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Male Grooming: An Ethnographic Research on Perception and Choice of Male Cosmetics

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore male perceptions toward cosmetics and their product choice. Applying an ethnographic framework to this study, three males between the ages of 24-30 were interviewed through a series of 141 questions pertaining to their demographics, lifestyle, attitudes toward masculinity, skin care, grooming and cleaning behaviors. The results showed five overarching themes: (1) all of the participants had early experiences with personal care products, (2) the term masculinity was defined with terms such as “calm” and “practical”, (3) all participants looked up to their fathers as their key role models, (4) all participants valued loyal friendships, and (5) location convenience drives shopping for cosmetics – participants tend to only shop for cosmetics at a location where they are based at any given point in time, thereby implying an unwillingness to travel to a specialty store for purchasing grooming items. Managerial implications utilizing the results of this research are also discussed.

Introduction

Consider the following scenarios: (a) A senior manager at a reputed firm is seen shopping by his friends/colleagues at a major department store in the male cosmetics aisles in the specific sub categories of liquid face washes, exfoliating scrubs and ‘scruffing lotions’ and (b) A senior manager at a similar firm is spotted in a comparable department store in the male cosmetics aisles of ‘anti-aging’ and ‘eye and lip care’.

Are these scenarios unrealistic, head turners or laughable? Probably – a decade ago but would probably not command as much attention anymore! Men have been increasingly involved in shopping activities while maintaining their masculine identity (Loo-Lee, Ibrahim, & Chong,

2005). The emergence of aesthetically cognizant men is a societal change that is prevalent in major urban areas and increasingly proliferating to suburban and rural areas as well. Not surprisingly then, concepts such as “feminization of masculinity” (Iida, 2004) and “metrosexual” generation (e.g. Clarkson, 2005) have been discussed and have invited the attention of researchers.

The male personal grooming product market continues to experience growth, aided by a new variety of male consumers that are concerned with their outward appearance. According to a survey conducted by L’Oreal, there has been an exponential increase in men claiming to use male cosmetic products over the past decade. This is supported by statistical evidence showing that only 4% of men used cosmetic products in 1990, but 21% in 2001, and a projected 50% growth in 2015 (Diagne & Souiden, 2009). These results indicate an increasing importance in the development of male cosmetic products.

As a result, men’s grooming has become more prominent. In the past, if anything went beyond deodorant and body wash, men might have gotten laughed at, but today, the male consumer has an array of products for the care and maintenance of their appearance. Diagne & Souiden (2009), (pp. 97) state “major cosmetic companies have created dedicated products for men such as face creams, anti-wrinkle creams, bronzing products, hair coloring and toning gels”. Their results are in line with following statistics: a remarkable 40 per cent of participants reported using hair gel, 35 per cent using facial cream, 28.7 per cent using skin care products, 25.1 per cent using moisturizer, 10.3 per cent using pore exfoliates, and 3.1 per cent using lift treatment products.

It is important to note that prior research has mostly focused on female cosmetics. Even though a study by Woodruffe-Burton (1998) noted a lacuna in research on male grooming products fifteen years ago, it is surprising that current research on male shopping behavior, especially on grooming products lacks in-depth research in identifying the variables that inform, guide, and impart male consumers’ use of cosmetics. Along this vein, this current study extends research on male grooming, and examines potential insights into male shopping behavior and their views on cosmetics.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First, we utilize existing theories and extant research to offer our explanation and propositions on why decision-making in male consumers is different in males and the consequent effect this has on the choice of cosmetics they make. Then, we offer our rationale behind utilizing an ethnographic approach to uncovering men’s perceptions of cosmetics. We also discuss its merits over other research methodologies and the importance of implementing this research method to explore hidden motivations that males have toward their views on cosmetics. We then discuss our findings categorized under different themes that emerge from our ethnographic research. Lastly, we discuss the findings of this study along with managerial implications and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Propositions

Functionality of Products

Men and women are known to process information differently when it comes to selection and consumption of products (Coley and Burgess, 2003). Differences in men and women in their selection and product purchases are noteworthy. While aesthetic products appeal more to women, men are persuaded by functional products (Dittmar, Beattie and Friese 1996; Rook and Hoch, 1985).

