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# The Gendered Shift in Skincare: The Role of Masculinity in Contemporary Men's Preferences and Opinions on Gender-specific Branding Design

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## ***Abstract***

A societal and cultural shift has occurred in terms of masculinity and needs to be transferred to gender-specific branding designs. In his research, the negotiation of masculinity and consumption and utilization of skincare usage, and the preferences and opinions of said products from a male's perspective are explored. The study is based on empirical investigations in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews to uncover the underlying attitudes, opinions, and preferences on various gender-specific skincare products. The sample size consisted of 15 men between the ages of 23 and 27 years old to extend the profoundness of the research regarding younger men. The findings show that contemporary men and their masculine identities allow for minor alterations in gender-specific branding design, that these are necessary due to societal and cultural changes, and that companies offer products and branding designs that are socially accepted. The findings present paradoxes and incongruences among consumers and their consumption, preferences, and opinions on skincare. This resulted in, revelations that skincare is culturally considered to be a feminine practice, skincare knowledge is low among men, and that men still have to negotiate their masculinity to consume and utilize skincare. The findings establish opportunities for minor adjustments that focus on male inclusiveness, convenience, and recognition of every possible touchpoint in the consumer journey.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Masculinity, Masculine Identity, Branding Design, Gender-specific branding design, Skincare, Gender-specific Skincare, Qualitative Methodology*

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## Introduction

When walking past the skincare section at the supermarket, there is a vast difference between the shelves targeted towards women and men. The color scheme differs from dark blue to light pink (Machado et al., 2021). The same goes for the packaging design, logos, and choice of words (Guittar et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a distinction between how commercials, e-commerce architecture, and product names are portrayed. Petersson McIntyre (2018) argues that this is a brand construction, as brands possess the power to differentiate products by making gender-specific designs to guide and restrict consumer choice. Branding methods are constantly changing accordingly, depending on how genders have been interpreted in society (Cooke et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there are currently more studies on the women segment in the skincare market, and women are the brands' largest target audience (Byrne & Milestone, 2022; Evangelista et al., 2022; Ficheux et al., 2016). Even if men's attitudes and interest in skincare are rising (Kestenbaum, 2022), gender-fluid brand efforts have become more accepted (Machado et al., 2021). Therefore, Byrne and Milestone (2022), encourage more research on men and their perception of gender-specific branding within the skincare industry.

Stereotypical masculine branding is being challenged by younger males, as they have become more open-minded and are less likely to conform to gender stereotypes, as opposed to older generations (Boeuf, 2020; Gosling, 2020; Kreicbergs et al., 2022). According to Boeuf (2020), the requirement to relate to overtly masculine brand offerings may impose negative emotions on the male consumer. This raises the question of how younger generations of males growing up in a changed society grasp and identify with the traditionally marketed masculine skincare branding. Changes in design can however disrupt brand and product recognition (Lieven et al., 2015), and alterations to masculine branding strategies may cause negative consumer responses (Avery, 2012). However, de Boise (2022) and Scheibling and Lafrance (2019), argue that traditional gender-specific branding should continuously challenge and adapt to gender norms and adhere to societal shifts. Younger men are less interested in upholding and maintaining stereotypical masculine roles in contemporary society (Kreicbergs et al., 2024; Twenge, 2023).

## Literature Review

Wood and Eagly (2015), define *gender identity* as “*people’s understanding of themselves in terms of cultural definitions of female and male*” (p. 461). An individual will be assigned a gender identity that is performed due to external societal and cultural norms (Butler, 1993; 1997). Initially, this implies that a change in the skincare market is dynamically affected by societal and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It lies in the co-production and co-construction of meaning maintained by consumers, the marketplace, and products (McCracken, 1986). This further proves how an individual performs their social gender identity and masculinity in society (Butler, 1993). Moreover, previous gender research has investigated men's preferences and masculinity in various contexts, such as advertising

