Man Up Son: Articulating the Conflict of Fatherhood and Skincare Advice

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Abstract:

Intergenerational differences are explored in this qualitative study exploring the dynamics of fathers and sons in the use of men's skincare and the influence of advertisers on how this consumption practice is represented. A series of twenty semi-structured interviews and two focus groups form the data collection for this study. From the results, there is evidence of reverse consumer socialisation taking place by sons encouraging their fathers to appropriate skincare as a routine. The influence of advertising is highlighted as continuing to provide unhelpful notions of masculinity that serve to reinforce 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005) ideals conflicting with changing societal influences. For change to truly take place in terms of males adopting potentially feminising practices such as using facial skincare, then advertisers need to rethink their approach.

Keywords: Masculinities, fatherhood, advertising

Track: Advertising and Marketing Communication

1. Introduction

The increasing array of 'beautifying' products and services that are advertised to men has added further complexities on evolving ideals for male identity. 'Traditional' or hegemonic ideologies continue to pervade as a dominant influence on expectations surrounding masculinities and what it means 'to be a man'. Introduced by Connell (1987), 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to dominant forms of masculinity (e.g. physical toughness, power) which are maintained by subjugating 'alternative' masculinities such as transgender or gay 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). With a greater focus placed on men to improve their looks, however, this trend serves to conflict with identity ideals placed on men to resolve how to balance these expectations.

Barber and Bridges (2017) note how advertisers often devise an approach to satisfy the struggle of targeting men with 'feminine' products by adopting a facetious approach, suggesting that this new consumer base of men simply need to 'man up' to buy such products. Such comedic portrayals of male protagonists in advertisements for products and services not traditionally aligned with men serves to create a buffer from reality, hence the actor is 'over' playing a role and traditional ideals are protected. However, recently issued guidelines surrounding gender stereotypes in UK advertising stipulate that advertisers should avoid content and context that may be harmful when mocking those that fail to conform to such typecasts (Advertising Standards Authority, 2019). Equally, recommendations from the American Psychological Association (AMA) (2018) have underlined the damaging effects placed upon boys and men from advertisers reinforcing 'traditional' versions of masculinity that may limit their psychosocial development and shape their identities negatively (Barber, Bridges and Nelson, 2019). A directive emerging because of the AMA study is to encourage 'positive' involvement from fathers, but the extent to which the fathers influence their son's life (beyond being present) is unclear in the context of report (American Psychological Association, 2018). In view of this, the objective of this study is to explore the process of intergenerational influence, investigating how fathers influence their son's attitudes towards the consumption of facial skincare products within the UK. Another key question explores the role of advertisers skincare is located as a masculine product to younger male audiences.

1.1 *Advertising's influence on male skincare consumption*

Advertising paradigms in consumer society have shifted focus from informational need for men's facial skincare products towards meaning-based approaches, resulting in men feeling confused about the functional benefits 'call to action' (Stevens & Ostberg, 2011). This has implications for how men view advertisements for products such as men's facial skincare. Products are identified as part of the male domain by advertisers' use of distinct differences, such as using a male model to logically connect that such products are intended for use by men (Williamson, 2002). However, Farr (2013) highlights that advertisers fail to represent the diverse spectrum of masculinities in contemporary society. At best, this lacks resonance. At worst, this engenders a lack of satisfaction with appearance that may have implications for a consumer's self-esteem. Nevertheless, the versions of masculinities presented are formed from the advertiser's narrow construct of reality to represent men and influence the ideals that men draw upon when contemplating their identity (Hariharan, Talukdar and Kwon, 2015). Couldry (2003), for example, suggests that underlying values in society serve to frame rituals in media relating to social aspects of our lives for example, male grooming product consumption. Many of the images devised by advertisers for male grooming tend to adopt traditional 'hegemonic masculine' (Connell, 2005) approaches to audiences. An example is the use of 'hypermasculine' (Vokey, Tefft and Tysiaczny, 2013) male models to suggest that 'men like this' use facial skincare products. Men's use of such products, however, potentially undermines the ideals of 'hegemonic masculinity', given that skincare products and services like cosmetic surgery are often viewed as the antithesis of masculinity itself (Connell, 2005). Hence, metaphors are often used to convey a recognisable 'rugged man' trope to help reinforce that the product does not denigrate traditional views of masculinity to the male audience (Gentry & Harrison, 2010). Alongside the 'rugged man' are depictions of white, strong, males in advertising images (Hirschman, 2003) which continue to dominate in UK skincare adverts.

