

## Chapter 11

### **'5 ways to give your skin a fresh workout': Semiotized and mediatized 'consumer masculinity' in UK branding and advertising for men's skincare products**

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#### **1. Introduction**

The facial skincare market has traditionally been dominated by products for women (often discursively highlighted by the adjunct *for men* on the packaging of products targeted at male consumers). This is due to the longstanding cultural ideology that women's value lies in their physical attractiveness, rather than their intellectual worth (Johnson 2008). While men have arguably not been subject to the same kinds of judgements of physical appearance that women have, the growth of male grooming markets across the globe suggests that the pressure for men to engage in "aesthetic labour" (Banet-Weiser 2017) is increasing. The UK is one of seven global "boom markets" in men's toiletries (Allgaier 2019) and, according to Statista, the men's facial skincare market in the UK was worth £69.8 million in 2020. The size of the global men's facial skincare market, and the UK's prominence within it, necessitates closer critical attention to how male consumers are persuaded to buy into the health claims of these products.

Existing research on beauty and skincare advertising shows that advertising texts present 'problems' and offer 'solutions' in gendered ways (e.g. Coupland 2007; Harrison 2008, 2012; Ringrow 2016), but there is less work that gives critical attention to products in the male grooming market, and the health implications of commodified gender representations in skincare advertising also remain under-researched. However, this is an important intellectual endeavour, since constructions of 'commodified masculinity' have the potential to impact negatively on men's body image in the pursuit of unrealistic standards of skincare. This is particularly the case in the context of a neoliberal capitalist culture which places the burden of responsibility on individuals for making the right choices to improve their own physical health and appearance, or what Elias et al. (2017: 347) refer to as "aesthetic entrepreneurship".

To interrogate how this 'aesthetic labour' is semiotized and mediatized, this chapter offers a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the product packaging for two of the bestselling men's skincare brands from 2020, L'Oréal Men Expert and NIVEA Men, alongside advertorials from the UK online version of *Men's Health* magazine, using concepts from social semiotics (van Leeuwen 2005; Ledin and Machin 2020) and gendered advertising (Cheong and Kaur 2015; Ringrow 2016). This allows for an analysis of both how product

branding targets different types of male consumers, and how such representations are mediatized for the purposes of selling images of the ideal male body.

Through my Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What skincare-related 'problems' and 'solutions' are evident in the packaging for NIVEA Men and L'Oréal Men Expert moisturiser products, and the advertorial content of *Men's Health* magazine?
2. What health claims are made in the texts, and how are these constructed through visual and verbal means?
3. How do semiotic and verbal choices conform to or challenge normative masculine ideals in the promotion of 'Commodified/Consumer Masculinity'?

The analysis section addresses these questions by first establishing the different kinds of 'problems' and 'solutions' on offer in the product packaging and magazine advertorials, including how these are textually realised through different semiotic resources (see subsections 4.1 and 4.2). I then consider the specifically gendered nature of different health claims being made in the packaging and advertorial datasets, including how semiotic materials contribute to the construction of 'Consumer Masculinity' (cf. references to 'Consumer Femininity', Talbot 2010; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Ringrow 2016, section 4.3). I then conclude with a discussion of the implications of gendered health claims in advertising and marketing of skincare products for men, and some final observations and reflections for future research into the intersections between 'consumer masculinity' and health messaging in critical linguistics (section 5).

## **2. Consumer masculinity and gendered advertising**

This chapter takes 'consumer masculinity' as a central theoretical model for framing my analysis of semiotic choices in the dataset. Rosenmann et al. (2018: 258) define 'consumer masculinity' as an ideology in which "proper masculinity is established, communicated and validated through consumption". Consumer masculinity is also typified by 'metrosexual' sensibilities – appeals to the urban, heterosexual man who unabashedly consumes health and beauty products and services to achieve the ideal healthy body; pursuits that are typically associated with women or gay men (Simpson 1994). Metrosexuality is therefore associated with a feminising of masculinity, which has the potential to challenge hegemonic ideals (Hall 2015).

Existing work on the semiotics of advertising for male grooming products focuses on how the feminine associations of vanity are negotiated in branding and advertising of products

for men, establishing how marketing strategies attempt to appeal to distinct gendered audiences. This research has demonstrated how making successful appeals to male audiences often involves emphasising the inferiority of products for women (Coupland 2007; del Saz-Rubio 2019; Harrison 2008). A number of studies have also pointed out that adverts for male grooming aids are imbricated in what Harrison (2008: 56) refers to as the “‘push-pull’ effect – a ‘push to make men more aware and critical of their faces and bodies in order to promote sales while, at the same time, respecting the ‘pull’ of values identified as traditionally male” (see e.g. Cheng and Kaur 2015; Coupland 2007; del Saz-Rubio 2019; Harrison 2008). Advertising and marketing of skincare products for men therefore has to negotiate the balance between appeals to beauty and appeals to function, since the pursuit of aesthetic ideals is perceived as an inherently feminine endeavour.

In this chapter I draw influence from Cheong and Kaur’s (2015) multimodal analysis of branding and marketing of L’Oréal Paris and L’Oréal Men Expert (LME) cleansers. The authors observe how the men’s version of the cleanser invokes a discourse of expertise in order to disassociate from the feminine connotations of luxury and aesthetic of the brand name for the women’s product, since ‘Paris’ in ‘L’Oréal Paris’ connotes high fashion and luxury, concepts that are conventionally associated with femininity. Skincare products and cosmetics are not necessary for survival, yet in the world of marketing, “needs and functions are masculine, luxury is feminine” (McIntyre 2011: 349). LME therefore has to dispense with feminine luxury and aesthetics in favour of “masculine expertise”, since consuming skincare products can only be considered legitimate if they fulfil a rational purpose. This observation is certainly borne out in the data collected for the present study: my analysis below demonstrates how health messaging in skincare products and advertising is a primary tactic for persuading the consumer that there *is* a survival need for male grooming products. The focus on health-related functions in the marketing of LME and NIVEA moisturisers in my dataset is arguably a mechanism for avoiding charges of ‘metrosexuality’ or ‘effeminacy’, by obfuscating any overt attention to aesthetics.

Research on the discursive construction of gender in magazine advertising has also shown how fragmented body part vocabulary serves as a key index of commodified femininity and masculinity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Jeffries 2007; Motschenbacher 2009; Ringrow 2016). For example, Motschenbacher’s post-structuralist analysis of gendered advertising language in *Cosmopolitan* (a lifestyle magazine for women) and *Men’s Health* (a men’s lifestyle publication) demonstrates how particular lexical items, such as ‘eyelash’ and ‘cuticle’, despite not being inherently gendered on a lexical level (that is, the semantic component [+male] or [+female] is not part of the denotative scope of these terms), tend to only occur in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, while meronyms of ‘muscle’ only feature in *Men’s Health*. Thus, while most people have eyelashes, muscles, and cuticles, these are *socially* gendered as masculine or feminine.

