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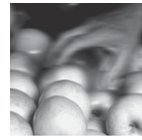
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‘He wouldn’t be seen using it...’ Men’s use of male grooming products as a form of invisible consumption

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Abstract

Skincare products are well-established amongst female consumers. The market for male skincare products is far more recent and little research has been undertaken on this emerging sector. The practice of men using what was traditionally a product almost solely aimed at women poses some interesting questions about changing gendered identities and practices. Themes emerged from a series of interviews with respondents and key informants from industry about men’s use of skincare products. Based on our findings, we explore the importance of age as a factor in terms of men’s willingness to engage with this form of consumption. Our research showed that men are not comfortable talking with others about their grooming practices. We argue that men’s skincare consumption is an invisible form of consumption. As our findings show, men do not tend to speak openly about whether or not they use moisturiser and other facial skin care products. We concur with Hakim’s (2016) analysis about the pressure for men to continually improve their bodies in order to try to obtain market advantage in a cut-throat neoliberal context. However, with the case of skin care products, men may introspectively gaze in the mirror in contemplation of their improved appearance gained from using facial skincare products but they want this consumption to remain invisible to others. This invisible consumption could be viewed as an indication of wider uncertainty about masculinity in late modernity and the continuing trend for men to feel that there are certain aspects of their life that they feel they should keep to themselves.

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Masculinity, consumption, identity, skincare, invisible consumption

Introduction

This article explores the response of male consumers to a consumption arena that was traditionally aimed only at female consumers. The male skincare market (involving products such as moisturisers and facial toners), has grown steadily and rapidly over the past two decades. Recent figures (Ridder, 2021) show that in the UK, the male skincare market is worth 77.2 million British pounds and the market has grown from the previous year. Currently the global men's skincare market size is valued at USD 11.6 billion (GVR, 2020). A market that was once virtually non-existent, has developed rapidly since the start of the 21st century. The sales figures strongly indicate that the 'invention' of the male skin care market has been successful. However, very little research exists about this phenomena from a social science perspective. In this article, we seek to offer a deeper understanding of how and why men are using skincare products.

Using findings from focus group and individual interviews with men in the North West of England (UK), about their own use (and non-use) of skin care products, we focus on this intriguing yet under-researched area. We interviewed 39 men about whether or not they engage in skin care practices and if they do, then why they feel skin care is important. Two distinct age groups of men were targeted. Young men ranging in age from 18 to 27 were in the first group. Men aged 28 to 59 were in the second group. One element of this research was to explore the impact that age has on men's use of skincare products. Our hypothesis was that older men would be more resistant to adopting a practice that they have not 'grown up with' than younger men. In addition to male consumers, we also interviewed a small sample of people who work in the men's grooming and beauty retail sector in order to gain some insight from this industry. This study explores how men consume skincare against a backdrop that explores possible broader shifts in how masculinity is constructed and understood. In addition to this, we consulted webforums where men's use of skincare products was the central topic of discussion.¹ Here we found powerful similarities between our interview data and the discourses on the webforums.

Men are increasingly encouraged to engage in practices that form part of a wider economic process that benefit the beauty industry and is often characterized as 'looking after ourselves'. Examples include working out at the gym as a body project (Hakim, 2016) or depilation of male body hair, termed 'manscaping', as an emerging ideal (Hall, 2015). Improvement of the body is situated within a competitive arena, which aligns with ideals of hegemonic masculinity where power over other men is seen as a sign of success in a neoliberal context (Lindisfame and Neale, 2016). Nevertheless, skincare is associated with beauty and this continues to present conflict with traditional notions of how men gain body capital. In the traditional hegemonic masculinity paradigm, men were 'consumers' of women's beauty. The emergence of the male skincare market represents a significant shift which places men in the 'to be looked at' category to be scrutinised by themselves

and others. More recently, a greater appraisal of men's looks by women, and by other men, has drawn attention towards an 'inversion of the male gaze' (Patterson and Elliott, 2002).

Convincing men to consume products deeply connected with women and femininity has clearly been successful, given the evidence of consumption statistics. However, little is known about how men actually feel about using skin care products. The men's facial skincare sector in the UK is substantial, as highlighted above. Facial skincare products for men were first available in the UK around the start of this millennium. However, the fact male facial skincare products exist is insufficient to prompt consumption by men. Men's actual skin has not changed; though, society's expectations of men have (Hakim, 2016). As a result, changes within society have placed an increased pressure upon men to strive to improve their appearance (Hall, 2015).

Our research data revealed two key findings. Firstly, is the fact that age is a key factor that determines whether or not men use facial skincare products. Younger men are much more open to engaging in caring for their skin and buying skin care products. The second key finding from our research is that men do not discuss their skincare practices with other people. It is a private, invisible form of consumption. This reluctance to discuss skin care routines suggests that there are strong societal expectations around 'appropriate masculinity' that remain dominant in late modernity. Men seem to have been convinced that they 'need' to use skincare products but yet this is something that men want to keep as a 'back-stage' (Goffman, 1959) activity. Consumption of skincare products amongst men could be viewed as form of 'inconspicuous consumption' (Eckhardt et al., 2015, Wu et al., 2017). The rise of 'inconspicuous consumption' is defined as a recent trend for consumers of luxury goods to be modest rather than showy about their ability to afford high-end brands. Eckhardt et al. attribute this rise, in part, to '*a preference for not standing out as ostentatious during times of economic hardship*' (2015:1). However, we argue that with the case of men and skin care products, there is a something more going on. We argue that men's consumption of skincare products is a process that we define as 'invisible consumption'. The consumption of skincare products is an 'act of faith'. No one can see whether or not a person has cleansed and toned (for example) or tell the cost of the product used. The impact of using moisturiser, for instance, is incremental, rather than dramatic and overtly visible. The act of this type of invisible consumption is especially the case with men because, as our findings show, men do not tend to speak openly about whether or not they use moisturiser and other facial skin care products. Men are buying in to the idea of a 'need' to put various products on their skin with the promise of improvement, but they are absolutely not talking about this with other people. This would strongly suggest that men, particularly older men, do not yet feel comfortable discussing their grooming habits.