(Islentyeva et al., 2023; Kreicbergs et al., 2024; Petersson McIntyre, 2018; Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019), the willingness of men to utilize skincare (Byrne & Milestone, 2018), alcohol consumption (de Visser & Smith, 2007), consumption of popular media (Zayer et al., 2012), and meat consumption (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021) among many. Hence, this research will contribute findings on masculinity in the context of skincare. Since skincare is considered a feminine practice in society (Chaudhary, 2022), it imposes cultural norms to adhere to, and consequently, for men to therefore have to negotiate their masculinity in a field predominantly targeting women. The phenomenon that a man has to negotiate their masculinity is not novel and is studied in various contexts (e.g. Eguchi, 2010; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). For example, how homosexuality does not reflect the sociocultural meanings of what makes a man masculine (Wetherell & Edley, 1999), as feminine and homosexual tendencies are avoided and do not represent a masculine identity (Boeuf, 2020; Östberg, 2013). Therefore, a constant negotiation amid social pressure exists among men to adhere to the stereotypical definitions of what constitutes masculinity (Plantin et al., 2003).

Individuals are dependent on signs, symbols, and cues to aid their interpretation process, and ultimately, make their consumption decision-making process effortless (Kahneman & Tversky, 1974; Kim et al., 2020). Colors, logos, typefaces, artworks, and packaging designs all signify connotations in different manners (Labrecque & Milne, 2012; Yorkston & De Mello, 2005). These design methods distinguish and differentiate goods and brands (Maheswaran et al., 1992), and gender-specific products (Ellemers, 2018), from one another for easier recognition and understanding of their purpose and target audience. Therefore, word choices such as 'sport' and 'power' (Caliskan et al., 2022), and darker colors such as blue and black (Lieven et al., 2015), are stereotypically associated with and considered to be within the scope of men's products (Gosling, 2020; Mondol, 2022). Gendered branding design has been studied in the fields of perfume, sex toys, and incontinence products (Petersson McIntyre, 2018). Many aspects have profound impacts on different genders' consumption behavior, such as logos, package design, and positioning (Lieven et al., 2015), perceived masculinity in color on gendered products (Felix et al., 2021; Hagtvedt, 2020; Pomirleanu et al., 2020), and male responses to skincare packing color (Gabbas et al., 2021). However, earlier research has neglected men's preferences and opinions. Even if there is an increased interest from men concerning skincare there is still inadequate research on the phenomenon in comparison with women studies on femininity and skincare (e.g., Gill, 2007; Heggenstaller et al., 2019; Lazar, 2006; Lorimer, 2023; Liebelt, 2022; Mohd Radzi & Musa, 2017; Varghese & Kumar, 2022). There is a lack of existing research concerning the role of masculinity and preferences and opinions on gender-specific branding design. A study on cultural norms of men's skincare opens up the topic of consumers' possible need for diversification of the segmentation of gender-specific design to improve inclusiveness and social belonging.

According to Sundar et al. (2020), consumers associate skincare products with an aesthetically pleasing design to perform superior to competing offerings. This connects to the aforementioned shift in society in design preferences, and thereby, the success in sales and

inclusivity of contemporary skincare products for men. As Xianchi Dai et al. (2024), argue and encourage more gender studies on men's preferences and aesthetic appeal to reduce the backlash of gender stereotyping. Building on previous literature streams, this research will contribute with findings from a consumer perspective and whether existing gender-specific branding design still provides value for the male consumer, since masculinity impacts all consumption and behavior decisions (Spielmann et al., 2021). Equally, the boundaries regarding any alterations of branding design to men's products in the skincare realm.

The *purpose* is to explore whether the evolving societal landscape encourages a shift in masculine identities and gender-specific branding designs targeted toward men in the context of skincare. Hence, distinguishing the underlying factors that drive potential transformation, such as cultural dynamics, social shifts, design, and other influences. Thus, the following research questions have been formulated:

*How do men negotiate their masculinity through the consumption and utilization of skincare?*

*How do men perceive and experience existing gender-specific branding designs in the skincare industry?*

This study will expand and contribute to the theoretical fields of gender and masculinity studies, cultural studies, and branding preferences about skincare products. Furthermore, a comprehensiveness of how men negotiate their masculinity in terms of their utilization of skincare products will aid companies to better understand the changing consumer landscape. These insights are of value to not stagnate in branding design strategies by building design elements upon stereotypical gender roles of outdated studies. Moreover, the impending research paper provides a theoretical framework consisting of theories and concepts in the fields of gender, the cultural aspects of consumption, gender-specific branding design concepts, and various elements that distinguish branding designs. The methodology chapter introduces the qualitative research strategy. Followingly, by a combined findings and analysis chapter, with a concluding discussion of the main findings of the research. The final chapter presents and discusses the theoretical and managerial implications as well as the limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Theoretical Framework

