

Skincare, Selfies, Self-esteem and Masculinity

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Abstract

The inception of men’s facial skincare products and an increased pressure to present positive images of the self on social media are key trends encouraging men to improve their overall appearance. Modern men’s attitudes towards facial skincare are explored in this study in terms of the impact this has upon masculine identities. The research uses an exploratory approach seeking the views of younger men as those identified as most likely to try facial skincare as part of their grooming routines (Intel, 2017). A series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with males aged 18-21 years old and a focus group with water polo players provide a forum to understand current trends and issues surrounding men’s facial skincare products. Key findings highlight how the growing trend for ‘selfies’ has prompted men to look at themselves more critically in terms of their image partly fuelling the adoption of skincare use by men.

Masculinity, skincare, selfies

Consumer Behaviour

1.0 Introduction

The growing trend for ‘selfies’ has prompted men to look at themselves more critically in terms of their image, creating an increased additional pressure to present positive images of the self on social media (Pounders *et al.*, 2016). Eager and Dann (2016) suggest that the advent of ‘selfies’ has encouraged a form of ‘human branding’ whereby individuals seek to present the most positive version of their image to upload and share to platforms such as *Snapchat*. Moreover, the varied range of products and services positioned to improve men’s looks suggest that men *should* be doing more to enhance their overall appearance (Intel, 2018). Men are increasingly encouraged to partake in practices that form part of a wider economic process that benefit the beauty industry and is often rationalised as ‘looking after ourselves’. We are in an era where individuals are actively encouraged to work upon their bodily appearance as part of an aesthetic improvement of the self (Elias *et al.*, 2017) which in turn helps to improve how we subjectively feel about ourselves (Blackburn, 2014). An increased focus on their physical image by men forms part of a trend towards considering appearance enhancement as a form of an ongoing ‘project’ (Hall, 2015). Glossy lifestyle fashion magazines for men were identified as an initial influence for an amplified introspection of their appearance (Jackson *et al.*, 2001). Idealised representations of male models in these publications reinforced a supposed need for men to improve their face with skincare products mediated as an acceptable ideal for men (Jackson *et al.*, 2001). Hakim (2016) offers an understanding of neoliberal notions that suggests there is an underlying need for freedom of expression and drive towards individuals seeking to attain ‘completion of the self’. Men’s use of facial skincare offers an example of how males individually and collectively are prompted to compete and ‘complete’ their improving skin appearance in pursuit of a form of wealth gained as ‘capital’.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Men’s skincare market

It was around the start of this millennium that facial skincare products specifically for men were first available in the UK. The introduction of this male grooming resource is explored in terms of how male engagement with this practice provides an insight into contemporary attitudes towards gender and identity. The fact that facial skincare products for men exist is not sufficient to prompt consumption by men (Intel, 2018). Men’s actual skin

has not changed; however, society's expectations of men have (Tungate, 2011). As a result, this study also draws attention to changes within society that have placed an increased pressure upon men to improve their appearance and combat wrinkles to age well. Ojala *et al.* (2016) highlight how the face as a site for ongoing defence against the signs of ageing has prompted men to scrutinise their appearance. The men's facial skincare sector in the UK has grown exponentially in recent years and in 2018 was worth an estimated £94 million (Mintel, 2018). As such, men's grooming is a valuable sector and an interesting one to consider in terms of how this might relate to societal gender ideals. Recent trends have seen sales slow down mainly due to the current fashion for facial hair amongst men, but the market remains strong.