Of most relevance to the present study is Ringrow's (2016) work on constructions of Commodified Femininity in French and UK magazine cosmetics advertisements. Ringrow (2016) also discusses the gendering effects of language choices in her data, for example in the use of 'sensual' lexis in the descriptions of product qualities, actions and effects, which results in sexualised imagery (such as advertising for '**irresistible**' face cream, or lipstick which '**embraces** your lips', Ringrow 2016: 64-65). In addition to making the link between Commodified Femininity and sexualised representations, Ringrow also observes the rise of a discourse of 'cosmeceuticals' (a blend of 'cosmetics' and 'pharmaceuticals') in cosmetics advertising. 'Cosmeceuticals' are "cosmetics with drug-like benefits" (US Food and Drug Administration; cited in Ringrow 2016: 82): products containing 'bioactive' ingredients, such as 'alpha hydroxy acid', an exfoliant that removes the surface layer of skin (Ringrow 2016: 82). There is an increase in scientific language that implies specific health benefits such as reduced wrinkles or hydrated skin in the advertising and marketing for skincare products. This is also borne out in my data, where scientific-sounding lexis forms a major field of vocabulary in the salient terms in the *MH* dataset, and is also prevalent in the key ingredients listed in the packaging for moisturisers in the *LME* dataset.

In conducting my analysis, I was particularly interested in investigating any textual evidence for the gendering of the body through the health claims in the product advertising and marketing. I was also interested in whether there was any evidence for some of the features identified in studies of advertising and marketing strategies for female products. For example, the objectification of men's bodies for the 'female appraising gaze' (Coupland 2007: 37), or the 'pathologization' of the ageing process (e.g. Coupland 2003, 2007; Ringrow 2016), whereby ageing is represented as a 'problem' in need of fixing.

### 3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach taken in this chapter. I begin by explaining the utility of a social semiotic approach to analysing gendered discourses in advertising and marketing texts. I then explain my processes of data collection, which is then followed by a discussion of Ringrow's (2016) model for analysing gendered Problem-Solution patterns in female cosmetics advertising and how it can be adapted for the domain of male grooming products.

#### ***Multimodality, discourse and gender***

Analysing how semiotic techniques used in product packaging can attract consumers, as well as how these consumer messages are mediatized, is an important endeavour, because products themselves are artefacts of persuasion: verbal and visual elements combine together in these texts and encourage consumers to buy into the idea that they offer

'solutions' to their skincare 'problems'. Taking a multimodal approach to analysing the gendering of health messaging in skincare product marketing is therefore important for gaining an appreciation of how visual or verbal signs accrue their meaning potential in relation to other semiotic elements (Machin and Ledin 2020: 5).

The social semiotic view of multimodality, influenced by Hallidayan linguistics, is interested in understanding the potential for "actions and artefacts", or "semiotic resources" (van Leeuwen 2005: 3) to communicate social or cultural meanings. The meaning-potential of different combinations of semiotic resources can be seen to solidify into 'discourses'. Observing gendered discourses therefore necessitates attention to how visual and textual resources combine in the production of 'common-sense' understandings of gender.

The gendered design of packaging on skincare products also forms part and parcel of what Fairclough (1992) refers to as the "technologization" of discourse, whereby the gendered meanings of particular aspects of visual content have become codified into a fairly coherent inventory of 'masculine' and 'feminine' significations. For example, there are strongly gendered cultural associations with the colours pink and blue (broadly connoting femininity and masculinity, respectively), and in general dark hues tend to signify a more masculine aesthetic, with pastel shades associated with feminine identifications. While the precise nature of gendered meanings of particular semiotic resources will shift according to their specific "contextualisations and configurations" (Machin and Ledin 2020: 32), there is a relatively coherent cultural inventory of signs that consumer brands draw from in order to target consumers of different genders.

### ***Data collection***

The first phase of the project involved collecting skincare products for analysis. NIVEA Men and L'Oréal Men Expert were chosen, on the basis that they are market-leading face cream brands in the UK, and were ranked as the top two leading face cream brands for men in 2020 (Statista, 2021). I then navigated to the retail websites for each brand and selected all the available facial moisturisers for each range, ranked by most popular (according to the website filters). Restricting the search to one particular product type allowed for comparisons in the kinds of health claims and visual-verbal choices in the marketing of one particular product, the moisturiser. This product type was chosen as the object of analysis because both brands produce moisturising creams, and moisturisers constitute the biggest proportion of the product range for both brands. This indicates that of all the skincare products sold by these brands, moisturisers are considered their 'hero' product: the one which attracts the largest number of customers. Therefore, the branding and marketing for these products will likely have the greatest reach. This resulted in the dataset shown in Table 1, which comprises twelve NIVEA MEN and thirteen LME product images.

Table 1: List of NIVEA MEN and L'Oréal Men Expert product packaging images analysed.

Rank	Text ID	NIVEA Men	Text ID	L'Oréal Men Expert
1	N1	Sensitive Pro Menmalist Face Cream	LME1	Hydra Energetic Daily Moisturiser
2	N2	Sensitive Pro Ultra-Calmng Moisturiser	LME2	Vitalift Double Action Moisturiser
3	N3	Crème	LME3	Pure and Matte Anti-Shine Gel Moisturiser
4	N4	Anti-age Hyaluron Face Moisturising Cream SPF 15	LME4	Recharging Moisturiser
5	N5	Anti-Age Hyaluron Face Moisturising Gel	LME5	Hydra Power Refreshing Moisturiser
6	N6	Protect and Care Rehydrating Moisturiser	LME6	Barber Club Short Beard Moisturiser
7	N7	Protect and Care Intensive Moisturising Cream	LME7	Pure Power Anti-Spot Daily Moisturiser
8	N8	Sensitive Intensive Moisturising Cream Gel	LME8	Pure Carbon Anti-Spot Exfoliating Daily Face Cream
9	N9	Skin Energy Moisturising Face Cream	LME9	Vialift Anti Wrinkle Gel Moisturiser
10	N10	Deep Matte Finish Moisturiser	LME10	Vita Lift 5 Anti Ageing Daily Moisturiser
11	N11	Sensitive Stubble Moisturiser	LME11	Hydra Energetic Anti-Shine Moisturiser
12	N12	Sensitive Cooling Face Moisturiser	LME12	Hydra Sensitive Moisturiser
13	N/A	N/A	LME13	Wrinkle Decrease Moisturiser

To complement the analysis of semiotic choices in the marketing for popular face creams, I also conducted an analysis of the mediatization of health messaging for these products. For this part of the analysis, I chose to analyse articles featuring men’s skincare products in *Men’s Health* magazine. This publication was chosen because it is a leading men’s lifestyle magazine specifically concerned with topics relating to health and fitness for a male audience, and so is well suited to the aims of this study. To find relevant articles for analysis, I used the search terms ‘skincare’ and ‘grooming’ and collected relevant texts published between 2020 and 2021. Articles needed to address some aspect of skincare (bodily or facial) and include mention of specific brands/products to be included in the data. This search retrieved 16 articles over the two-year period, which include a combination of ‘listicles’ (such as ‘5 easy grooming upgrades to make right now’) and advertorials – editorial articles that contain listings for products with accompanying marketing text.