*In order to explore gender studies and gender-specific design elements the framework is divided into two sections: Gender, Culture, Masculinity, and Gender-specific Branding Design. Here various concepts and theories are reviewed and separated to provide paragraphs solely focusing on the topics, respectively.*

## Gender, Culture and Masculinity

*The first chapter reviews the concepts and theories connected to 'Gender Performativity', 'Cultural Masculine Norms', and what classifies the 'Masculine Identity'. The existing literature further discusses the topics from a gendered perspective.*

### *Gender Performativity*

Butler (1993), argues that gender is a construction of societal forces. Gender is not inherited nor a natural behavior for human beings. It is discovered, memorized, and upheld through constant performance, language, behavior, and social reinforcement and practices. In other words, an individual will receive a gender identity that is maintained by external social and cultural forces (Butler, 1993). Performativity entails adjusting and accustoming to specific and assigned practices and behaviors to be acknowledged as one's gender identity. Institutional entities and market actors, such as brands, will constantly encourage identity performances. Butler (1993), further claims that individuals who do not conform or fit the stereotypical behavior may face, or fear, repercussions if deviating from the norm of their socio-cultural environment. Holt and Thompson (2004), argue the act of consumption will further maintain the wanted gender identity, a performance to adhere to the cultural norms within society. This leads to the following section on how norms and cultural meanings impact the male consumer.

### *Cultural Masculine Norms*

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is the concept of sociocultural relationships, and how these are emphasized and reliant on society's shared meaning, symbolic attributes, and practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Essentially, individuals and objects with cultural meanings hold the power to change and seek change simultaneously (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Holt, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002). In contrast, a man's perception and identification of what is considered masculine can become threatened by societal and cultural forces, and these will intrude on their masculine identity, such as criticism or comments on consumption choices (Östberg, 2013). Similarly, social pressures and expectations may limit their consumption choices and lifestyle choices (Holt & Thompson, 2004). One example by Randell et al. (2016), is that the effects of peer pressure may lead younger men to follow a stereotypical masculine route, such as consuming blue products when they, in reality, would have wanted pink products. The constant exposure to commercials and branding that depict men stereotypically puts pressure on men to conform and abide by these norms (Holt & Thompson, 2004). However, exaggerating, idealizing, and always adhering to masculinity norms and rules will increase the likelihood of anxiety and depressive thoughts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), making it unsustainable and unattainable in the long run (Kimmel, 2018). Nevertheless, consumption will implicitly and explicitly shape individuals' perceptions and what is achievable (Askegaard & Kjeldgard, 2002). The act of consumption will further hold meaning that will be encoded by society (Holt & Thompson, 2004),

indicating a certain lifestyle or personality to the social sphere (Holt, 2004), and equally their identity within a collective group (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Consequently, Holt and Thompson (2004), proclaim that society and cultural norms are ever-changing and becoming more inclusive in terms of acceptance and encouragement of vulnerability when it comes to expressing feminine traits generating new norms. Followingly, the next section will provide theories and a foundation of how a man wants to be perceived as masculine. The behaviors and specifics of what determines them as masculine in other individuals' minds.

### *Masculine Identity*

According to Connell (1987), there are two perspectives on what constitutes masculinity: hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative masculinity. Firstly, hegemonic masculinity emphasizes the stereotypical behaviors of a man, such as emotional unavailability, detachment, aggressiveness, restriction, stoicism, strength, toughness, and employing dominant language to exert power and authority over others (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Östberg (2013), claims that hegemonic masculinity highlights and distinguishes the differences between men and women. The characteristics reflect femininity and are considered to be sensitiveness, compassion, tenderness, expressing emotions, and vulnerability, which men stereotypically try to avoid (Boeuf, 2020). Secondly, the masculinity perspective known as heteronormative; is performed through their sexual orientation and refers to heterosexuality being the norm and most common indication of what is considered masculine (Connell, 1987), and homosexual tendencies express feminine traits (Östberg, 2013). According to Connell (1987), men who partake in or express feminine traits, often make other men question their masculinity and try to avoid these behaviors or emotions. Therefore, a man will strategically consume goods and services that elude and symbolize masculine behavior (Holt & Thompson, 2010; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). According to Holt (2004), this stems from a sense of belonging and expressing one's social identity. For instance, previous generations have had negative opinions on skincare, and that these types of products do not reflect masculinity (Kreicbergs et al., 2024). Men care about their looks and how they are perceived (Byrne & Milestone, 2023). At the same time, there is a hyper-awareness of procedures to avoid behavior interpreted as feminine, gay, or vain (Butler, 2004). Moreover, Machado et al. (2021), claim that the unwillingness among men could come from cultural norms and views that feminine-associated designs and brands could question their sense of masculinity. This leads to the next section of the theoretical framework, which highlights previous research on gender-specific branding designs and how it is presented in the design of men's products. Additionally, an overview of the stereotypical design elements and how men perceive these branding efforts.