Modern men are apparently fascinated with their appearance and use an array of goods, including facial skincare to maintain their looks (Hall, 2015). However, the impetus for men's use of such products serves as a reflection of the drive towards exploiting economic possibilities that manufacturers gain from this trend. Male facial skincare appeals to consumers by subjectively suggesting the product is 'required'. Commodities such as facial skincare products are associated with what Bauman (1968) terms a 'social reality'. This 'reality' is suggested by the use of artificially created signs that convey a need-satisfying role for males. The signs offer distinction and definition to deliver a 'rite of passage' for new consumers (Bauman, 1968) such as when younger males first start shaving. Facial skincare provides another grooming component for possible adoption by younger males as they are more likely to spend longer on appearance enhancing routines (Mintel, 2017). However, this grooming practice remains problematic for some men as it conflicts with their ideals of masculinity. Bauman (1968) suggests that a potential consumption routine is established by recognising and accepting this as part of a more 'structuralised pattern'. Assimilation into culture takes time. Bauman (2012) appraises how consumers have been 'coerced' into viewing shopping and consumption as synonymous with 'a good life'. Male consumers are encouraged to 'complete' themselves through the act of consuming products including facial skincare (Jackson *et al.*, 2001). However, there is disparity between the ideal body, the real body, the "dream body and the looking-glass self, reflected in the reaction of others" (Bourdieu, 2001: 207). Consumption practices of goods considered as 'feminising' by some men are explored in this study in terms of how this conflicts with traditional notions of masculinity for modern men and in turn informs male identity. Mintel (2017) highlight that in respect to using beauty products for men and women, almost three quarters of adults in their

survey of 2,000 respondents agree that looking good makes them feel more confident. If accepted as representative of wider views, then men's facial skincare helps to contribute towards improving self-esteem.

2.2 *Selfies and skincare*

The 'selfie' has cast the importance of self-appearance into the mainstream spotlight by encouraging people to care more about how they appear. Lim (2016) highlights that how the outside world views the way a person looks has become more important than how a person behaves off-camera. An increased focus on appearance has implications for how men are seemingly required to improve their appearance as a required ideal of modern society. The practice of taking 'selfies' that are shared through digital media has placed an increased pressure on men to improve their appearance (Hakim, 2016). The term 'selfie' has entered contemporary culture and transformed social ideals and attitudes and is defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" (Eagar and Dann, 2016). The person taking the 'selfie' can actively promote the image they want to project which is then intentionally shared for approval by others (Lim, 2016). Eagar and Dann (2016) suggest that through technology 'the self' has become commodified for all. Historically, the power and dominance of traditional media has excluded individuals from 'human-branding performance' (Eagar and Dann, 2016). However, the 'selfie' can be used as a medium to narrate the human brand as the individual is the brand manager (Eagar and Dann, 2016). The proliferation of 'selfies' that are shared via social media platforms such as *Instagram* have the potential to influence existing discourses. Such images play an important role in how we experience being in the world and consequently shape our appearance ideals (Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015). Furthermore, Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) contend that those individuals taking 'selfies' are merging how they perceive their bodies in photographs taken by others with their evaluation of how they look in the mirror. By evaluating two views of their appearance (photo and mirror), this informs how a person can improve upon this for their posed 'selfie'. The potential offered by use of facial skincare products by men provides a way forward for those men who scrutinise their appearance and identify that an improvement is required. Pounders *et al.* (2016) suggest that the motivation to post 'selfies' is derived in part to the conscious or subconscious process in which people attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person. The main drivers for taking 'selfies' were identified as suggesting those taking the images were experiencing happiness, signifying the 'selfie' taker has a good life and emphasising their

physical appearance (Pounders *et al.*, 2016). Whilst Pounders *et al.* (2016) focussed on women for their study, equally Jankowski *et al.* (2016) highlighted how men are taking ‘selfies’ as a form of engagement with an online community. A key aspect of their study was the importance of a positive physical appearance and ‘selfies’ were posted on social media as a tool to establish self-identity and self-esteem. This self-esteem increased with the number of likes a ‘selfie’ image attracted (Pounders *et al.*, 2016). The ‘selfie’ has enabled individuals to communicate a ‘constructed and curated image of themselves’ (Eagar and Dann, 2016). This suggests that ‘selfies’ provide a way of presenting an image of the self to others that has been planned to invoke an intended outcome. Mintel (2017) highlights that a strong selfie-culture drives interest in appearance. Sharing online within social media serves to promote beauty and grooming routines. The proliferation of such images offers another stimulus for men to scrutinise their facial skin and seek to compete for approval of their image by others in a digitally engaged world. This helps towards the acceptance of practices such as using facial skincare products by men and forms part of ‘embodied’ ideals of masculinity (Hakim, 2016).