Text ID	Article title	Date of publication
MH1	John Lewis has launched a male make-up counter	15/01/2020
MH2	6 grooming essentials you should never skip post-gym	04/02/2020
MH3	12 Quick Tips to Help You Look and Feel Younger	20/02/2020
MH4	The best men's grooming kits to give this Father's Day	05/06/2020
MH5	Everything you need to know about breakouts	17/06/2020
MH6	Face masks help guys look younger overnight	01/07/2020
MH7	A Grooming Expert's Three-Step Plan to Mask Sleep Loss	20/08/2020
MH8	4 Eco-Friendly Grooming Brands to Buy Today	01/12/2020
MH9	5 easy grooming upgrades to make right now	04/12/2020
MH10	A Dermatologist Details the Perfect Post-workout Grooming Routine	15/01/2021
MH11	5 Ways to Fix Lockdown Skin Problems	27/01/2021
MH12	5 ways to give a skin a fresh workout	05/03/2021
MH13	The right grooming product for your skin type	31/03/2021
MH14	Yes, Guys Can Wear Makeup – and Here Are 5 Products to Get You Started	04/11/2021

MH15	These Are The 10 Best Body Moisturisers For Every Skin Type	09/11/2021
MH16	Every Man Needs Hand Cream. These Are the Ones That Actually Work	14/12/2021

Table 2: List of *Men's Health* advertorials analysed

These articles often include disclaimers at the outset, such as “We earn a commission for products purchased through some links in this article” (MH5). These texts are therefore implicitly signalled as a form of advertising, but the article copy – appearing in prose form, and written from the (friendly, informal) point of view of an individual – is designed to disguise their ‘real’ aim of selling products via affiliate links. These more covert advertising strategies represent another reason why it is important to interrogate these sorts of ‘lifestyle’ media texts.

***Analytical approach: A multi-modal approach to analysing problem-solution patterns in gendered advertising and marketing***

In thinking about how male target audiences are persuaded to consume skincare products, this chapter draws particular influence from Ringrow’s (2016) work on the analysis of problem-solution patterning in advertising for cosmetics aimed at female audiences. She adapts Hoey’s (1983) linguistic framework for Problem-Solution patterns to incorporate elements relevant specifically to cosmetics advertising discourse. It is my contention that these categories are equally applicable to advertising and marketing for male grooming products, but may result in slightly different gendered effects.



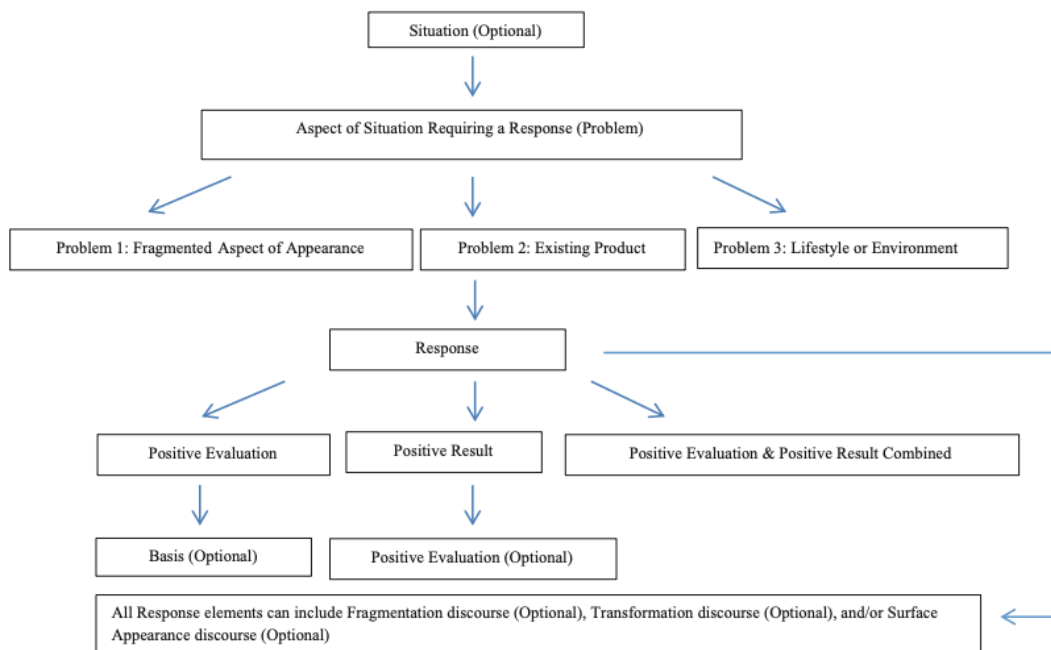


Fig. 1: Problem-Solution pattern for cosmetics advertising discourse (reproduced from Ringrow 2016: 37).

The schema begins with an optional **situation** (such as ‘you work hard outdoors every day’), followed by the **aspect of the situation requiring a response**. This constitutes the ‘Problem’ that needs to be addressed (such as ‘leading to dry skin on your face’). Ringrow shows how in cosmetics advertising, the ‘Problem’ constitutes one of three forms: 1) an aspect of the fragmented body that is in need of improvement (as in the case of ‘dry skin’); 2) issues with an existing product on the market (indicated by statements like ‘non-greasy application’); or 3) some aspect of lifestyle or environment (such as the elements or the stresses of work).

After the ‘Problem’, comes the ‘Response’ (Solution). Ringrow proposes that these can take the form of a Positive Evaluation (such as ‘**ultra** calming moisturiser’), Positive Result (‘**nourishes and strengthens** dry skin’) or a combination of the two. In modelling the different forms that Responses can take, Ringrow distinguishes between ‘Surface Appearance discourse’, involving verbal synonyms of ‘looks’ (e.g. ‘wrinkles **appear** reduced’); ‘Transformation discourse’, consisting of more material propositions (e.g. ‘**reduces** wrinkles’) and/or ‘Fragmentation of body parts’ (e.g. ‘softens **rough beard**’).

To establish gendered Problem-Solution patterns in the product packaging for LME and NIVEA Men moisturisers, I analysed the meaning potential of the following multimodal features:

- Brand name/logo
- Brand image (use of colour, patterns and typography)

- Classification of product series
- Description of key ingredients
- Description of key functions and effects

My analysis draws influence from Cheong and Kaur's (2015) study of the visual design of product packaging for L'Oréal Paris and L'Oréal Men Expert products, as well as Machin and Ledin's (2020) social semiotic approach to multimodality for analysing visual elements of the product packaging. I also utilise the corpus linguistic method of keywords analysis for establishing salient patterns of description in the advertorials. Underpinning Ledin and Machin's social semiotic toolkit is the idea that 'semiotic resources' communicate ideas, how they convey attitudes or moods in relation to those ideas, and how elements interact to present a coherent whole. The analysis of brand names in the product packaging involved looking at the use of morphology and semantic meaning to establish ideational meanings. For the brand image, I considered how each brand used colour, including both the 'associations' (ideological values) and 'features' of colour (such as: degree of saturation, modulation, brightness and differentiation); images and patterns (such as the use of photographic images versus diagrams; angular vs curved lines) and typography (including weight, slope, curvature and regularity of letterforms). Analysing descriptions of key ingredients, functions and effects involves establishing which 'active ingredients' are foregrounded, and what claims the product makes concerning epidermic changes in providing the 'solutions' to the particular ailments being proposed.

To establish problem-solution patterns in the *MH* data, I used the word list and keyword list tools in Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al 2014) to identify salient lexical 'triggers' for conditions, and products being promoted as solutions. I first established salient vocabulary themes in the data by calculating a list of the top 150 keywords (words that appear more frequently in one dataset compared with another (usually larger) reference corpus). Sketch Engine uses the 'simple maths' method to calculate keywords, which establishes how many more times word X appears in corpus A compared with corpus B (Kilgariff 2009). Keywords are then ranked according to keyness score, an indication of saliency. To aid comparability, I used the EnTenTen20 web corpus as a reference dataset, which is a 36 billion-word English corpus made up of texts collected from the internet between 2019 and 2021. I then coded the keywords thematically according to their semantic profiles in context. This approach will not have captured all instances of relevant strategies, but provides an indication of the kinds of semantic patterns which characterise these texts. It also offers a useful starting point for considering how problem-solution patterns are gendered in similar or different ways to the product packaging, as well as to the findings of existing work on female cosmetics advertising.

