individualistic gender practices incorporated in the institutionalized cultures of both cosmetic companies. Once the shopping procedure became the property of the collectives of women it assumed entirely different functions where displaying and monitoring of the group commitment became prominent. Women in the researched coalitions instead of competing with each other through attractiveness and beautification practices cooperated with each other through collective rituals of reversal. By pooling the beauty knowledge they equalized their chances to arrive at comparable levels of attractiveness within their bonded collective. Whereas the institutional expectations of the researched cosmetic companies foster division and competition among women the behaviour that emerged among the researched women transgressed these institutional norms, rendering the observed ritual practices anti-normative. The studied women collectively created a resistance culture to the competitive ideology of the researched cosmetic companies. This resistance culture was conditional and episodic originating in the ritual performance. It was not institutional and normative. It transgressed the norms of the cosmetic companies and it only came together at those sites and in those instances where women felt equal. This counter-culture was clearly observable in the ritual situations in which sharing, bonding and becoming part of the collective were prominent and manifest among the participating women. In these situations the status differences among the present women were effaced, the elation, excitement and joy underpinned the collective dimension of the event. In these '*moments out of time*' the instants of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) among the participating women came to existence. At these particular

moments the collectives of researched women, bonded and intimately close, got in a position where it was impossible to refuse to share.

Research of the reciprocal cooperative relations within women's coalitions is a new challenging area that can yield interesting insights into female – female cooperation to inform both theory and practice. Focusing on everyday aspects of collectivized female sociality centred on beautification practices and their sharing can help us further understand deep social processes of gender relations.

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**31 July 2015**

Dear Elena

**Project Title:** Female Cosmetic Coalitions: How to be women together through direct sales cosmetics.

**Researchers:** Elena Fejdiova

**Principal Investigator:** Camilla Power

**Reference Number:** UREC 1415 116

I am writing to confirm the outcome of your application to University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), which was considered at the meeting on **Wednesday 22nd July 2015**.

The Committee notes that you are transferring your PhD study to the University of East London from Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia, and that you conducted the data collection whilst you were at Comenius University.

You have provided a letter from Comenius University stating that they do not require and do not provide ethical approval for research of their doctoral students.

UEL's University Research Ethics Committee is unable to give ethical approval retrospectively for research that has already taken place. However, the Committee has looked at your application outlining your study and does not see any ethical problems with it.

Yours sincerely,

Rosalind Eccles  
University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)  
UREC Servicing Officer  
Email: **researchethics@uel.ac.uk**