## Gender-specific Branding Design

*This section is divided into the sections of 'Branding Design', 'Gender-specific Design Elements', and 'Gendered Consumption Preferences'. The focus lies on gender-specific designs and the existing findings on the topics.*

### *Branding Design*

Branding design functions as a source of differentiation and is thereby of high relevance when attempting to provide a brand with a personality to easier connect with consumers (Montaña et al., 2007). According to Lieven et al. (2015), it is the collection of multiple aesthetic elements supporting a brand to create a position in the market. The elements are names, signs, and symbols containing brand names, logo shapes, colors, type fonts, illustrations, and photographs (Lieven et al., 2015). The design elements also play a vital role in influencing brand masculinity and femininity attitudes, which in turn, relate particularly to consumer preferences and increased emotional connection (Leuthesser et al., 1995). Studies have emphasized the importance of brand gender, which is the set of human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity that are both applicable and relevant to brands (Grohmann, 2009), and for their success (Machado et al., 2021). Furthermore, consumers desire masculine or feminine brand design elements when they feel a connection toward a specific gender identity, such as masculine or feminine (Aaker, 1997; Belk, 1988). As stated by Machado et al. (2021), elements such as typefaces used in a logo can affect whether it is seen as masculine or feminine, and therefore, companies could design their logos with cues that match the gender they want to target. Machado et al. (2021), further claim that darker colors and cultural designs such as vehicles or buildings evoke higher perceptions of masculinity. Thus, utilizing dark blue for logos makes products seem more masculine, and light pink makes these seem more feminine. For many decades skincare brands have been targeting men through gender-stereotypical methods, such as darker colors on packaging, macho and rugged tv-commercials, vigor logos, and brand names (Guittar et al., 2022). According to Guittar et al. (2022), this is an attempt to further distinguish male products from female products. Furthermore, according to Neale et al. (2016), brands need to be careful when targeting males, and preferably continue with masculine branding methods to minimize the risks of harming the brand or confusing their main customer segment. Hence, that is one reason why existing branding elements utilize exaggerated masculine traits (Boeuf, 2020; Kreicbergs et al., 2022). The next theoretical chapter will in-depth expand on the elements of usage regarding branding designs. The existing theories on design elements will focus on how these are interpreted by the male consumer.

### *Gender-specific Design Elements*

Products that target males will differ and exhibit a different approach distinct from female products (Lieven et al., 2015). According to Oblong (2012), the aesthetics of skincare products is an essential need for men. While Fugate and Philips (2010), argue that gender-congruent packaging is most vital for men. Men then tend to gravitate instinctively

toward cues that are far from feminine (Avery, 2012; Lee, 2006), while women are generally more open to using brands with masculine elements (Lee, 2006). Furthermore, Ringrow (2016) proclaims that there are words that indicate femininity, such as ‘smooth,’ ‘beauty’ and ‘flawless.’ Additionally, the color pink can reflect femininity and depict gender-specific associations (Biswas, 2016). Branding cues and designs with flowing lines, and softer shapes, are also perceived as women’s products (Machado et al., 2021). Azar et al. (2018) also note that the fear of feminine products among men makes it challenging for marketers to improve gender-bending branding styles. Followingly, androgynous, neutral, or unisex branding design can affect male consumer responses negatively due to confusion (Bhanja & Mehta, 2022; Blazquez et al., 2019). However, a person’s gender identity impacts how they react to brands with feminine traits, but it does not affect their reaction to brands with masculine traits to the same extent (Kumar, 2022). For the sake of this research, it is vital to understand how the male consumer behaves and acts when it comes to gender-specific branding designs. Therefore, the consumption preferences are discussed with existing theories in the following chapter.