#### **4. Findings**

This section provides an analysis of semiotic devices used to construct ‘problem-solution’ patterns in the data. In doing so, I consider the kinds of health claims being made and how these invoke ‘consumer masculinity’. I also consider how these differ from the sorts of problem-solution patterns found in advertising for female cosmetics (Jeffries 2007; Ringrow 2016), as well as those reported in existing work on gendered representations in male grooming discourse (Coupland 2003, 2007; Cheong and Kaur 2015).

***Problem-Solution patterns in product packaging for LME and NIVEA For Men***

In the product packaging data, ‘problems’ are often implicitly presupposed in the names and descriptions of key functions and effects of the products, which constitute the ‘solutions’. For example, product names such as “anti-fatigue moisturiser” present a Response (the product) to the implied Problem of (in this case) tired skin (we might interpret this as an example of Problem type 3: a result of lifestyle factors). Claims about key functions and effects can be seen as more explicit solutions to implied Problems. For example, “reduces the appearance of wrinkles” (LME9) represents a clear proposition of what the product does, with the Problem of ageing skin presupposed by the definite noun phrase “the appearance of wrinkles”. Tables 3 and 4 provide examples of the different Problem types implicit in the packaging data, and the different Solution elements evident for remedying these.

<b>Problem type requiring a Response</b>	<b>Specific issues</b>	<b>Number of instances (raw frequency)</b>	<b>Examples of semiotic resources communicating Problems</b>
Fragmented aspects of appearance	Dry/dehydrated/ageing skin; wrinkles	17	Textual references to key functions e.g. “reduces the appearance of wrinkles”
Existing Product	Greasy feel	1	“instant absorption”
Lifestyle or Environment	Irritated skin (from shaving); tired skin; stressed skin	11	e.g. “soothes discomfort”; “instant wake up effect”; “skin stress minimising”

Table 3: Problem types requiring a Response in the NIVEA and LME skincare product packaging

Unlike in the advertorials, the product packaging does not present many Solutions to Problems based on the shortcomings of existing moisturisers (see section 4.2 below), with the majority of Problems consisting of aspects of the skin requiring treatment (such as signs of ageing and dehydrated skin) and, secondarily, lifestyle factors (namely irritation from shaving). Many of the specific problems involving fragmented aspects of appearance are, for the most part, very similar to those found in research on product advertising aimed at

women, including ageing: six of the products (NIVEA = 2, LME = 4) are designed to tackle the problem of ageing skin, signalled through the expression of key functions and effects such as “targets wrinkles” (LME13). However, there are some important differences in the kinds of lifestyle or environmental sources of skin issues: problems relating to skin irritation from shaving, a lack of energy and ‘stressed’ skin (e.g. “soothes discomfort”; “instant wake up effect”; “skin stress minimising”) do not appear at all on the packaging for L’Oréal Paris moisturisers marketed at female audiences<sup>i</sup>. This suggests that these problems are intended to be particular causes of concern for men.

In terms of Responses, these are more likely to involve semiotic resources communicating a Positive Result. These can be signalled both linguistically and visually, as Table 4 below indicates:

Response ('solution') type	Examples of semiotic resources	Number of instances (raw frequency)
Positive Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperbolic intensifiers in product names and key functions e.g. ‘<b>ultra</b> calming moisturiser’</li> <li>• Photographic images of key ingredients that serve as the product’s unique selling point</li> </ul>	6
Positive Result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-modifying adjectives in product names e.g. ‘<b>Protect</b> and <b>care</b> Rehydrating Moisturiser’</li> <li>• Key functions and effects: e.g. ‘long-lasting moisture’</li> <li>• Colours signifying positive effects e.g. energy (orange, yellow); hydration (blue); healing (green)</li> <li>• Patterns and typefaces e.g. diagonal lines evoking energy; bold types implying strength</li> </ul>	23
Surface appearance discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key functions and effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘visibly <b>healthy looking</b> skin’</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	6
Transformation discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key functions and effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘visibly <b>reduces</b> deep wrinkles and <b>firms</b> the skin’; <b>revitalises</b> tired skin’</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	9

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawings e.g. target symbol to imply combatting wrinkles; stop clock indicating youthful effects</li> </ul>	
Fragmentation of the body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key functions and effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “softens <b>rough beard</b>”</li> <li>○ “nourishes and strengthens <b>dry skin</b>”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	6

Table 4: Response types in the NIVEA and LME skincare product packaging

It is perhaps unsurprising that Positive Results are the most common response type, given that the aims of product packaging are to persuade the consumer as to how purchasing the product will offer material improvements to their appearance. Similarly, we would expect elements of ‘transformation discourse’, emphasising material impacts on the skin, to be prevalent. Interestingly, the transformational nature of these products are sometimes mitigated via hedging or ‘Surface Appearance Discourse’ (Ringrow 2016), which takes the form of the verb ‘look’ or appear’, as in: “groomed **look** and skin comfort” (N1); “reduces **appearance** of wrinkles” (LME9). This mitigation of the material effects of products is a common strategy in advertising, to avoid accusations of misleading customers (Coupland 2003: 139-40; Ringrow 2016: 40).

Positive Evaluations of the products are evident in the use of attitudinal premodifiers and intensifiers emphasising positive effects (e.g. NIVEA’s Anti-Age Hyaluron gel ‘hydrates **intensively**’ and LME’s Pure & Matte moisturising gel has a ‘**lasting** matte effect’). The visual promotion of particular ingredients and key functions can also be seen as forms of Positive Evaluation and Positive Results, since they are effectively visual representations of a ‘unique selling point’ for the product. For example, the LME packaging often includes photographic images of key ingredients in the background to imply the natural sources of ingredients (for example, French vine on LME’s Vita Lift Anti-Ageing gel; a hemp plant leaf on NIVEA’s Sensitive Pro Ultra-calming moisturiser; and a coffee bean on NIVEA’s Skin Energy face cream). Textual descriptions of key functions and effects are also often displayed alongside small line drawings, which constitute markers of Transformation Discourse; a drawing of a stopwatch on LME’s Vital Lift Anti-ageing Revitalising Gel, and a drawing of a small battery with a water droplet inside on LME’s Hydra Energetic Anti-fatigue Moisturising Pot. Some of these drawings are intended to suggest scientific legitimacy: for instance, NIVEA’s Anti-age Hyaluron Gel and face cream products (N4 and N5) feature a hexagon encased in a chain of molecules, evoking the chemical make-up of ingredients, and therefore implying the proposed effects are evidence-based.