Invisible Consumption

To explain the form of consumption that takes place with regard to male skincare products we propose the concept of 'invisible' consumption. The invisibility comes first from the fact that people cannot tell 'by looking' whether or not someone is wearing moisturiser. This contrasts starkly with the use other products and procedures to do with enhancing physical appearance. It is clearly visible to others when a person is wearing make-up, has

had some kind of cosmetic surgery, eye brow treatment, lash extension, or had botox injections, for example. The visibility of skincare products however is very different to that of cosmetics. Invisible consumption could be regarded as a form of investment in the body which will reap future rewards. As such, it can be regarded within the paradigm of body capital (Bourdieu, 1984). However, unlike most forms of investment in the body, using moisturiser remains invisible to the beholder. Invisible consumption must be seen in the context of deferred gratification. Men are buying in to the promise that consuming skin care products will have a benefit in the future. It is a form of consumption based on hope that use of the skincare product will improve the appearance of the skin over time and delay the ageing process. As Beruchashvili M et al. (2015) highlight; 'Hope is a commodity in the marketplace.' Drawing on the work of Lazarus (1999), they argue, using the example of weight loss companies, that people will consume something on the basis that there will be a reward or pay-off in the future.

That men have only since the millennium started using skincare products distinguishes it from 'inconspicuous consumption'. Invisible consumption works very differently to that on 'inconspicuous' consumption. The phrase 'inconspicuous consumption' refers to the routine consumption of 'ordinary' goods and services (Warde, 2014). Consumption of skincare products by men is still relatively novel and most definitely not something practiced by most men. There is potential, over time, for this to move from an invisible, unacknowledged, private form of consumption to an everyday routine. At the moment, it remains a decidedly 'back stage' and novel form of consumption.

In addition, and significantly, the consumption of skin care products by men is invisible because they are unlikely to tell people about their skin care practices. As yet, men do not feel comfortable talking about such matters, because applying moisturiser, cleansing, toning and exfoliating (for example) are forms of consumption that remain feminized. So, whilst wearing moisturiser is similarly 'invisible' for both men and women in terms of the deferred gratification that investment in these products promises, it is additionally invisible for men because their consumption of these products is unspoken. Our data clearly shows this to be the case. These posts from an Australian web forum give a sense of the ambivalence shown by men towards the use of skin care products by men when asked the question 'Guys, fess up, do you use skincare?';

'No. Proud to be a real man. Leave that crap to the metros!' and 'leave the moisturizer for the women, real men use sandpaper!'

Literature review

Goffman's (1956) seminal work on taking a 'dramaturgical approach' to understanding social life remains highly relevant and his metaphor of the 'back stage' bears many parallels with the idea of the invisible consumer. Goffman wrote about 'mystification'. This is a concealment or non-disclosure of certain information from the 'audience' to avoid divulging information which could be damaging to the 'performer'. With the case of men and their consumption of male grooming products there seems an overarching desire for this to remain invisible or 'back-stage'.

The issue of male grooming can be situated within the literature on the self and the body in late modernity. Here the work of Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2001) is highly relevant. The body is now something that individuals are expected to work on and improve, according to these key theorists of ‘individualization’. Giddens (1991:196) argues that while late modernity stimulates the ‘project of the self’ that this takes part against the back-drop of consumer capitalism. Consumption of products that promise some sort of self-improvement or competitive edge (such as skincare products) allows capitalism to thrive and consumers to keep (literally) buying in to the never-ending quest to be ‘the best’. New and ‘improved’ products constantly flood the market so a state of equilibrium is never achieved. Consumer culture stimulates anxiety and insecurity about the body (Bauman, 2005). The rewards of our investment are usually promised in the future rather than being instantly available. As Kotzé and Antonopolous (2019) note, in terms of their research on body builders; *‘The process of aesthetically priming and fine-tuning the body requires subjecting oneself to a far from pleasurable regime that requires considerable commitment and deferred gratification (Bauman, 2005)’*. This ‘deferred gratification’ is certainly the premise on which skincare products are sold to consumers. Reflecting upon how men relate to the use of facial skincare products provide a useful and interesting empirical setting to understand how our gender identities are shaped by current ideals. Orbach (2017: vii) highlights that an increasing trend towards the ‘commercialisation of the body’ has resulted in greater value being placed on ‘aesthetic labour’ or the work involved in creating a desirable appearance. Similarly, Elias et al. (2017: 5) describe how self-transformation is achieved through the management of the body thus, ‘neo-liberalism makes us all “aesthetic entrepreneurs”’ as we are encouraged to work upon our appearance physically to help improve how we subjectively feel about ourselves. The work of Foucault (2008) is also highly relevant to the context of this article and notably his work on biopolitics and the regulation of the self. As (Pylypa, 1998:21) notes of Foucault, his work; ‘focuses on the body as the site of subjugation, and because it highlights how individuals are implicated in their own oppression as they participate in habitual daily practices such as the self-regulation of hygiene, health and sexuality’.