Numerous studies vouch for the differences that men and women show in consumption of material possessions (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kamptner, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). While women seek emotional comfort in their ownership of material possessions, use-related, activity-related and self-expressive features of possessions are instrumental in men's relationship with products they own (Dittmar, 1989, 1991). Accordingly then, women's behavior is perceived to be more emotionally and socially rooted than men, leading to the following logical argument: men are less susceptible to impulse purchasing and more likely to adhere to a product or brand chosen based on cognitive decision-making in product selection and choice in the past. Guided by this line of reasoning, we propose that:

Proposition 1: Men are guided by functional benefits and attributes of products.

Proposition 2: Men tend to exhibit brand loyalty thus making it difficult for them to switch brands.

Material goods are consumed not only for their functional benefits, but also as symbolic signifiers of taste, lifestyle and identity (Bourdieu, 1979; Featherstone, 1991). Thus, consumers buy and relate to sets of products in a way that fits their preferred self-image. It is clear that men and women have different motivations that make functional versus emotional appeals more attractive to their respective genders. This basis always had women drawn more to product categories that load heavily on impulse purchase dimensions such as to clothes, shoes, jewelry, and cosmetics; whereas men are more drawn to product categories – high-tech, electronic and sports equipment – that can be easily assessed for their rational usage through clear functional dimensions. Because the male cosmetics product category does not fall under the latter category heavy on functional-cognitive dimensions, purchase decisions pertaining to these products are not very exciting, resulting in males not seeking these products actively.

Not surprisingly then, a research study by Holmes (2012) found that even though more men are now shopping for themselves, a majority of women still purchased cosmetics for men. Thus, there is a clear female influence into male consumer behavior, especially in the line of cosmetics. This leads us to suggest the following hypothesis:

Proposition 3. Women influence the choice of cosmetics for males: not only many women purchase cosmetics for males, they influence brand choice and potentially brand switching from a current brand choice.

Methodology

Ethnographic Research Method: Rationale

In order to gain insight into male grooming habits and attitudes on personal care products, an ethnographic research method was adopted. As mentioned at the very outset, the purpose of this research was to further an understanding of key aspects of cosmetics consumption by males. It was felt that quantitative methods employing questionnaire methods and analyses would confine the research to asking people a set of numerically anchored questions and would pose strict limitations in our true exploratory journey on uncovering deep seated feelings and attitudes toward male cosmetics.

Running a focus group or a routine depth interview in a “contained” environment was another choice since it offers the researcher much more control than that seen in a naturalistic setting (Freeman and Spanjaard 2012). However, the risk of other participants influencing the introverted subjects and a moderator streamlining the conversation dilutes the take-aways from each individual respondent. Similarly, a simple depth interview that misses out on the naturally occurring context in which a respondent is ensconced also misses on the richness of data that is usually crucial in a research where a respondent may be uncomfortable answering questions, which are sensitive – take for example a question on cosmetics that threatens male identity or masculinity.

Participant Selection and Demographics

First the researchers obtained permission from three men between the ages of 24 and 30 to observe them for three to four weeks and then conduct interviews with them if they felt comfortable in participating in these interviews. Respondents were assured of their privacy and anonymity when the current research gets published. These participants are urban youth living in major metropolitan cities around San Francisco and Bristol, Connecticut. They are employed full-time and two currently live with their significant others, while one lives alone. This target group includes both single and married men, but none have children.

The researchers immersed themselves full time for almost a month resulting in sustained engagement with the participants. The initial three and a half weeks were spent in observations that centered on understanding the participants, what they valued in day-to-day activities, and their daily routines around grooming themselves. The researchers engaged in copious notes taking when there was anything noteworthy in their engagement during this phase of understanding the respondents.

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, care has been taken to ensure that all names of people are pseudonyms so that informants’ privacy is maintained. Interviews were conducted during the last couple of days. While the interviews with the respondents were spread over three days given their detailed and lengthy nature, the researchers coordinated among themselves to ensure that all the three interviews followed questions around the same themes and had the same guiding patterns so as to be able to compare their results across the three participants.