Fig. 2: NIVEA MEN Sensitive pro Ultra-calming moisturiser (N2) (source: boots.com via Google, reproduced according to Google’s Creative Commons license)



Fig. 3: LME Hydra Energetic Recharging Moisturiser (LME4) (Source: amazon.co.uk via Google, reproduced according to Google’s Creative Commons license)

Aside from images, colour palettes also communicate transformative effects and the natural sources of ingredients that achieve this: N9, LME1, LME4 and LME11 all make use of yellow and orange hues to imply the energy-giving properties of the products; green suggests the presence of natural plant extracts in N2 and LME12, as well as healing effects in N2, N8, N11, LME7 and LME12; and blue connotes natural sources of water in LME5, LME11 and LME13. The use of orange to imply energy, activity or ‘excitement’ has been noted by other scholars in visual communication (Akçay, Dalgin and Bhatnagar 2011; Kress and van Leeuwen 2002: 349; Mora 2009; van Leeuwen 2021: 81). Blue and green hues also symbolise calm and healing properties – green in particular is found ubiquitously in the textual domains of both nature and medicine (Lacy 1996). While the “symbolic value” of colours differs depending on their specific ‘contextualisations (Ledin and Machin 2020: 32), using similar colour palettes across products with similar effects provides a level of textual cohesion (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002: 349).

Textual indicators of Positive Results and Transformation Discourse on the packaging include product names, “measures of verifiability” (Ringrow 2016: 89), and claims with high degrees of specificity. First of all, the morphological processes of compounding and prefixing facilitate the communication of healing properties and other key effects in product names, for instance: lexical compounding (such as ‘Vita Lift’ (a clipping of ‘vitality’ + ‘lift’) and the repeated structure ‘hydra + N or Adj’ (as in ‘hydra energetic’, ‘hydra power’ and hydra

sensitive’)); and the productive use of negative prefix *anti-*, as in ‘anti-fatigue’ or ‘anti-ageing’.

Aside from product names, Positive Results are also communicated via “measures of verifiability” (Ringrow 2016: 89), indicating the degrees of impact/volume of ingredients that are assumed to be desirable or have positive effects. For example, NIVEA’s Skin Energy face cream boasts that it contains ‘caffeine: 100% natural source’, and their Sensitive Pro Ultra Calming moisturiser cites ‘100% plant based hemp seed oil + vitamin E’. The inclusion of these measures indicates either completeness or absence, depending on whether the brand is promoting an ingredient with positive effects, or whether they are boasting the absence of an undesirable element that is assumed to be present in other, competitor products. For example, ‘0% alcohol’ is advertised on LME’s Hydra Sensitive Soothing Daily Moisturiser and NIVEA’s Sensitive Stubble Moisturiser, the assumption being that the presence of alcohol in other after-shave products causes skin irritation. Related to these measures is the notion of specificity of claims: several products specify a number of ailments/signs of a condition that the product remedies (e.g. N11 claims to provide ‘protection against 5 signs of irritation’ and LME10 promises ‘5 actions against signs of ageing’).

### ***Problem-Solution patterns in the Men’s Health advertorials***

Problem-solution patterns in the *MH* data were identified via thematic coding of the top 150 keywords compared with a reference corpus (as described in section 3.4 above). Table 5 displays the resulting thematic categories (raw frequencies of terms are given in parentheses, and words in bold typeface indicate a frequency of 10+ occurrences, to identify higher frequency repeated tokens in each category ).

<b>Thematic category</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Brand/product names	<i>Aesop</i> (6); <i>CeraVe</i> (4); <i>Cicaheel</i> (1); <i>Dove</i> (5); <i>Foreo</i> (3); <i>Kiehl</i> (5); <i>La Roche Posay</i> (2); <i>Lipikar</i> (2); <i>Lubriderm</i> (2); <i>Malin + Goetz</i> (7); <i>MMUK</i> (2); <i>Molton Brown</i> (2); <i>Neutrogena</i> (2); <i>Pitrok</i> (2); <i>replenix</i> (2);
Product type	<i>Antiperspirant</i> (5); <i>balm</i> (4); <i>cleanser</i> (7); <i>concealer</i> (12); <b><i>cream</i></b> (31); <i>deodorant</i> (3); <i>facial</i> (7); <b><i>gel/s</i></b> (13); <i>grooming</i> (16); <i>hydra-gel</i> (1); <i>kit</i> (15); <b><i>lotion</i></b> (14); <i>make-up</i> (5); <b><i>mask/s</i></b> (19); <i>mist</i> (3); <b><i>moisturis(z)er/s</i></b> (44); <i>mouthwash</i> (2); <i>rinse</i> (2); <i>salves</i> (2); <i>sanitiser</i> (2); <b><i>serum/s</i></b> (10); <i>shampoo</i> (8); <i>sunscreen</i> (5); <b><i>wash</i></b> (22); <i>wondermasks</i> (1)
Fragmented body parts	<b><i>beard</i></b> (11); <i>brow</i> (5); <i>complexion</i> (6); <i>cortisol</i> (3); <i>cuticles</i> (2); <b><i>face</i></b> (38); <i>follicle</i> (3); <b><i>hair</i></b> (21); <i>peptides</i> (3); <i>pores</i> (9); <i>sebum</i> (3); <b><i>skin</i></b> (179)

Conditions	<i>acne</i> (21); <b>ageing</b> (10); <i>bacne</i> (2); <i>blackhead</i> (8); <i>bloodshot</i> (3); <i>breakouts</i> (8); <i>chafing</i> (4); <i>comedones</i> (3); <i>dryness</i> (5); <i>flaky</i> (2); <i>flare-ups</i> (2); <i>greasy</i> (5); <i>irritat/ed</i> (8); <i>irritation</i> (6); <i>lesion</i> (4); <i>maskne</i> (3); <b>oily</b> (10); <i>papules</i> (5); <i>pustules</i> (4); <b>spot</b> (18); <b>sweat</b> (12) <i>sweating</i> (5); <i>sweaty</i> (4); <i>unruly</i> (3); <i>whiteheads</i> (5)
Key functions/effects of product	<i>anti-ageing</i> (2); <i>anti-chafing</i> (2); <i>banish</i> (2); <i>blotting</i> (2); <i>cleanses</i> (2); <i>collagen-blasting</i> (1); <i>cruelty-free</i> (2); <i>dermatologically proven</i> (2); <i>exfoliate/ing</i> (5); <i>elasticity</i> (5); <i>formulated</i> (7); <i>fragrance-free</i> (2); <i>gentler</i> (2); <i>hydrate/d</i> (9); <i>hydrating</i> (9); <i>hydration</i> (9); <i>moisturising</i> (7); <i>non-comedogenic</i> (4); <i>nourish/ed</i> (9) <i>nourished-looking</i> (1); <i>oil-free</i> (3); <i>penetrates</i> (2); <i>purifying</i> (2); <b>skincare</b> (16); <i>soothed</i> (2); <i>spreadable</i> (3); <i>tinted</i> (6); <i>travel-friendly</i> (2); <i>unscented</i> (1)
(Key) ingredients	<i>antioxidant</i> (4); <i>b5</i> (3); <i>benzoyl</i> (3); <i>collagen</i> (15); <i>ceramides</i> (3); <i>formulas</i> (7); <i>ginseng</i> (2); <i>glycerin</i> (3); <i>hyaluronic</i> (4); <i>jojoba</i> (2); <i>lutein</i> (2); <i>mint-infused</i> (2); <i>niacinamide</i> (2); <b>paraben/s</b> (14); <i>peroxide</i> (3); <i>Retinol</i> (16); <i>salicylic-acid</i> (2); <i>shea</i> (5); <i>SPF</i> (7); <i>sulfates</i> (3); <i>ylang ylang</i> (2);
Object descriptors	<i>gym</i> (7) <b>grooming</b> (18); <i>three-step</i> (2)
Objects	<i>Gym</i> (1); <i>mask/s</i> (7); <i>menswear</i> (2); <i>workout (gear)</i> (1)
Social actors	<i>Bhanusali</i> (4); <i>Dalley</i> (2); <b>dermatologist/s</b> (10); <i>Komorowski</i> (4); <i>Rodney</i> (5); <i>testers</i> (6)
Social action	<i>banish</i> (2); <b>grooming</b> (13); <i>mask</i> (1); <i>nix</i> (2); <i>post-gym</i> (2); <i>post-workout</i> (2); <i>post-workout-shower</i> (1); <i>sanitising</i> (2); <i>slather</i> (2); <i>wash</i> (4); <i>workout/s</i> (8)
Negative evaluation/effects	<i>downsides</i> (3) <i>unscented</i> (1)