Hakim (2016) argues that men are being increasingly pressurized to increase their ‘market value’ in the process of individualization (Bauman 2001), and against a backdrop of neo-liberal competitiveness via the body. Here the body is constructed as a potential asset, but one which needs to be constantly worked on and improved in order to gain a competitive edge in a ruthless world. Qualities such as youthfulness have started to become more important for men in terms of their status (they have long been for women). The rise in men’s use of products that have long and powerful associations with women and femininity, presents a problem in terms of how men use such products without being considered being feminized. A high-profile example of this can be seen in the example of Donald Trump, who has a spray tan and attempts to disguise his thinning hair in order to appear more youthful. As Smith and Higgins (2020) highlight, Trump performs hypermasculinity in spaces such as Twitter (prior to his ban on the platform) and this might be part of the process of helping to drown out the potentially feminizing practice of preening his appearance to appear younger.

Literature on gender is highly relevant to this article. The body is seen as key to understanding the complexities of gender and subjectivity in the 'neoliberal era' (Elias et al., 2017). Identities are more fractured and disparate as an increased focus is placed on accountability of the individual to seek to improve their appearance, income, home, career and relationships with others. This helps men to frame their use of facial skincare in ways that align with patriarchal values linked to acquiring better prospects in the workplace and relationships by improving their appearance. As social structures change, so can a person's discernment of what is necessary as part of their identity. Traditional ideals of masculinity as a breadwinner are seemingly at odds with beauty trends of skincare for men. Gill et al. (2005) perceive that in a consumerist society the body is less about what the body is able to do and more about what it looks like. Men's use of facial skincare is shaped by neoliberal rationalities such as the drive towards completion of the self as a form of project to be the best version of yourself (Hakim, 2016) and younger looking skin provides a form of capital to assist career progression (Das and Loach, 2011). These are ideals notionally expected for men in a patriarchal society.

Expectations that men should be concerned with how others view them adds further to the complexities for modern men. Jack (2018) highlights how media representations influence how people think, feel and act in respect of idealized standards and expectations for inconspicuous use of products to improve cleanliness personally and domestically. The recognition of the influence of others on self-esteem presents another influence on whether or not men choose to use facial skincare products.

The pressure on men to become concerned with their physical appearance can be contextualized in terms of feminist literature about the intense regulation and scrutiny of women's bodies. Skin care products were once only aimed at women. That this market has now been extended to men raises issues about gender in late modernity. It is not that women's bodies have stopped being examined, shamed and airbrushed, but that men are increasingly subjected to comparable scrutiny. Expectations for gender are influenced by prevailing ideals at a given time. In her landmark text, Mulvey (1975: 64) highlighted how men were presented in cinematic portrayals as active constructors of meaning and in sharp contrast to women, who were constructed as passive and for men to consume as part of the 'male gaze'. Whilst consumption of male skincare products is a significantly growing trend, the promise of improving skin appearance has been constructed as a predominantly female practice, and thus is implied as a feminising practice. The introduction of men's facial skincare products was not purely an opportunistic launch by manufacturers from the women's market. There has been a cultural shift in attitudes, whereby men are becoming more open to buying goods and services aimed at improving their overall appearance (Mintel, 2019). Although there is an absence of scientific certainty that skin care products can prevent ageing and make people look younger, the promise of the potential *they might* has been harnessed by the skin care industry who have been successful in convincing consumers to invest in skincare products. It is a highly lucrative market. The extent to which male grooming can be seen as a route to gaining power and advantage over contemporaries, and a form of 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984), is a way of understanding how men use products that have historically been used predominantly by women as part of a beauty regime.

Facial skincare products serve to boost skin appearance. Blackburn (2014) highlights how those who are considered as attractive by others are more likely to find friends and partners. The potential improvement in appearance gained from using market commodities such as male facial skincare products has influence on consumers' self-concept as orthodox notions of masculinity (Connell, 2005) retains influence as a pervasive identity ideal for men. When placed in situations that conflict with their normative gender identity, men have been found to perform in ways that distance themselves from any suggestion that their ongoing masculinity has been de-stabilised in any way. Bridges (2013) highlights how heterosexual men in his study distanced themselves from any suggestion that they were homosexual despite subjectively identifying aspects of their identities as 'gay' and relied on 'sexual aesthetics' to construct acceptable performances of straight men. This is similar to Draper and McDonnell's (2018) work on gay male beauty bloggers who actively conceal their sexuality in fear that their sexual orientation will alienate straight male followers.

Whilst skincare is a significant market sector, skincare for men is still emerging as a routine and socially accepted male grooming practice. An overt use of skincare products might suggest vanity, and an interest in making the face look younger and skin softer jars with ideals of masculinity. The problem lies with how men can use skincare products without feeling that they are going beyond accepted gender identity ideals. Masculinity and the 'hard body' have long been connected (see Jeffords, 1994). Using facial skincare is linked with making the surface of the skin softer and is also regarded as a feminine and thus a metaphorically 'soft' practice too. As Alexander argues; 'The image of masculinity constructed purposely to sell a brand-name product also shapes the way men see themselves and others. Moving to the macro level, changing ideas of masculinity signal that a significant transformation of the social structure is under way' (2003:535). Men's skin has become a focus for skincare advertisers to prompt men to scrutinize their face in the mirror, social media posts and, increasingly, on-screen video calls, and identify flaws for improvement. Expectations regarding appearance enhancement can create uncertainty about self-image leading to greater introspection of how you perceive others view you. The supposed judgement of others in relation to newly evolving ideals of masculinity reflects changing social ideals (Hakim, 2016). The need to improve their face with skincare products is 'mediated' as an acceptable ideal for men. With specific reference to the male body, men have historically been portrayed as dominant, aggressive, powerful and, essentially, heterosexual, in advertising campaigns (see, for example, Ostberg, 2012). Whilst advertising creates fantasy it also offers a way to positively engage men in adopting consumption practices that reflect changing masculinity practices.