2.3 Self-esteem and skincare

Cooley’s (1902) suggestion that appearance is judged by others maintains relevance for this research in terms of how men currently negotiate the idea of using facial skincare products and the effect this has upon their ‘self-feeling’ or identity. Borrowing from Cooley’s (1902) ‘looking-glass self’ analogy, this paper seeks to highlight how facial skincare for men helps to inform male identity by offering an insight of the “imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind” (Cooley, 1902: 164). The research draws attention to the idea that men are consuming facial skincare products as part of a wider trend towards men seeking to improve their appearance. The imagined effect of how other men (and women) judge appearance as part of the ‘looking-glass self’ (Cooley, 1902) provides a context to explain how men reflect upon their improved facial skin appearance but seek to ensure their ideals for masculine identity are not compromised by this potentially feminising beauty practice. Specifically, Cooley (1902) refers to an ‘imputed sentiment’ in respect of how men wish others to perceive their appearance in a positive manner. This also suggests a growing understanding by men that their appearance is being ‘judged’ by others. Cooley (1902) proposes that the judgement can lead to a sense of ‘pride’ or ‘mortification’. Pride contains an evaluative dimension that suggests we feel pride when we think we deserve the admiration of others as opposed to simply anticipating it (Blackburn, 2014). Linking this to the use of facial skincare products by men, pride can be gained by evaluating the results of the improved

skin they have attained. Once men purchase goods such as male facial skincare products on a regular basis, the consumption process moves from a functional format towards a more symbolic process of meaning construction in relation to social identity (Szmigin, 2003). As a result, consumption offers a form of representation such as how moisturiser functions to help enhance facial skin. 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. As a result, the consumption of products such as facial skincare by males offers an opportunity to consider how this affects men's identity and cultural implications of male facial skincare products.

3.0 Methods

The aim of this research sought to understand attitudes towards men's facial skincare use and the implications arising for male identity. In particular, the study explored how the trend for 'selfies' has contributed to the use of facial skincare by younger males. Mintel (2017) identified younger males as those most likely to use facial skincare products. Bearing this in mind, participants aged 18-22 years were recruited for a series of semi-structured interviews. Convenience and snowball sampling was used to gain access to upper sixth and undergraduate UK male university students willing to participate in the research. All interviews were recorded after consent was given and transcripts were typed by the researcher in order to keep close to the data. Key questions such as whether facial skincare products were used by respondents and views towards facial skincare and influences surrounding the topic were central to all interviews. In addition, a focus group of males aged 19-26 years old was arranged to consider the influence that social media has had for an increased focus on men's appearance. Given the likelihood that they would be concerned with their skincare regime a group of water polo players aged 18 and above were interviewed. The questions centred around the consumption and attitudes towards men's skincare with a greater emphasis on the use of social media. The focus group took place in Manchester Aquatics Centre after seeking permission from their coach to approach the men's team. Four members of the squad were willing to take part. Participants included 'Gaz' a White British 27 year-old in media sales who said that he did not see the need for skincare although his girlfriend was trying to get him to use it. 'Bez' was a White British 26 year-old playworker (a title that the others derided him for as being 'girly') who stated how purchases of skincare were left that to 'her indoors'. 'Loz' was a 19 year-old student who said that he used a Greek brand of moisturiser *Protakas*. He was happy to talk about how he liked to 'look after his skin' but the others were laughing

at him whilst he was discussing this. He countered any suggestion that this was demeaning his masculinity by saying that ‘it hasn’t done him any harm getting the ladies to like him’ thus asserting his heterosexual status. ‘Dec’ was a 20 year-old White British professional water polo player. He did not use skincare and was very careful to ensure that his traditional views on how men do not need to ‘use stuff’ on his face. 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). Key quotations from participants to support relevant themes were identified. Codes relating to the themes that emerged were developed iteratively by the researcher re-reading transcripts in order to identify key issues emerging from the data in order to produce a codebook to work from (Guest *et al.*, 2012). The approach started with open coding to understand emerging themes and to provide a deeper analysis using selective coding after the initial trawl through of the data (Urquhart, 2013).

4.0 Findings

Respondents were asked specifically about their use of social media and the effect this may have on attitudes towards using skincare. ‘Mich’ a heterosexual upper sixth form respondent notes changing attitudes towards using skincare amongst younger males but does not link this to social media specifically, “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). Some respondents demonstrated an awareness that good-looking skin offers better responses for images posted on social media. ‘Tim’ a gay 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” (Young Male, 9). 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). The advent of ‘selfies’ has, meanwhile, triggered a need for males to look good for the camera and has been focussed upon by a number of researchers (for example Hall, 2015; Hakim, 2016).