### *Gendered Consumption Preferences*

According to Bakshi (2012), male consumption behavior tends to include a less involved path to purchase decisions than females. Therefore, the package design for men’s products requires easily recognizable features, as the male consumer values convenience and efficiency concerning consumption (Mortimer & Clarke, 2011). Males behave and react differently to various cues and stimuli as opposed to women when it comes to skincare products (Bakshi, 2012). For example, males are to a larger extent more independent and willing to take financial risks in comparison to females, which also could be portrayed in their way of consumption (Bakshi, 2012; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004). Moreover, another element that could be a link to male consumption behavior is the, more extensive, view of purchasing as an issue to be solved. However, Ulrich et al. (2020), argue that simply adding the word ‘men’ to the brand name, which is quite prominent among brands, may not make it more appealing to men, as it does not necessarily increase their masculinity. According to Kumar (2022), and Ulrich et al. (2020), women are more comfortable using products with masculine traits than males utilizing products embodying feminine traits. Ulrich et al. (2020), further suggest that certain brands can strategically become more effective in reaching a wider audience of both males and females by removing feminine elements to be more gender inclusive. Hence, females can to a greater extent approve of masculine-designed products than males approve of feminine-designed products (Ulrich et al., 2020). However, according to Grohmann (2009), individuals with firm notions of masculinity, or femininity, tend to exhibit more favorable attitudes toward gender-specific products that align with their perceived gender identity.

## Conceptual Framework

The systematic themes in the framework are gender, cultural meanings, branding designs, and gender-specific design elements. Primarily, how distinct gender beliefs, gender identities, consumer behavior, preferences, and gender-specific designs are in actuality regarding the adherence to cultural norms. The chosen theories are diverse; however, for the objective of this study, they are necessary and interconnected. While gender, masculinity, and branding designs have been studied in various contexts they may differ in the setting of skincare consumption. For instance, according to Holt and Thompson (2004), and Randell et al. (2016), men pursue a different purchasing path due to social pressure. Equally, the masculine design elements (Oblong, 2012), are influenced by traditional gender norms in society (Östberg, 2013). Thus, the dependency on the existing traditional gender-specific masculine product designs in contemporary society justifies the resemblances of views of traditional masculinity approaches in the design aspects of gender-specific products. The different concepts and theories in the research fields of both gender and branding design act as a basis to capture male consumers' perspectives, societal meanings, and preferences in the analysis chapter.

## Methodology

*To be able to explore how men negotiate their masculinity, and their preferences and opinions on men's skincare designs, interviews of a qualitative nature were conducted in this research. The phenomenon and context of the study stem from the abductive approach utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews to meet the purpose and extend the existing research on the topic.*

## Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore the preferences and opinions of men in the context of skincare usage and expression, and the qualitative research approach was advantageous (Bell et al., 2019). Following this, the ability to answer the research questions and the reasoning behind male consumers' perceptions, preferences, and opinions about the phenomenon was vital. This approach allowed the researchers for deeper insights and acknowledgments of various elements that shape and construct the consumption behavior of men. Furthermore, it allowed for the interpretation and understanding of how various socially constructed entities function within societal norms (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Bell et al. (2019) argue that qualitative research carries the disposition of inductive reasoning. The data collection is organized, developed, and managed in a manner that allows for new interpretations and understandings. Therefore, this study approached the research phenomenon from an abductive reasoning strategy, a middle ground between inductive and deductive reasoning (Saunders et al., 2016). The abductive approach is most suitable juxtaposed to the purpose, allowing flexibility, and simultaneously, guidance to explore the phenomenon with existing theories and collected empirical data (Williamson, 2016).