The blurring of gender roles in the masculinities arena has created a form of 'cultural turbulence' that disrupts accepted notions of how men are expected to behave (Connell, 2003). However, the importance placed on heteronormative values associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' fails to recognise other dimensions of more fluid, feminine versions of masculinities linking to identity and sexuality (Connell, 2005). When men are placed in environments that conflict with ideals of masculinity, 'sticky masculinity' (Berggren, 2014) offers a useful descriptor to highlight the difficulties that persist with male identity. Men continue to be associated with culturally established signs of

masculinity (Connell, 2003). The pressure placed upon men to improve their appearance through skincare product use is explored here in relation to current ideas about masculinity.

How men view their skin in the private sphere, reflected in the mirror, is contingent on their idea of how others regard them too. The formation of the self-image is informed by social surroundings and communicative interaction with others (Cooley, 1902). Cooley's ideas about understanding identity formation, where there is conflict with accepted notions of gender performance, are still highly regarded (for example, Ritzer, 2005). The 'looking-glass self' (Cooley, 1902) could be deployed as a useful metaphor in how men reference their consumption of facial skincare products. The relevance of the 'looking glass' to social identity has come to the fore during the Covid 19 pandemic, as the practice of using platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams for work and social purposes, forces us to confront our faces on screen on an almost daily basis.

Data gathering and methods

This exploratory study used empirically-backed small data samples to understand how men are using facial skincare products in practice. Individual semi-structured interviews with selected participants were undertaken with men aged 18 and over. These men were either in full-time education or employment. The majority described themselves as being middle class. Of the 39 men, three stated that they were gay whilst the rest defined themselves as heterosexual. In terms of ethnicity, 35 identified themselves as white British, 1 as British Asian, 1 as Black British, 1 as British Chinese and one was from Greece. People were initially selected on the basis that they were the target audience for skin care products. Mintel, (2018) states that "*it is younger men who have taken more readily to the concept of facial skincare, with a peak amongst men aged 25–34, Nivea for Men's core target group*". This main demographic was used as a basis for profiling of participants in the first phase of research. However, younger males were identified (Mintel, 2016) as those most likely to use facial skincare. To respond to this, two focus groups with younger males from the ages of 18 to 27 took place exploring how attitudes towards consumption and influences may differ from those interviewed in the first phase of research. Additionally interviews with older men (aged between 28 and 59) were also organized to explore the issue of age in more depth and to test the hypothesis that older men were not motivated to use male skin-care products.

The research participants were all based in the North West of England, UK Access was obtained initially on a convenience sample basis and then through snowballing from contacts of respondents. There were 39 interviews and two focus groups in total. The research participants were asked a range of questions about their experience and knowledge of male skin care products. Ten interviews were undertaken with skincare consultants and a range of industry grooming professionals. These key informants were able to discuss foremost consumer trends and attitudes within the male facial skincare and grooming sector. Men and women participated in the interviews and roles ranged from salon owners, airport retail, barbers and clients, grooming sale professionals, a tattooist and skincare consultants (*Clarins* and *Clinique*). Two women's beauty salon offering

men's facials and a company offering a men-only grooming experience were interviewed as part of this research. One aspect that the research focused on was the advertising of male skin care products, but this is not discussed in this article.

All of the interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed. After transcription was completed, the text was clustered to identify a limited number of grouped subjects deemed similar and any relationships that arose from the data (Guest et al., 2012). A number of key themes were identified.

In addition to this we also explored two web forums where male skincare was a discussion topic. One of these was a UK based university discussion forum. The second was an Australian based web forum. These provided further insights in to the contemporary conversation about this consumer market.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research are structured into themes that emerged from the series of interviews with respondents and key informants from industry. Verbatim comments from transcripts are used to illustrate various influences that respondents considered as important in forming their attitudes towards men's skincare products.

The relationship between age and attitude to male skin care consumption. One of the main things that skincare products are connected with is anti-ageing. With this in mind we might have expected older men to be more receptive to using skincare products. However, this was not borne out by our findings. Our data suggests that older men are least likely to be interested in developing a skincare routine (even when it is now more socially acceptable for men to do so). Discourse surrounding ageing as a negative feature in a society places a greater value on youthful appearance as an ideal (Jankowski et al., 2016).

Not all men respond to changing consumption trends for males to care for their facial skin and their overall appearance (O'Neill, 2015). 'Hegemonic' ideals that may still be held by older men, are seen as outdated by younger males that may be embracing an array of beauty treatments (Duncanson, 2015). When discussing the potential of age as a factor in using men's skincare, 'Drew', an undergraduate student commented upon how he perceived that there are generational differences in attitudes towards use of facial skincare products.

"Dad's just a man's man... my Grandad gives me a funny look—he's like what are you doing? I think as we get older it will be acceptable then because we've grown up with it being acceptable" (Young Male, 1) (age:18).