Advertisers offer representations of masculine ideals but they are unrealistic and possibly counter-productive (Fitzgerald & Arnott, 1996) and as Gentry and Harrison (2010) argue they do not reflect reality and cause confusion for men in terms of how they should 'do' gender. By adopting a traditional approach, that fails to challenge the status quo, Stevens and Ostberg (2011) highlight how outdated expectations concerning masculinity are reinforced in advertisements. Images of men with muscular bodies offer one reason for the increase in men trying to emulate 'perfection' through skincare, diet, depilation, surgery and bodybuilding (Frank, 2014), although clearly not all men respond in this way to such images. The

persistent trend towards men improving their appearance continues and influences the propensity to consume facial skincare by men as part of an ongoing identity 'project' (Hall, 2015). In a consumerist society, men are potentially free to work on their identity. Nevertheless, the body as a 'tool' and the body linked to 'image' are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish in relation to males depicted in advertising (Boni, 2002).

1.2 Identity and paternal influence on son's skincare consumption

The narrative of how masculinities is articulated is constantly in flux. Kimmel argues that any anxiety relating to discourse concerning what masculinity actually is tends to stem from how the power base shifts within the wider gender arena and unhelpful attitudes, traits and behaviours that persist in relation to gender ideals (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). Historically, the skincare market was predominantly female-focussed thereby creating connotations that such products are feminising. By extending this product sector for men, this serves to destabilise the notional boundaries of how men should not be overly concerned with their looks for fear of being perceived as vain and therein suggesting that they are less 'manly'. Traditionally, one dominant form of masculinity was conceived: "this masculinity is non-feminine (or anti-feminine), independent, heterosexual (or 'anti-homosexual'), tough" (Gentry & Harrison, 2010: 79). The theory of 'hybrid masculinities' articulates how social change occurs, such as the consumption of beauty products for men, whilst maintaining the overall impression that there has been little shift in terms of real privilege (Barber & Bridges, 2017). To maintain power, three key interrelated processes take place. Firstly, a *symbolic distance* between men and hegemonic forms of masculinity is created; secondly, men '*strategically borrow'* elements from disadvantaged groups, such as white men adopting elements from other ethnic groups; and, thirdly, there is a *blurring of the boundaries* between straight and gay culture so it appears that greater inclusivity is occurring (Barber and Bridges, 2017). Another concept to explain how the masculinities arena is adapting to change was first coined by Whannel (2002) as 'flexible masculinity', blending traditional 'hegemonic' attributes with a more fluid, diverse, multi-faceted and constantly evolving masculinity. David Beckham is suggested as a prime example of 'flexible masculinity' (Gee, 2014) as Beckham comes from a working-class background and adopted a good work ethic to ensure that he excelled as a footballer, which aligns with hegemonic masculine ideals. David Beckham blends these hegemonic ideals with a caring role as a father and husband whilst simultaneously blurring the lines of traditional expectations of masculinity, as illustrated through wearing sarongs, nail varnish and his wife's knickers, and thereby he 'flexes' the

boundaries of more traditional hegemonic ideals. To blend traditional expectations with an evolving consumption area that is potentially feminising, Schelibling and Lafrance (2019) contend that advertisements for male grooming products combine symbols and narratives relating to traditional hegemonic notions whilst the constructions of masculinities are 'hybridized' and 'flexible'.

Ideals surrounding masculinities are fluid and a key influence in how boys behave lies in their social formation in terms of how their fathers influence behaviour. Paternal involvement has been identified as having three key components (Pleck, 2007, 2010) that include *positive engagement* activities to promote development (e.g. a father showing his son how to shave); *warmth and responsiveness* (e.g. kind words and gestures to reinforce a father's love of his son) and *control* (e.g. ensuring and monitoring safety). Adopting Merleau-Ponty's body-subject in relation to male grooming, Liu (2019) suggests the importance of the role of personal background and characteristics developed during childhood whereby the consumer may be influenced in their bodily identity position when relating the self to others. In view of this, the fatherhood role has clear potential to influence attitudes towards skincare consumption by their sons, which forms the central focus of this paper.