## The Skincare Context and Younger Men

The epistemological approach to how men's perceptions and opinions on gender-specific branding were constructed was in the contextual realm of skincare for men. Men's interest in skincare products increased in popularity recently (Kestenbaum, 2022), which provides vast marketing-related opportunities and solutions for brands. The structural shifts in males' skin maintenance piqued the researchers' interest in opinions and attitudes of existing product assortments. In particular, the male Swedish beauty industry rose by approximately 2 billion SEK, in 2021, and continues to grow each year (Gents, 2023). And, when it came to Swedish males, they had been deemed as far more progressive than other nationalities in challenging and disrupting the traditional gender roles of society (Shenoy, 2023; Östberg, 2013). This opportunity provided for research into a population with a lower inclination and necessity for masculine behaviors, and a higher openness towards self-care in general. Per definition, skincare is the practice of cosmetics that aims to support the skin, enhance appearance, and prevent undesired skin conditions (Penzer & Ersser, 2010). Simultaneously, personal care products fall within the same category, these products are utilized for well-being, beauty, and cleansing benefits (Protsenko, 2021). This included products such as face moisturizer, face serum, deodorant, shower gel, and shower cream. Therefore, the choice was to include personal care products to expand the assortment of products for men's care. This was an active choice by the researchers to provide a larger variety of products and to include individuals who did not consume advanced skincare products. Therefore, "skincare" became the umbrella term for all products presented in this research study.

## Research Methods

*The following section presents the research methods of choice: semi-structured interviews, digital observation, and prop-showcasing. Furthermore, the sampling technique and size are explained and argued for in-depth.*

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Due to the purpose of this study, the interest was on the men's negotiation of masculinity and the preferences and opinions of men on skincare products. Therefore, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants allowed for greater in-depth knowledge, to be able to explore individual relations, opinions, meanings, and perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are less strict and provide leeway for both the participant and researcher to effortlessly proceed in the direction that the interview is heading. This allowed for responsiveness to induce new replies and additional questions to arise for the sake of the quality of the interview (Bell et al., 2019). An interview guide was constructed before the interviews, to ensure that the researchers maintained a general standard for each interview session (Bell et al., 2019). As seen in *Appendix A: Table 1.*, the different topics and their functions are listed for the reader to get an insight into what was discussed, and the reasoning behind the researchers' choices. For

instance, the researchers decided to introduce heavier and more sensitive topics at the end of the interview, in this case, *gender* and *masculinity* (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011), solely for the informants to become more comfortable with disclosing and easing into the topics as the interview progressed. Furthermore, the language of preference was Swedish, due to the informant being from Sweden. Therefore, for the conversation to run more smoothly, and the language was not a barrier for them to express themselves thoroughly (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Swedish word phrases or precise translations may have been lost in the translation process to English. However, it was deemed to be necessary, to keep the essence of meaning behind each statement and interpretation. Before each interview, the informants were informed that they were going to be recorded. This was due to the recording process of each interview allowing for transcription and access when reverting to the original interview in the analysis process (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, Bell et al. (2019), and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2011), state the importance of a pre-study interview for the sake of alterations. This is because such interviews enable the researchers to assess the clarity of their questions and ensure they align with the intended research objectives. This was taken into account, and Informant 1 in this study acted as the pre-study interview. However, the interview session was deemed to be suitable for the empirical material. Due to the vast insights and understanding of each question, the researchers kept the interview in the informant group formation of the study.

### *Sampling Techniques and Selection*

A total of 15 interviews were conducted and the duration of each varied between 53 to 94 minutes. Where a total of eight interviews were in a face-to-face setting and nine interviews were conducted online via the communication platform Microsoft Teams. Even if physical interview settings were of preference, according to Saunders et al. (2016), video interactions allow for visualization for both researchers and participants to interact, and to capture and recognize expressions, and body language. Which is a fairly setting similar to face-to-face interviews (Bell et al., 2019). The demographic background information on each respondent is found in *Appendix A: Table 2*. Furthermore, the sampling approach was selected on the premise of purposive sampling (Bell et al., 2019). The selection of sample size and informants was based on the relevance of the research purpose and their ability to induce in-depth information, and that they utilized some sort of skincare product. Wherein, the research reached theoretical saturation when the twelfth interview was completed. Albeit it was deemed that an additional three interviews were warranted to ensure that such saturation had indeed been reached, and no unique or novel information was discovered (Rowlands et al., 2016). The researchers found the informants through mutual friends, friends' boyfriends, and other acquaintances. There was a level of familiarity between informants and the interviewers, which is promoted as it enables informants and interviewers to have an in-depth shared understanding of the interpretations and intentions (Garton & Copland, 2010). Thereby, acquaintances were deemed sufficient in terms of the ability to express themselves. While closer relationships as colleagues, friends, and partners were excluded to reduce ethical issues and project the relationship into the interviews (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014).