Table 5: Thematic categories of top 150 keywords in MH advertorials

The vocabulary domain of body parts in Table 5 denotes the ‘fragmented aspects of the body’ that are the source of Problems Requiring a Response, as well as the Response elements. ‘Conditions’ contains lexical traces of Problems; ‘key functions/effects’ as well as ‘key ingredients’ constitute the proposed Solutions to Problems. There are other functional categories here that point to some of the other persuasive strategies used by the text producers to encourage the reader to consume the particular products being advertised: the presence of social actors indicates how voices of expertise are drawn on to imply credibility and authenticity. In particular, the term ‘dermatologist/s’ is a functionalisation (van Leeuwen 1996) and implies professional as well as scientific expertise, while the inclusion of ‘testers’ – people who try out different products to assess their efficacy – also gives a sense of scientific credibility to what is essentially advertising copy.



The 'social actions' category demonstrates lexis that is used to characterise the target consumer of the products being advertised, and notable here are the references to exercise (*post-gym, post-workout, workout/s*). The lexemes containing the prefix, *post-* are indicators that the products discussed are intended to be applied in the context of exercise, as in "post-gym skincare routine" (MH2) and "Treat your skin **post-workout** with one of these hydrating body creams" (MH15), as a way of mitigating the supposed negative effects of exercise on the skin: "**Cracked** hands from too much heavy? Gone. **Dry** patches from going the extra mile during your cold morning? Sorted." (MH15).

#### *Fragmented aspects of the male body in MH*

In the 'body parts' field in Table 5, 'skin', 'face' and 'hair' are the most prominent, with lower frequency items consisting mainly of meronyms of the face and skin. The holonym 'skin' is the most prominent item in this field, with 179 tokens. This is to be expected, since a focus on skincare was part of the inclusion criteria for selecting articles for analysis. More interesting is the gendering of terms such as 'beard', 'brow' and 'hair'. 'Beard' is the most obviously gendered here, and most instances of 'beard' (7/12 = 58%) premodify the noun 'oil' to denote a specific product targeted at beard hair, as in: "A good **beard** oil makes all the difference in keeping your furry face looking more Jason Momoa and less Chewbacca." (MH2). However, the lexemes 'brow' and 'hair' also take on masculine connotations in context:

#### **Extract 1:**

The Problem: **Unruly Brows** The fix: Trim any long hairs with scissors. Then smooth every- thing with a **brow** pomade. "Just brushing them up opens the eye area and makes you look more awake," says Komorowski. Gimme **Brow** Volumising eyebrow gel 3g BENEFITSELEFRIDGES.COM £22. (MH14)

#### **Extract 2:**

Dr Vyas explains: "If you're prone to sweating or have a lot of **body hair**, sweat, oils and bacteria can build up and cause flare-ups of conditions such as acne." (MH11)

#### **Extract 3:**

Use the tweezers and facial scissors to tackle those unexpected **nose hairs** or unruly eyebrows and keep nails in good shape with the mini nail clippers. (MH2)

In extract 1, it is interesting to note first of all that the article does not use the more specific term 'eyebrows', as though the abbreviated form downplays the focus on eyes – a notoriously feminised body part in advertising discourse (Motschenbacher 2009: 15). Eyebrows are treated as a separate part of the body requiring treatment

through the use of 'brow' as a classifier for grooming products ('pomade' and 'Volumising eyebrow gel'). The premodifying adjective, 'unruly' in this extract negatively evaluates eyebrows that appear untidy; describing them as 'unruly' also implies a sense of agency (your eyebrows aren't playing by the rules!). However, rather than improving the appearance of the eyebrows themselves, the Positive Result of brushing and using the eyebrow gel is that it will "make you look more awake". Thus, the focus is more on physiological transformation than aesthetic effects. In extracts 2 and 3, 'hair' refers to 'body hair' and 'nose hairs' respectively, which are meronyms of 'hair' that appear much less frequently in women's magazine advertising (Motschenbacher 2009: 14). Therefore, although it is perfectly possible for women to be described as having 'body hair' or 'nose hairs' in advertising discourse, it is presented here as a particular Problem for men, drawing on the (cisnormative) stereotype that men's bodies are much hairier than women's.

*Conditions: Problems requiring a Response in MH*

The 'Conditions' field contains lexical traces of the 'problems' associated with fragmented parts of the body. These Problems requiring a Response include those relating to skin conditions (e.g. *ageing, greasy, dry, flaky*), as well as those which result from lifestyle/environmental factors (*irritated, irritation*). This largely mirrors the Problems identified in the product packaging, where products offered an antidote to the stressors of shaving, excess oil and the ageing process. In addition to forms of IRRITATE, 'chafing' and forms of SWEAT are also gendered indices: 'chafing' refers to parts of the skin that rub together and become sore, which in the *MH* data is used exclusively in the context of exercise, while SWEAT is also used in the context of gym workouts:

**Extract 4:**

**Sweating** is perfectly normal – it's the body's way of regulating your temperature when you overheat. But excessive **sweating**, something that affects many of us who frequently exercise to an intense level, can have its downsides. "Excessive **sweating** can trigger skin issues like acne, and tight, non-breathable activewear will only make it worse," warns Dr Vyas. (MH11)

The target consumers of this magazine (and therefore the products being advertised in it) are men who accrue skin conditions as a negative by-product of an otherwise commendable health and fitness regime. As well as exercise, there are lifestyle/environmentally induced skin conditions that have occurred as a result of the mandate for people to stay indoors during the covid pandemic, such as 'lockdown skin problems', 'unruly' beard growth, and 'maskne' – that is, acne occurring as a result of wearing face coverings. The description of unwanted hair growth is interesting, since both the Problem and Solution use discursive

techniques that imply a negotiating of hegemonically masculine features (such as testosterone-inducing hair growth, and 'natural' aggression) :

**Extract 5:**

Men's Beard Oil combines a luxurious blend of almond, jojoba and grapeseed oils to condition, to **soften** and **tame unruly** beard hairs, simply by working 2-3 drops through the length of your beard. (MH2)

The product's key ingredients (evaluated positively via the rather sensual descriptor, 'luxurious') *soften* but also *tame* the beard hairs, which denotes the Positive Result. The combination of negative evaluation describing the problem ('unruly') and the metaphorical process 'tame' evoke wildness and constitute the transformational effects of the product. These lexical choices thus imbue beard hairs with a sensibility of natural strength and aggression.