Data Collection Method

Through two-hour interviews, the researchers created an interview style that enabled accurate data collection and processing of collected information. All interviews were conducted in-person, in the participants' homes. The researcher interviewing would be in-person, while the other two researchers would Skype in. Of the two researchers not interviewing, one would be pre-selected as the scribe for the answers. This would allow the interviewer to concentrate on the participant to make the process more conversational. The researchers met and went through each interview, analyzed all information therein with view to pulling out common responses from the interviews as well as unique responses from each respondent after all three interviews were completed.

The questions were divided into four sections and were designed to understand the premium male user target consumer at a deeper level. The interview included a 45-question introduction on demographics, life and lifestyle. This is where the researchers established a relationship with the interviewee that was aimed at getting an insight into the participant's day, work, hobbies, friends, interests, families, likes and dislikes.

Subsequently, 21 questions were asked regarding masculinity and male role models in order to establish a more personal relationship with the participants, gauging their attitudes towards masculinity and the values associated with these attitudes. Next, 20 questions related to perceptions and feelings about their skin were asked to gain a better understanding of their importance on skin care and an approximate spending budget on cosmetics to fulfill their skin needs.

Lastly, the researchers asked 55 questions on cleansing and grooming behaviors and needs, including several questions how personal care products are purchased. Specifically, this final section allowed the researchers to understand participants' feelings about their current grooming habits and attitudes and routines related to personal care. The questions also aimed to assess product and brand loyalty and factors that influence brand switching or switching to a newly released product. The final set of questions were on product purchase and who makes the in-store or online product purchases.

The flow of questions was designed to start with the broader, easier, demographic and warm-up questions. The idea here was to make the interviewee feel comfortable with the researchers and then share in-depth information on questions related to personal grooming, cleansing issues, overall attitudes and product choices.

Results

Throughout the interviews, five main themes were highlighted. These cover the first use of personal care products, ideas of masculinity, role models, friend influence, and shopping habits.

First Experience with Personal Care Products

All respondents had early experiences with personal care products, but none have continued to use that same brand. In their early experiences, the respondents searched for skin clearing tools to help fight acne. The third respondent noted, “when I was in 7th grade I used Clearasil for acne,” while the second respondent recalled, “7th grade maybe, I used oxy acne pads, Accutane medication.” While breakouts were the initial introduction to personal care products, none of the men continue to use the same products they did as teenagers, since skin needs have changed. The third respondent in current day uses “Nivea aftershave, Neutrogena face wash, Irish spring soap, Spiker hair gel and Old Spice deodorant.”

The second respondent commented on his choice of brands: “BedHead Gel and Paul Mitchell shampoo and Old Spice is the brand for my deodorant and body wash – all these brands work really well for my needs. Besides these nothing else is really consistent.” These findings supports proposed Proposition 1 that men are more guided by functional benefits and attributes of products as evidenced by the attribute-benefit linkage sought. The fact that respondents cease to use acne products when needed, discontinuing when not required and then seeking a different product that functions well for their evolving needs is a testimony to our proposition that men seek products for attributes that satisfy certain specific functions.

Friend Influence

Regarding friendship, all respondents stated that they build relationships and maintain their friendships for decades. Further, they said that they want to be loyal and expect “someone who is loyal.” None of the respondents could think of a bad time with their friends.

This loyalty and trust they have with their friends is also reflected in their behaviors with brands. For instance, the third respondent said “I have been using Irish Spring soap, Spiker hair gel and Old Spice deodorant forever. To change I would probably have to discontinue what I am currently using”. Similarly, when asked how long the respondent has been using a brand, the second respondent answered: “I have been using Paul Mitchell shampoo and Old Spice deodorant for about 5 years now.” This finding supports Proposition 2 that men tend to exhibit product loyalty. They do not switch brands easily once they adopt a brand and are satisfied it.

Shopping Habits

Respondents reported that they prefer to shop for their cosmetics at a location that was convenient especially if they were already present at that location. Specifically, none of them was likely to make a special trip or travel to these locations for their cosmetics: a specialty store, the Internet, or department stores for male cosmetics. For example, the third respondent stated: “I only shop for my grooming needs in Grocery stores or pharmacies. When I purchase groceries or get a medication – I simply buy what I need. As long as I get my brand where I am based.”