2. Methods

Adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach, a series of twenty semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were conducted, ten with young men to explore their opinions (and vicariously, their father's) towards the consumption of facial skincare products. Younger male consumers were purposively sought given that they are more likely to purchase and use skincare products (Mintel, 2019). The views of ten industry experts (8 male and 2 female) were also captured via a series of semi-structured interviews, charting shifts in men's use of beauty products over time. As these interviews took place within their working environment this afforded the opportunity to interview a couple of clients as participants in addition to the key informant (see interview 2 industry in figure 1). Two focus groups took place, the first one exploring generational differences amongst a mixed age group of five participants. For the second focus group, four participants were recruited via sports teams in order to capture the views of men who participate in high-impact, masculine activities; yet self-identified as caring about their physical appearance. Within the interviews and focus groups the men were asked to discuss their opinions of the male skincare market; their consumption and motives for using such products; and whether they recalled how such

products were advertised (i.e. the use of celebrity appeals). They were also asked to consider their father's opinions towards male use of cosmetics, such as skincare products. All interviews were audio recorded after informed consent was given and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Figure 1 offers a summary of the participants and their pseudonyms.

Figure 1. Overview of participants

Interview	**Name and profession**	**Age**	**Ethnicity and sexuality**	**Moisturisers Used**
Focus Group 1	John – student	18	White British heterosexual	Nivea for Men
Focus Group	Ash – Accountant	47	British Asian heterosexual	Nivea Men/Dolce
Focus Group	Mal – Plasterer	50	White British heterosexual	Avon for Men
Focus Group	Tony - IT manager	42	Chinese British heterosexual	Nivea for Men
Focus Group	George – Retired	59	White British heterosexual	None
Interview 1 Industry	Gemma Skincare Promotions Manager	35	White British heterosexual female	N/A
Interview 2	Andy –Illustrator Tommo – Barber Theo – Student	38 30 20	All White British and heterosexual males	E45 Aloe Vera/Bio Oil Aloe Vera
Interview 3	Daniel – Barber	32	White British heterosexual	Nivea for Men
Interview 4	Sewerwyn – Tatooist	33	White British heterosexual	None
Interview 5	Stuart – Skincare Consultant	52	White British homosexual	Clinique
Interview 6	Ashleigh – Skincare Consultant	33	White British heterosexual female	Clarins
Interview 7	Lin – Skincare Consultant	55	White British heterosexual female	N/A
Interview 8	Thomas – Skincare consultant/barber	28	White British homosexual	Gentry Products
Interview 9	Sam – Barber	28	White British homosexual	Nivea for Men
Interview 10	David - Beauty Consultant	58	White British homosexual	Nivea for Men
Interview 1 Young Males	Drew - Student	18	White British homosexual	Simple moisturiser
Interview 2	Tom – Student	18	White British heterosexual	Oxy 10 spot cream
Interview 3	Matthew – Student	19	White British heterosexual	Nivea For Men
Interview 4	Michael – Student	18	White British heterosexual	Aveeno
Interview 5	Brad – Student	19	White British heterosexual	Nivea for Men/Bulldog
Interview 6	Mike – Student	20	White British heterosexual	Nivea for Men
Interview 7	Mich – Student	22	White British heterosexual	Clinique for Men
Interview 8	Paul – Student	18	White British heterosexual	Dove Men Care
Interview 9	Tim – Student	18	White British homosexual	Lush
Interview 10	Adam – Student	18	White British heterosexual	Clearasil
Focus Group	Gaz – Media Sales	27	White British heterosexual	None
Focus Group	Bez – Playworker	26	White British heterosexual	None
Focus Group	Dec – Professional Water Polo Player	20	White British homosexual	None
Focus Group	Loz – Student	19	Greek heterosexual	Protakas

3. Major results

The interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis to identify masculinity ideals, advertising or parental influence on skincare attitudes and consumption. The findings are presented into three distinct themes illustrated with verbatim comments from participants.