This can equally be a defence of traditional notions of how men should act by distancing themselves from facial skincare for men. Older men may be retaining 'hegemonic masculine' (Connell, 2003) principles by resisting consumption of such products. Hence, 'Thomas' reflected on how younger males are more likely to come in for facials into the men's salon he manages,

“the older generation are a bit scared in a way of moisturising because it’s just not what you would do. It’s not a manly thing in their eyes” (Industry Respondent, 8).

The older market may still perceive the market as ‘culturally delicate’ (Hall et al., 2013). ‘David’ a beauty salon owner surmised that older men failing to engage in the use of facial skincare products have been left behind.

“The older ones that are 65 plus they are probably in a ditch somewhere. They haven’t kind of followed through” (Industry Respondent, 10).

The decision to use facial skincare products is heavily influenced by age, as suggested by ‘Ashleigh’ a female *Clarins* consultant, “my Dad... he doesn’t think it’s manly” (Industry Respondent, 6). As a result, fathers seem to cling to traditional ideas that men should eschew facial skincare and suggests as commented upon by ‘Mich’ an undergraduate,

“my dad’s... generation would be more ‘oh we don’t need that and it’s a woman’s thing’ and very stereotypical about looking after your skin” (Young Male, 7).

A more ‘inclusive’ notion of masculinity by some males is clearly contrasted by the ‘safer’ ideals of masculinity sought by others (Anderson, 2011). ‘Paul’ an undergraduate, notes,

“I think perhaps it’s the last kind of macho, masculine generation that doesn’t really mind about taking care of skin... I think it was associated with quite a female thing to use moisturisers and things. Now I think males would think more about their appearance” (Young Male, 8).

As can be seen from a discussion on a UK webforum, this 25 -year-old man is clearly interested in developing a skincare routine;

Hi I’ve never had a skin routine before, just always washed my face with soap twice a day. I’m 25 now though so want to start looking after my skin and make sure it stays looking young/fresh, as a lot of my friends are starting to crack and look ugly in the face due to wrinkles/horrible skin. I want to prevent looking like that.....What products should I buy and in what order/when should I use them? (25 year old male, UK web forum)

This curiosity about skin care products is also clear from this post on an Australian web forum;

I want to start taking better care of my skin so it could help me look younger a couple decades down the track. Too embarrassed to ask anyone though about a cheap, non-fanciful routine. (Australian male)

Obviously the fact that the poster above points to their embarrassment about grooming is a clear indication of the prevailing trend for male grooming to remain a taboo subject.

Generational differences, traditional views and the influence of social media are additional factors contributing to attitudes towards consumption of male facial skincare. Participants highlight older men as being more sceptical of the value of skincare. Respondents referred to traditional modes of masculine ideals continuing to provide a context for whether men accept or reject facial skincare as an acceptable consumption practice. Hegemonic masculine ideals persist and are reflected in the way that men rationalise their consumption of facial skincare to protect their identity. These traditional ideals may serve to deflect from an identity vulnerability by articulating product consumption in ways that align with an accepted rationale – such as using moisturiser for functional reasons to protect against dry skin, rather than its use for beauty purposes. In contrast, younger males posting online are using skincare to enhance the appearance of their skin.

In relation to his father and grandfather's avoidance of facial skincare products, 'Drew' an undergraduate student highlights generational differences in attitudes to skincare consumption by men,

"they just maybe feel uncomfortable about it—maybe judged... they might consider it effeminate like and challenges their masculinity... stop messing with that! That's not what man does!" (age: 18).

Age-related differences in facial skincare use suggest that constructs of 'norms' in society possibly held by older men are being challenged by changing attitudes of younger males. Ideals linked to how men are viewed in relation to facial skincare have changed over time, as noted by 'Daniel' a male barber,

"I think they were brought up maybe not using certain products on their face and it was normal for a bloke to wash his face and that was about it" (age:32).

'Gemma' a female skincare brand advisor notes how younger males are more conscious of their appearance.

"The younger generation are becoming more aware of their skin so you'll find that early to late teens, early twenties are now actively buying skincare... younger men are quite open to looking after themselves" (Industry Respondent, 1).

Similarly 'Ashleigh' a *Clarins* skincare consultant, stated that; "younger men are using it more than older men definitely!" (Industry Respondent, 6).

The younger audience have a growing realisation of the potential offered to enhance their appearance as previously highlighted by Hall (2015). Yoo et al., (2012) also found that teenagers are less inhibited about the use of grooming products and more knowledgeable of the benefits as suggested by 'Matthew' an undergraduate student. "I basically use it because I need it" (Young Male, 3) (age:19).

'Tim' highlights changing grooming practices of what is considered accepted as masculine behaviour.

“I feel like society is becoming more acceptable to things... the progression of skincare will become like something that doesn't have the feminisation with it, it will just be something that everyone does as part of your daily routine” (Young Male, 9) (age:18).

This view was echoed by another young interviewee;

“I quite like to look after myself I like to keep myself active and look after my skin... I feel it's more of a natural thing to do. Look after yourself and I guess it's just like natural now going out through the generations” (Young Male, 7) (age:22).