*Key ingredients, functions and effects: 'Solutions' to 'Problems'*

Lexis in the 'key functions and effects' category in Table 4 denotes the Response elements ('Solutions') to the aforementioned Problems Requiring a Response. The kinds of solutions evident are more often related to providing hydration, as well as 'nourishing' the skin. This choice of verb to describe key effects is particularly interesting, because it implies the nutritional value of the products being described, as the following examples demonstrate:

**Extract 6:**

It contains exfoliating grains and moisturising technology to get to the source of common men's skin problems while still keeping the skin **nourished**. (MH13)

**Extract 7:**

It's a good idea to use a **nourishing** plant-based body wash like Dove's Men+Care Clean Comfort body and face wash, which gently cleanses, instantly hydrates and strengthens skin. (MH11)

**Extract 8:**

This balm-textured hand cream sinks into skin in mere seconds, delivering a **nourishing** dose of vitamins alongside moisture-magnet glycerin. (MH16)

**Extract 9:**

All found it softened any rough patches, leaving 93% with more **nourished-looking** skin. (MH15)

Extract 6 highlights the product's effectiveness in 'getting to the source' of skin problems (so acts tough) while not compromising on care (but does so gently). This is also evident in extract 7, where the advertised face wash both 'gently cleanses' and 'strengthens' skin. The nutritional value of the advertised cream is also emphasised in extract 8, via the premodifier 'nourishing', combined with lexis carrying rather medicalised connotations ('delivering', 'dose'). These extracts also illustrate what Ringrow (2016: 82) refers to as 'scientised' discourse, where the combination of scientific-sounding lexis (e.g. 'moisturising technology') and description of active ingredients ('exfoliating grains', 'vitamins', 'glycerin', 'plant-based') give legitimacy to the key functions claimed. Extract 9 demonstrates evidence of Surface Appearance Discourse: skin only *appears* to be nourished (rather than having undergone tangible changes at the epidermic level), but the quantification of testers' perceptions of the product being trialled gives weight to their observations.

Although they don't appear as keywords in table 5 above, there are also other instances of the verbs 'look' and 'feel' serving as lexical traces for Surface Appearance Discourse, as in: "keep it **looking healthier** for longer" (MH9) and "Night masks can make your skin **feel** and **look** better" (MH13). Even though these aren't permanent effects, arguably what is implied in these sorts of examples is that the appearance or perception of improvement is as valid as more material changes to the skin.

The technical or scientific-sounding nature of key effects evident in extracts 4-7 is also reflected in keywords such as 'non-comedogenic' (referring to the absence of ingredients that are said to clog pores), as well as higher frequency key ingredients such as 'retinol' (linked to the reduction of fine lines and wrinkles) and 'parabens' (said to prevent bacteria growth). The premodifying compound adjectival descriptor, 'dermatologically-proven' is another example of scientific ratification as a persuasive strategy, as in: "The **dermatologically proven** and sulfate-free from Dove Men+Care is tough on sweat but not on skin" (MH11). Foregrounding the presence of chemical substances in the products (however small the actual levels of the ingredients are), and emphasising rigorous testing procedures, are common tactics for imbuing the products with scientific, even medical credibility.

Key effects are also communicated via the negative prefix *anti-*, which implies a combatting effect, as in: 'anti-ageing' and 'anti-chafing'. The lexeme 'banish' also implies an aggressive attack on particular Problems, as in: "Banish unwanted flaky, dry skin" (MH15) and "is perfect for banishing dry, flaky skin" (MH13). The implications of these sorts of combative constructions will be discussed in terms of masculine discourses in the following section.

### ***Commodified masculinity in the health claims of product marketing and advertising***

There are a number of visual resources employed by the marketers of LME and NIVEA products that evoke stereotypically gendered meanings. All of the packaging makes use of colours that are stereotypically associated with masculinity, consisting mainly of blacks, greys, blues and reds (see e.g. Cheong and Kaur 2015: 373; Labrecque et al 2012)<sup>ii</sup>. They also make use of angular, bold typefaces with straight vertical lines and no curvature, which communicates importance, status or strength (e.g. Horn 1998: 147). The use of straight lines vs curved lines is a semiotic resource commonly associated with gender differences in advertising texts (Machin and Ledin 2020: 130-131). Van Leeuwen (2006: 148) also notes the “assertive” connotations of ‘heavy’ fonts, which in turn index a masculine aesthetic.

A masculine sensibility is also evoked in the use of diagonal lines on a number of NIVEA products (N4, N5 N9, N10), which connote dynamism and angularity:



Figure 4: Product packaging for NIVEA MEN's Deep Matte Finish Moisturiser. (Source: ebay.co.uk via Google, reproduced according to Google's Creative Commons license)

A discourse of hegemonic masculinity is also indirectly invoked via recontextualisations from the field of war/combat, which feed into a discourse of toughness/strength. This materialises in a number of ways: the prefix ‘anti’ referred to in sections 4.1 and 4.2 is used across the dataset to imply that products combat particular conditions: ‘anti-ageing’, ‘anti-spot’, ‘anti-fatigue’, ‘anti-wrinkle’, ‘anti-shine’, ‘anti-chafing’ etc. This combative framing implies that the product ‘attacks’ problems. There are also adjectival descriptions of products and verb choices in elaborations of key functions that imply aggression and strength. For example, product descriptions such as ‘pure power’ (LME7); ‘hydra power’ (LME5) indicate strength and efficacy, and verb choices in the key functions ‘helps **fight** spots’ (LME7) and ‘**targets** wrinkles’ (LME13) are metaphorical actions that imply the (accurate) destruction of skin imperfections. Cheong and Kaur (2015: 374) argue, in their

own comparison of LME and L'Oréal Paris packaging, that the trademark 'active defense system' on LME's product packaging suggests "competitiveness and expertise" (2015: 375), while contributing to an overarching combative sensibility across the product series. Ringrow (2016) and Lazar (2014) also observe a vocabulary of war in their analyses of advertising for cosmetics and jewellery products aimed at women, respectively, but the difference between their findings and my own is that in the men's advertising texts, men are, in a sense, taking on the positive effects of the product doing the fighting (e.g. "5 actions **against** ageing" (LME10) and "**targets** wrinkles" (LME13)), but in the adverts Ringrow and Lazar analysed, the products themselves act more defensively, offering "protection" against the elements (Ringrow 2016: 43-44).

Related to a semantic field of war are semiotic choices implying active, intensive effects. Analyses of female cosmetics advertising demonstrate a predominance of 'sensual' lexis, which is often linked to the sexualisation of women's bodies in advertising (e.g. Jeffries 2007; Attwood 2009; Gill 2009; Ringrow 2016). Sensual discourse is much less prevalent in the product effects in men's advertising; instead, descriptions foreground how the products build strength and energy, and the intensity of their effects is emphasised. This is indicated in product names e.g. 'skin energy' (N9), 'pure power' (LME7), 'vita lift' (LME2, LME9, LME10), 'hydra energetic' (LME1, LME2, LME11), 'hydra power' (LME5), 'turbo boost gel' (LME4); promotion of caffeine as a key ingredient in N9; and lexical choices in key functions, such as 'anti-fatigue' (LME1), 'intense double action' (LME2), 'instant wake up effect' (LME4), and 'instant relief' (N12). These descriptions are intended to communicate a sense of urgency, intensity and action that contributes to a discourse of strength and empowerment that coheres with a hegemonic masculine aesthetic. There are also one or two examples of somewhat oxymoronic compounds, which point to the delicate balance at play between a need to communicate the caring, healing effects of products and the intensity of their efficacy, such as 'ultra calming' (N2), and 'ultra light' (N10). The prefix 'ultra' has superlative, hyperbolic connotations, but the adjectives they modify have much gentler associations.