3.1 Masculinity ideals

The perception of not "living up" to perceptions of generational ideals by using what was still perceived as a female product was commented on by respondents. They cited the continuance of hegemonic ideals by their father's generation in how they viewed the consumption of skincare products in terms of masculine ideals. Ashleigh, an industry skincare respondent for example, noted the resistance to using skincare products as part of daily grooming rituals in relation to her father and his peers:

> *"I know with my dad I tried to get him using moisturiser and stuff and he said no, no! because he doesn't think it's manly and he's not really bothered about his looks".*

In response to the question as to whether his dad used skincare, Drew replied in the negative stating the reason as "*he's just a man's man"*. Furthermore, his father's attitudes to Drew's use of skincare revealed traditional ideals with typical comments such as:

> "*What do you want that for? Stop messing with that! That's not what man does".*

Mike commented on his dad's initial antipathy towards use of skincare being largely related to hegemonic ideals perceiving this as a generational mind set:

> *"It's a woman's thing and very stereotypical about looking after your skin".*

During discussions surrounding why fathers generally tend not to use skincare products, Thomas highlighted the lack of consumer experience along with outdated perceptions as key barriers for older men resisting skincare products:

> *"I would say the more people try it, the more people are going to like it. But I think 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."*

3.2 Shifting generational ideals

Participants reflected on the potential for change in attitudes and behaviour towards men's use of skincare among the younger generations:

> *"I think as we get older it will be acceptable"* (Drew).

Growing up in a generation that sees body image improvement as a normative behaviour, a reverse generational trend is noted by Mike in terms of sons encouraging skincare product use

by their fathers (reverse consumer socialisation). Mike revealed how he was first given products by his mum, but then he would pass them upwards to his father and grandfather. Similarly, Paul reflects on a (shifting) generational difference in terms of the importance placed on image:

> "*I really don't know, but I don't think he [father] uses any. But I don't think he cares about maintaining a very high quality of skin or anything like that."*

When discussions focussed on his dad's use of skincare, Tim responded "*Erm I don't know if he does*" suggesting his father potentially consumes skincare discreetly if at all, whilst Adam's dad was referred to as an occasional skincare user:

> *"Only after he shaves, maybe. But he does have some that he uses, but not as big as my mum, obviously, but he does use it."*

The expectation by Adam for his mum to 'obviously' be a bigger user of skincare than his dad is interesting as this provides an insight into how this participant assumes that women continue to be the 'natural' consumers of skincare.

3.3 Advertising representations

A tendency to overcompensate the masculine positioning of skincare by advertisers for male audiences was considered as creating a negative effect for some younger male consumer respondents. Drew highlighted, for example, the over-exaggeration of masculine traits which are used in advertising male products, termed 'hypermasculine' by Vokey et al. (2013):

> *"[They're] quite aggressive… the way they advertise them I wouldn't want to put it on my face. I wouldn't feel safe putting it on my face because it's marketed like something you'd put in your car or your bike to oil it – not your face".*

When asked why he thought advertisers were taking this approach, Drew thought that it was to reinforce 'safe' 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005) ideals for his father's generation:

> *"to appeal to the older generations maybe? Like my Dad who's very, quite manly. He doesn't want his masculinity compromised. So the way they market it, it doesn't compromise him. It says this makes you more manly, not less."*

Mal, a male in his fifties, takes a pragmatic view of how he does not find the staging of skincare advertisements convincing as he does not share the view that he needs to improve his image for the scrutiny of others:

> "*We don't put it on to attract women like you have these, you know, these adverts that say look what you can look like and all – we just don't do it for that – we do it because it's functional, we don't do it for anything else."*

Whereas, Mich, a younger male, perceives that there is an increased pressure placed upon individuals for better looking skin:

> *"advertising you see it on TV every day the different products and you see celebrities with complete, flawless in every way so the expectations are higher from everyone."*

Maintaining traditional ideals, Tommo reflects on the importance of perceiving the functionality of the product,

> *"I wouldn't like see that advert and run out… if I've not got a problem I'm not going to need to fix it– that's how a man works – with regards to skincare."*

4. Implications

In consideration of intergenerational influence on the use of male facial skincare, there are strong indications of reverse consumer socialisation taking place by younger males in respect of attempting to positively influence their fathers to appropriate such products as part of their daily routine. Participants in this study have highlighted a divergence of perceptions surrounding masculinity ideals whereby younger males are seemingly less concerned than their fathers about adopting consumption practices that may undermine traditional notions of masculine practices. In attempting to appropriate masculine ideals to a potentially feminising product, advertisers are perceived by participants as overplaying hegemonic ideals to the extent that respondents perceived the approach as overly aggressive. This strategy is clearly unhelpful and serves to further divide intergenerational attitudes as younger males suggest they place less importance on their masculinity being compromised than their fathers. Advertisers and brands need to take heed and present skincare in a more nuanced manner that suggests this consumption practice is a natural part of male daily grooming without feeling the need to reassert that masculine values are not compromised by this.

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