However, it is clear that there remains an ambivalence about skin care use amongst males, as this poster on an Australian web forum makes clear;

Mates do occasionally rip into me when I break out the face scrub on a fishing trip...I'm looking forward to then offering me botox prescriptions when they go through their midlife crisis (Male, age unknown on Australian web forum)

As can clearly be seen from this data, younger people are open to the idea of men using skin care products. These young people are aware that their older male relatives do not share their views. They are resistant to the ideas of their elders and see them as outmoded and failing to keep up with social change. Gender identity is a malleable construct (Connell, 2005) and those men using facial skincare products are perceived as manipulating current ideas and contesting outdated views.

Invisible Consumption

Whilst there is a clear divide in our interviewees, based on age about which men do and do not use skin care products, even younger men were very private about their grooming habits. There is skincare consumption taking place but this is invisible. Some respondents noted that men who feel that their masculine ideals are compromised might perceive facial skincare products as a feminising influence as suggested by 'Mike' a second year undergraduate geography student.

“I'd say that there's a bit of a stigma to some degree in terms of like masculinity but apart from that I would say it's personal choice” (age:19).

Seemingly, men want to improve their appearance but how this is achieved is personal to the product user and concealable from the public. This is a clear example that men's consumption of skin care products is a form of invisible consumption. This draws out the importance of O'Neill's (2015) notion that whilst men may look different they still may not think differently. There seems to be an undercurrent of traditional values in relation to facial skincare being something that men are not traditionally associated with. If men are seen as using facial skincare products to improve their appearance then this compromises

heteronormative ideals linked to masculine identity as suggested by ‘Adam’ an upper sixth former,

“I’ve got one friend using skincare... he’s vain, you would describe it as feminine the way he is” (age:18).

How men attain better facial skin whilst protecting their identity remains problematic. The facial skincare market is still perceived by some to create ‘identity vulnerability’ for consumers (Tuncay and Otnes, 2008). The use of skincare provides an opportunity to enhance skin but the value this adds seemingly needs to remain discreet to the one benefiting from such products.

“I just don’t think it’s a very masculine thing to talk about skincare and moisturisers and stuff just because like there’s a stigma around it all. It’s quite a feminine subject so it’s not something that boys talk about” (Young Male, 9) (age:18).

“I have a few friends, I know they use it then but we never really talk about it” (Industry Respondent, 4) (age:33).

“We talk about other stuff... I don’t think lads come across it talking about it. Maybe they talk more about hair gel but not moisturiser” (Young Male, 6) (age:20).

“We wouldn’t discuss it. They wouldn’t admit it but they probably do use it... skincare products are usually traditionally related with females and not males... it’s quite a recent thing for males to use it more... maybe in 5 or 10 years... it may be perfectly acceptable and it will be discussed but not at this stage it’s not” (Young Male, 1) (age: 18).

Tim’, a sixth former highlighted the boundaries that exist in accepted topics amongst males,

“it’s just not really a boy thing to talk about in theory... we don’t really talk about it at school or whatever... I have spoken to people in the past about skin and everything but it’s not like a regular thing” (Young Male, 9) (age:18).

This sort of attitude comes across from other young men who were interviewed;

Alfie (23) ‘mum buys my skincare as wouldn’t really like to be seen dwelling on the possibilities instore’.

James (21) ‘asked sister to look online as eyes looking really tired so managed to get some eye cream but don’t want to advertise this to others’.

Tim (23) ‘try to do my best with the products I buy but always feel self-conscious looking at skincare as it still doesn’t feel like a blokey thing.’

Mal (18) 'never use it in front of my mates as they would take the mickey mercilessly'

Butler (2004) contends that masculinity has to be 'denaturalised' to understand why men want to look good whilst being aware of the issues this may trigger in terms of suggesting 'vanity' or 'girly' behaviour.

At present, men may see the need to use facial skincare to improve their appearance but they also understand the importance of retaining traditional notions of how men are expected to behave. In respect of their father's need for secrecy when using facial skincare, a 'Gemma' offered an interesting comment,

"he would use it but he wouldn't be seen to be using it" (Industry Respondent, 1).

This is a key and recurring finding from our research data. Young men are using skin care products but they are not drawing attention to this fact. This suggests that there is still a stigma attached to a practice that is still seen as feminine. Enhanced skin is notionally acquired as a result of men using facial skincare products; however, this practice disrupts established identity ideals that men should not be overly concerned with their appearance. Men may feel that face skincare use enhances their appearance in a society that increasingly values image (Gough et al., 2014). Das and De Loach (2011) contend that exploration of practices such as facial skincare in relation to men helps towards a greater understanding of (male) identity in contemporary society.

Social media and scrutiny of the skin

The advent of 'selfies' and video calling has, meanwhile, triggered a need for males to look good for the camera with a view towards sharing on social media sites such as *Instagram*. Some respondents demonstrated an awareness that good-looking skin offers better responses for images posted online. 'Tim', a sixth former commented on how insecurities about appearance arise when posing for 'selfies'.

"Your skin's all red and spotty it's not something that you then want to put out into social media... people post pictures all the time of them looking great and then if you take a picture of yourself and there's spots or whatever you just don't feel like this is going to get as many likes" (age:18).

This highlights how those capturing the image seek to create an acceptable appearance as a form of 'impression management' as highlighted by Pounders et al. (2016). Thus, the pressure to create the best photo image for sharing online influences skincare use as part of self-promotion. Confidence was an issue amongst some respondents in regards to taking 'selfies'. 'Dec' reflects on his reasons for posting images online, "*Instagram* you look good that's the whole purpose of it". In contrast, 'Bez' provides his reason not to take selfies,

"I don't really have the confidence to stand there with my phone and take a selfie with myself" (age: 26).