Additionally, not only do these respondents change their brands or products as noted above, they also do not actively seek out specialty stores or make a special and separate store trip for

cosmetics. This shopping habit provides additional support for Proposition 2 that men are brand loyal, making it difficult for them to switch brands.

Female Influencer

The potential impact of a female influencer is considerable in the purchase of male cosmetics. This came in two different ways; (a) men either purchase the products that are used in the home by their spouses or girlfriends, or (b) women can suggest finding a new product to use. The second respondent's thoughts are the following:

“I shower and wash my face. I also use my girlfriend's moisturizer when seasons change and my skin gets dry.”

When it came to the decision on moisturizing, the men deferred to their girlfriends or spouses to make the brand decision. For example, the third respondent mentioned that he also used “the moisturizer his wife buys,” and he would change brands if “my wife ...wanted something changed.” Therefore, this finding supports Proposition 3 that men are open to switching brands if there is a female influence.

Below we mention other themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews when discussing ideas of masculinity and the role models that influenced them.

Additional Themes

Ideas of Masculinity

Despite the demographic differences, all three respondents described masculinity very similarly. With repeated ideas of rationality, strong mentality, and confidence, these men felt they are expected to be calm and practical. Since all of the men are in relationships, most of the time this was put in contrast to women who are emotional. The first respondent stated:

“Mental toughness is important because if you are mentally weak then life is an uphill battle... confidence is important because a lack of confidence shows a lack of character...[and] rational is important because being emotional is a female or feminine quality.”

The second respondent similarly responded:

“Confidence is important to take control of situations and be strong for others when they are unsure or scared. If my girlfriend is freaking out about something, I always try to slow her down, and help her understand how it's not the end of the world... to be a strong, smart and able to take care of any problem or situation that may arise.”

Lastly, the third respondent echoed these themes saying:

“A man has to be strong and stable not physically, but mentally strong because of the role of men in a family. It falls on the man to shoulder responsibility to protect his family... stable and confident and rational because I think it’s a male quality to anchor a family and support them.”

Role Models

Another theme that arose for the respondents was that their fathers were their main role models. The characteristics that their fathers had are qualities that the participants value. The first respondent stated: “my dad [was my role model] because he is rational, thoughtful, selfless, hardworking, smart.” While the second respondent similarly answered: “My father. Courteous, intelligent, confident and a problem solver.” The third respondent also mentioned: “My father. Because he is who I aspire to be.” The ideas of problem solver, rational, selfless, and smart were all values of masculinity. The fathers taught their children what being a man was and why the participants associate many of the ideas their fathers taught to masculinity.

Managerial Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

This paper has important implications for marketers. By exploring and gaining an understanding of male consumers’ perceptions of cosmetics, managers could effectively combat the hard-to-break-into male cosmetics market. This market has been particularly difficult to break into and it is our hope that our in-depth research and detailed insights on how males view cosmetics will guide managers into arriving at convincing rationale and positioning bases to launch their products.

Another important implication is that since the men rely on the Internet for research, getting the brand name out through these sites will start to build credibility. Additional insights on brand building are finding ways to build out those personal recommendations from friends for their brands.

Managers could also focus on finding the best way to reach the men where they shop and how they find out about new brands will help win this target market. Results of our research indicate that men tend to look for cosmetics in stores that are easily accessible and convenience based. Thus, emphasizing on placing products in specialty stores is counterproductive and may not help the bottom lines and reaching out to a majority of the population.

Selling in grocery stores and pharmacies, advertising on key Internet sites, and finding ways to get word of mouth or recommendations from friends to direct them to these shopping locations and then to the respective brands will be needed to launch a successful brand. For example, “Brand X – now available at Walgreens is recommended as great for after shave cuts by Facebook friend A.” Finally, it may be prudent to target the significant others’ as brand ambassadors as they determine the brand and purchase decisions of men. There could also be a potential to market these brands to women as influencers in men’s purchasing decisions.

Through the results of this study, recommendations for further research include studying the male teenage market (ages 14-19). It will also be worthwhile to investigate brand loyalty and strategies aimed at attracting males at a younger age before they transition into their adult

personal care product. Furthermore, another study taking women into consideration when advertising and marketing and keeping in mind the women who make the purchases for the men in their lives may provide beneficial insight into the male cosmetic research.

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