The product packaging and media advertising also subtly evokes gendered discourses via fragmented aspects of the male body, since masculinised body parts are the targets of the products being advertised. This is evident particularly in the *MH* keywords, where gendered meronyms of 'hair' and 'beard' are a frequent source of Problems requiring a Response (see section 4.2 above). LME's BarberClub Short Beard and Face Moisturiser also claims that it 'moisturises **skin beneath beard & face**', which effectively treats 'skin beneath beard' as a meronym of facial skin. This is further implied by the accompanying graphic, a faceless head drawing with only the head hair and beard hair displayed.

## 5. Discussion

This paper sought to identify dominant patterns of skincare-related ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ in the packaging for NIVEA For Men and L’Oréal Men Expert moisturiser products, and the advertorial content of *Men’s Health* magazine. Using tools and concepts from social semiotics (Machin and Ledin 2020; van Leeuwen 2005) my analysis of these patterns considered how the health claims of advertised products negotiate normative masculine ideals.

In many ways, the text producers are adopting similar kinds of strategies as have been found in the literature on cosmetics advertising for the female market: there is evidence in my dataset for fragmented aspects of the ageing body as the basis of ‘problems’ in need of ‘fixing’ (Smith 1988; Motschenbacher 2009; Jeffries 2007; Ringrow 2016); positively evaluating idealised notions of youthful perfection; and scientized discourse which makes claims to the empirical verifiability of their key functions and effects (Coupland 2003, 2007; Jeffries 2007; Ringrow 2016). The difference lies in the specific masculinising effects of the ‘strong, energetic, youthful bodies’ on offer in these texts. For instance, instead of the more sensual implications of Positive Results such as “supple” or “soft” skin found in female cosmetics advertising, male products promise remedies to ensure more physiological improvements, such as “hydrated”, “awake” or “nourished” skin. Instead of factors such as juggling motherhood with paid work, lifestyle-related conditions requiring a Response in men’s advertising are more likely to refer to the stresses of physical labour (for instance: the toil of gym workouts on skin hydration levels and clogged pores, or irritated facial skin from shaving, see section 4 above). The product packaging for LME and NIVEA For Men also makes use of semiotic resources conventionally associated with masculine aesthetics, such as darker colour palettes, sharp lines and bold, angular typefaces.

The findings of my analysis have implications for critical discursive treatments of the intersections between health and masculinity in advertising. For instance, earlier work on the language of male grooming advertising demonstrated how male audiences were being explicitly persuaded to consume male cosmetics and other grooming products in the face of their traditional associations with femininity (see e.g. Coupland 2007; Cheong and Kaur 2015). However, my findings demonstrate that the gendered basis of this persuasion has become more nuanced: it is no longer about overtly denying the long-held belief that ‘cosmetics is for women’, and more about persuading men that investing in skincare will make them *more* manly, because it represents taking responsibility for their own health-related self-improvements. For example, gendered ailments (such as a ‘rough beard’, or ‘irritated skin’) are ways of differentiating men’s ‘grooming’ products from women’s ‘beauty’ potions, presenting a commodified form of masculinity which targets the image-conscious male consumer. However, the notion of engaging in the ‘beauty project’ (consuming products to make one more attractive), is significantly downplayed: the marketing of men’s grooming products in these texts relies mostly on the idea of making health-related improvements, to avoid charges of narcissism. Rather than the mitigation of

narcissism being on the basis of establishing an overtly macho image, via declarations like ‘real men do wear mascara’ (Harrison 2008), this is achieved much more subtly through implied meanings, such as metaphorical associations, and indirect indexing of conventionally masculine behaviours.

In addition to an avoidance of charges of femininity and narcissism, existing work on male grooming highlights how product advertising emphasises heterosexual prowess, or the “female appraising gaze” (Coupland 2007), where the persuasive power of such advertising lies in the promise of attracting a mate. However, there is little evidence for this in my dataset – the appeal of the products lies solely in their claimed ability to solve health-related conditions, rather than their sex appeal. Men are instructed that consuming skincare products is about ‘self-love’, and so men’s bodies are being problematised in more or less equivalent ways to women’s bodies in female-directed advertising. However, this shouldn’t necessarily be interpreted as a simple ‘equal-but-different’ reading of gender presentation in the texts, since there are very different connotations of some of the semiotic resources used, which mean that persuading men to consume grooming products is less about scrutinising men’s appearance as a sexualised object (as in cosmetics advertising aimed at women), and more about encouraging men to make changes to improve their physiological strength and status. This means that consuming skincare products is in fact constructed here as a power move for men, as a means of taking control over their own health and wellbeing in ways that denies the possibility for changing the hegemonic status quo.

As well as having implications specifically for research on the links between health and commodified masculinity, this chapter also has broader methodological implications for work on gendered language in advertising, in my application of Ringrow’s (2016) model for identifying gendered Problem-Solution patterns in advertising discourse to multimodal texts. Ringrow’s model is (as befits the scope of her analysis) based on the analysis of linguistic elements, but I have suggested here that Problem-Solution patterns can also be signalled via aspects of visual design: choice of colour, image or typeface (among other elements) can also contribute to the establishment of gendered Problems requiring a Response, as well as Positive Evaluations or Positive Results implied from using the product.

The presence of a multitude of terms for describing different skincare Problems Requiring a Response across both datasets is a way of justifying the marketing and advertising for all of these different skin products – it essentially invents a need for a more extensive range of products to remedy skin conditions (which are often variations of the same underlying issue). This is particularly evident in the product packaging data, in which variations of one single product (a facial skin moisturiser) is offered as the solution to numerous different ailments (e.g. tired, dry, irritated or ‘stressed’ skin).



It is important for critical linguists to scrutinise the gendering of health claims in texts produced by commercial enterprises such as skincare marketers and magazine publishers, to consider how they might be better regulated: although on the surface, the language used to encourage male consumption of these products technically adheres to official guidance from regulatory bodies like the Advertising Standards Agency in the UK, the way they encourage men to dissect and treat every inch of their skin in pursuit of the (perfectly curated) strong, youthful body has the potential to cause unhealthy fixations on appearance, resulting in negative self-image and body dysmorphia<sup>iii</sup>. Future work in this area could therefore examine personal accounts of men who consume these products to establish how the appeals of skincare products are taken up by their target consumers. However, whether these kinds of 'self-improvements' are viewed as 'empowering' or 'objectifying', they are still encouraging men to put their bodies under unnecessary scrutiny, and that has negative implications for all.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> While I have not conducted a detailed comparative analysis of L'Oréal Paris and NIVEA products for women here for reasons of scope, a web search on the same retail website for LME found 23 moisturiser products for women, and none of them contained lexis relating to discomfort, energy or stress (see <https://www.loreal-paris.co.uk/skin-care?product-type=moisturiser&page=2> [last accessed 28 June 2022]). Even the product series 'Revitalift' contained no references to the energising effects of the product. This also chimes with the findings of Cheong and Kaur's (2015) comparative analysis of LME and L'Oréal Paris product packaging.

<sup>ii</sup> NIVEA MEN's Skin Energy is one exception here, which includes orange hues, but this is to emphasise the energising effects of the face cream.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, according to social enterprise Better's 2021 'body confidence report', the majority of men surveyed (54%) showed signs of low body confidence, and three quarters of 18-24 year olds surveyed showed signs of body dysmorphia.