Whether or not this reflects a lack of practical expertise or a disclosure of how self-evaluation of his appearance prevents him from posting ‘selfies’, ‘Bez’s’ comment reflects a wider culture that places pressure upon men to perfect their looks before sharing images online (see [Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015](#)). A general need to consider appearance was noted by ‘Mich’ an undergraduate student,

“you want to look good because the pressure is there... people are more conscious of their image” (age:22).

Men are using facial skincare but rationalising their use of such products by practicalities such as increasing the number of likes on social media as a form of ‘impression management’ whilst enjoying the benefits of improved appearance in a society that values this. Appearance can be critiqued by anyone viewing online posts. The pressure is now upon men to look good without seeming to be concerned about their looks. Discreet improvement of appearance that may conflict with current cultural ideals helps to foster an improved sense of self whilst protecting identity. Male facial skincare serves as a disruptor with all the attending female antecedents for expected gender norms. As the gaze progressively turns towards males in terms of a need to present the most attractive version of the self to others, skincare forms part of an increasing portfolio of grooming products and services on offer.

The Internet is a key source of information for younger male skincare consumers and offers a more discreet way of purchasing products ([Hall et al., 2012, 2013](#)). The trend towards online purchases was highlighted by ‘Thomas’ a manager of a male grooming salon,

“we see more products bought online than actually in the salon... there’s a lot of guys out there that are buying it so... a bit too shy to go in the shops to buy it but there’s a lot of guys experimenting with the products out there seeing the results” (Industry respondent, 8).

Not only are younger males buying facial skincare products online, as [Nui, \(2013\)](#) suggests, but they are also seeking advice from testimonials posted on the internet for skincare ([Hall et al., 2013](#); [Segal and Podoshen, 2012](#)). ‘Tim’, searched for specific types of facial skincare online that he perceived as being better for his skin,

“just doing research on the Internet ... It’s all natural and supposedly can be more effective I bought it myself originally but my parents do buy it for me now” (Young Male, 9). (age:18).

‘Stuart’ an advisor for *Clinique* highlighted shifting grooming practices that conflict with hegemonic ideals for men,

“younger men are more into using things like masks, treatment products as opposed to just wash and moisturise... that’s growing” (Industry Respondent, 5).

Thus, reinforcing [Beasley’s \(2012\)](#) suggestions that men are forming their own notions of gender identity in deciding whether to embrace facial skincare product use. A move

towards greater introspection in relation to image and expectations amongst peers has resulted in more awareness of facial skin as a liminal feature creating a greater desire for men to strive for healthier looking skin. Hence, 'Matthew', a student, highlights the need for constant scrutiny of appearance,

"there's like more pressure to look your best most of the time" (Young Male, 3) (age: 19).

As a result, respondents suggest that facial skincare products are a legitimate feature of grooming with younger males as suggested by 'Michael', a sixth former,

"it's more accepted for younger people to be more conscious of their appearance in general and then skincare is part of that and past generations don't seem to care too much for their appearance" (Young Male, 4) (age:18).

'Thomas', manager of a male grooming salon highlighted how a growing awareness that ageing is considered in a negative light will change behaviour.

"Younger men that want to prevent wrinkles in the future... they will buy it" (Industry Respondent, 8).

Differences in facial skincare use suggest that constructs of 'norms' in society possibly held by older men (Goffman, 1979) are challenged by changing attitudes of younger males. The practice of men using facial skincare products offers a cultural norm for a new 'hybridized' 'hegemonic masculine' ideal as suggested by Bridges (2014) in how newly emerging beautifying practices are blending with 'macho' posturing by some men.

'Ashleigh' drawing upon experience as a *Clarins* beauty practitioner predicted the practice would become easier once the initial resistance to men's facial skincare consumption was overcome.

"Once they start buying it they love it then they continue coming back to it" (Industry Respondent, 6).

A key defence for men using skincare products was the functional properties offered through usage. A recurring reason for initiating the use of facial skincare was to cure or prevent dry skin. This was seen as more important than use for age prevention or vanity purposes. Such a functional and rational approach resonates with the instrumental reasons provided by men reflecting on their purchase decision (Segal and Podoshen, 2012). Through skincare use, men are promised an improved appearance which potentially leads to higher levels of self-esteem and confidence. However, this improved confidence does not compromise masculine ideals as men use facial skincare privately and discreetly and is thus a form of invisible consumption. Hegemonic masculinity remains dominant in neoliberal times (Cornwall et al., 2016). Connell (2005) contends that when men feel insecure in regards to their image, they seek to develop their masculine self. Indeed, Bridges (2009) highlighted how men gain 'gender capital' from bodybuilding. Body

building, in contrast to using moisturizer, is a very visible form of consumption and one that conforms to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