Confidence was an issue amongst some respondents in regards to taking ‘selfies’. ‘Bez’ commenting in the focus group with water polo players said he felt it was too

narcissistic to post an image of just himself, “I take photos with my mate but not selfies” (Focus Group, B). Whilst ‘Dec’ responded to this comment by admitting to taking ‘selfies’ but not sharing them, “I wouldn’t upload it anywhere I just take it on my phone I don’t upload it to anywhere to be honest... maybe to Facebook and maybe to *Twitter*” (Focus Group, D). Although denying posting a ‘selfie’ to social media sites, ‘Dec’ considers sharing on *Instagram* as a more obvious self-promotion than other social media platforms. Hence, he contends, “*Instagram* you look good that’s the whole purpose of it; *Facebook* I upload it so that my mum can see it because she likes to keep tabs on me” (Focus Group, D).

A lack of assurance was raised by ‘Bez’ in the focus group amongst water polo players, “I don’t really have the confidence to stand there with my phone and take a selfie with my self so I just think well if you want to do it, do it but it doesn’t really bother me” (Focus Group, B). Whilst this respondent says he is not bothered, he does disclose how his self-evaluation of his appearance prevents him from posting ‘selfies’. This reflects a wider culture that places pressure upon men to perfect their looks before sharing images online (see Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015). Better facial skincare and the ‘pressure to look good’ has been highlighted as improving prospects for job opportunities (Das and Loach, 2011).

A general need to consider appearance was noted by ‘Mich’ an undergraduate student, “you want to look good because the pressure is there mainly but it’s also good too... people are more conscious of their image” (Young Male, 7). It also provides more confidence to share ‘selfies’ with social media. The particular staging of ‘selfies’ before they are shared was noted by ‘Gaz’ in the focus group with water polo players, “they take like a hundred pictures of themselves to make them look in the best light and then just post them up to show off” (Focus Group, G). The need to prepare a perfected image before it is shared highlights how important it is to create an illusion of perfection to others as part of identity. Identity issues are key to how younger males negotiate the value of facial skincare in enhancing their overall appearance as ‘Tim’ a gay student respondent indicates, “you want to have nice, clear skin” (Young Male, 9).

5.0 Conclusion

Male facial skincare forms part of a wider range of products and services that serve to challenge men to look at themselves in somatic terms, suggesting that expected norms of masculinity are changing in how others increasingly judge a man on his image. The societal expectation that men should consider their image as an ongoing project is gathering pace.

The need for introspection in relation to image is continuing to place pressure on men in relation to their appearance. Vanity enters insidiously as a reason for using facial skincare products by men. This has been triggered, specifically by the emergence of 'selfies' fuelling a perceived need amongst men to scrutinise their appearance. Better looking skin can improve the number of 'likes' attracted linked to images posted on social media. This is an important trend especially followed by younger audiences and thus contributes towards how the face is contemplated as a site for ongoing scrutiny in a digital space. Cooley (1902) highlights how the imagination of men's appearance to others and the perceived judgement of this was important over a century ago. This notion retains currency in terms of how men negotiate the improvement of their body image that fit with contemporary ideals of masculinity. If the cultural norm is that men are critiqued in terms of how they are constantly improving their image, then using facial skincare products becomes more of a necessity. The cultural appropriation of facial skincare products for men offers a discreet improvement to appearance and whilst products are not noticeable on the face they offer improved self-esteem through enhanced skin.

Implications for brands and marketers arising from this study highlight how we consider body image has shifted so that appearance is no longer a natural evolution. There are embodied historical structures in relation to how we comprehend our perceptions and appreciation of men's expected behaviour. Image has become a form of an ongoing project influenced and informed by mediating agents such as the proliferation of selfies posted on social media within society. Men are using facial skincare whilst enjoying the benefits of improved appearance in a society that values this. How marketers serve to reflect acceptable versions of masculinity is an ongoing but lucrative challenge.

6.0 References

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