As introduced above, we argue that men's skincare consumption is an 'invisible' form of consumption. It is clear that some men are using skin care products, but they are absolutely not talking about this with other people. This behaviour is the polar opposite of Veblen's concept of 'conspicuous consumption' (1965 [1899]). The premise of conspicuous consumption is that the consumer wants others to know what they have bought. It is an ostentatious form of consumption where aspects such as the brand and cost of a luxury product are actively displayed, talked about and 'on show'. The most relevant theoretical idea to understand invisible consumption is that of Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical analogy and particularly the idea of the 'back stage' and 'mystification' as part of 'impression management'. As our findings reveal, the consumption of skincare products is not something that the men in our study want others to know about and nor do they want to discuss their skincare practices with other people. Unlike other late modern consumption trends to do with improving the aesthetic appeal of the body, such as going to the gym, wearing make-up, body piercing and tattoos, whether or not someone is wearing moisturizer is not visible to other people. Skin care on the other hand is 'invisible'. It is invisible in two senses. Firstly, it is invisible because you cannot tell by looking if someone has exfoliated, toned, cleansed or moisturized. It is a sign of the times that men use such products in the *hope* that this might bring about a visible improvement which can then be translated in to body capital. Respondents downplayed their use of skincare for vanity purposes. This appeals to heteronormative ideals of how men should not seem to be overly concerned about the beautifying elements of facial skincare benefits. The consumption of skin care products by men can be read as part of a wider neo liberal social discourse which encourages people to regard their bodies as a resource that can be used to gain a competitive advantage in an increasingly ruthless context.

Secondly, it is invisible because men do not discuss their skin care practices with other people. Our data shows that whilst younger men are more open to using skin care products the majority of them do not discuss this with anyone else. Thus, while there is a private willingness to engage with care of the skin, the linkage of skin care products with the feminine remains strong. Traditionally, signs of ageing was not held against men in the way it has been held against women. The passage of time and impact on bodily features for men have typically been constructed as 'distinguished' and 'wise', given respect and comfortably able to occupy positions of power. Women, on the other hand, are vastly underrepresented in positions of power in the workplace and are constructed as 'past their sell by date' once they reach middle age (Milestone and Meyer, 2020). However, our data suggests that pressure to look as youthful as possible is starting to impact on the psyche of younger men. Whilst older men are familiar with traditional masculine jobs that in turn produce traditional forms of masculinity (the 'old man' Edwards, 2006) are resistant to the idea of using skin care products to try to hold back the ageing process, it is clear that

younger men are of a different opinion. Our data clearly shows that younger men see the value of using skin care to hold back the ageing process. The impact of the rise of knowledge economy jobs, media representations of new forms of masculinity (such as those offered in publications such as *Men's Health Magazine*), advertising and the rise of social media appear to have had a significant impact on younger men. We concur with [Hakim's \(2016\)](#) analysis about the pressure for men to continually improve their bodies in order to try to obtain market advantage in a cut-throat neoliberal context. However, with the case of skin care products, men may introspectively gaze in the mirror in contemplation of their improved appearance gained from using facial skincare products but they want this to remain invisible to others.

So, our data shows that men have similar anxieties about their looks than women. It is good for capitalism and cosmetics companies that these fears have emerged as they can sell more products. On the other hand, it is problematic that even young men do not feel comfortable talking about these issues with their friends and peers. This links to a much wider social issue of men bottling up their feelings and concerns which has led to a range of mental health issues amongst men and alarming rates of male suicide. The most recent figures from the [Office for National Statistics, \(2019\)](#) for England and Wales show that 75% of people who commit suicide are men. This has been a pattern since the mid-1990s. Organisations such as CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) campaign to encourage men to talk more about their emotions. Their website has a current feature on body image, and this indicates that this is a worry for young men, particularly in the social media age. This form of invisible consumption by men highlights the continued anxieties experienced by men about what it means to be a man in the 21st century. Social structures that traditionally have offered clear notions that men should be unconcerned with their image then present conflict when ideals linking to identity subsequently change. In a patriarchal society, concerns about social constructions of attractiveness are traditionally a pressure placed on women ([Connell, 2005](#)). Thus, products linked to beauty 'nudge' the boundaries of traditional ideals of masculinity. Historical associations of facial skincare as a field connected with women potentially conflates product use with femininity. Connecting men with facial skincare use have implications for male identity as traditional ideals of masculinity are challenged by men's use of 'beautifying' products ([Hall, 2015](#)). Skincare is something that men use discretely and [Adams et al. \(2010\)](#) highlight that men maintain status by avoiding any suggestion of feminising or narcissistic behaviour. It seems that discourse outside of the normal boundaries between men continues to exist, as facial skincare is still perceived as 'antithetical' or taboo as a natural topic for discussion ([Hall, 2015](#)). Men are not likely to openly discuss the use of a product associated with beauty, for fear of ridicule from other men. However, we must also acknowledge that debates about gender identities have recently moved centre stage and traditional gender binaries are being challenged in unprecedented ways. The UK Office for National Statistics² (2021) notes that; *'There are now more varied conceptualisations and self-descriptions of gender and non-gendered identities. The trans community, trans identities and gender identity matters are becoming more visible, and this is particularly noticeable in the mainstream UK media'*. In terms of gender identities, society is rapidly changing. There are currently no official statistics in the UK for people who identify as non-binary,

but recent research from the US suggests that almost one in 10 high school pupils identify as gender diverse (Kidd et al., 2021). The arena of willingness of men to talk about their male skin care consumption could be a highly fruitful future test case to examine the extent to which seismic shifts in gender identity are taking place to the extent that recent estimations suggest. If society acknowledges and accepts a more diverse range of gender identities, it should follow that rigid ideas about what men should and should not discuss in public will also significantly change.

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Notes

1. Australian webforum discussion of male skincare (accessed 21/08/21) <https://forums.whirlpool.net.au/archive/2386773>
UK webforum discussion of male skincare (accessed 21/08/21) <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=5719752>
2. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/measuringequality/genderidentity/genderidentityupdate>

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Websites

Campaign Against Living Miserably <https://www.thecalmzone.net/> Accessed 12/06/21

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