Furthermore, the chosen group was based on the criteria of including younger men. The determined age group included Generation Z, consisting of people born between 1996 and 2012 (Zayer et al., 2012; Vinichenko et al., 2021). As Santy and Andriani (2023) proclaim, Generation Z represents a significant amount of the consumer market within the skincare industry. Which made it essential to investigate their preferences and opinions to meet the purpose, contribute with managerial implications, and accommodate the audience. Lastly, the criteria were the notion that the sample size possessed some form of knowledge on skincare and societal gender norms. And, due to convenience, and the researchers' judgment, the latter part of Generation Z stood for the sample size of this research. Hence, the choice was to include informants that ranged between the ages of 23 and 27 years.

### *Digital Observation and Prop-showcasing*

For the sake of the informants and the interviewers, the decision was to introduce products and pictures during the interview. While the researchers had preconceived knowledge of product designs, and the assortment of skincare for men, there was an additional research procedure on gender-specific products. This method is particularly common when it comes to focus groups (Bell et al., 2019). However, based on Comi's et al. (2014) recommendations, it can be imperative to showcase visual elements, such as images or existing products, in interviews to foster better interaction and help the informants understand the questions and elaborate their answers. This was for them to find reference points and inspiration so that the interviewers could truly understand the informants' preferences and opinions, and further elevate the discussions. The preparations entailed extensive research online. Thus, the researchers utilized keywords in various e-commerce settings, and Google's search engine to find suitable products. The popular websites of choice were the Swedish online pharmacies: Apotea, Meds, Apoteket, and Apohem, and Swedish online beauty stores: Lyko, Kicks, and Åhléns. The approach to find gender-specific products was to add keywords such as 'men', 'neutral', and 'women', and specific product categories, such as 'deodorant', 'shower gel', and 'cleanser'. The inclusion of neutral and unisex products was due to the researchers' initiative to include a product segment with no association with gender. Essentially, to leverage whether neutral designs would present new perspectives and opinions on the gender and design discussion. The choice to include different categories was to incorporate different skincare products and diverse assortment to achieve a higher level of recognition by the informants. Early on in the interviews when the discussion was based on gender-specific design elements, the informants were shown images specifically categorized by gender and genderless products, as seen in *Appendix B: Figures*. After that, product images were shown when the topic of gender and masculinity was discussed. These slides are found in *Appendix B: Figures* as well. Here, the interviewers brought up the phenomenon that women-specific products were similar to neutral products, and provided images of different categories such as deodorant, shower gel, face wash, and face cream within the three gender divisions of 'men', 'neutral', and 'women'. The intention behind these discussions, and prop-showcasing, was to elicitate new and different answers from the informants. How and why do men gravitate to the obvious gender-specific option, since earlier research has shown that women are more

inclined to opt for more neutral design elements (Bhanja & Mehta, 2022; Blazquez et al., 2019).

## Data Analysis Procedure

The data collection in this study was analyzed through a thematic approach. When using a thematic approach, the data is carefully analyzed to identify recurring trends, opinions, and patterns (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). The six-phase process originally generated by Braun and Clarke (2022), was utilized to structure the interpretation of the data, to be more manageable, to find themes, and to outline all the interviews. Firstly, the researchers listened to the data collection of the 15 semi-structured interviews and took notes on certain words and reflections that occurred multiple times. Moreover, carefully transcribing and reading through all interviews to get a first grasp of possible themes and patterns. The second step included the coding process of the data, this was made in an Excel document, where words and smaller sentences were listed in distinct codes, as seen in *Appendix A: Tables, Table 3*. The third step identified sub-themes and themes from the codes. The procedure included reviewing the coded data, to develop and identify patterns, correlations, and similarities. After these steps, the researchers went through the identified themes and compared them to the original data set to ensure the accuracy of the named themes to appropriate titles, and continued writing the analysis. Hence, this procedure was an iterative process of inspecting each step multiple times to ensure nothing important or of value was missed, and that the results were interpreted correctly. Furthermore, two main themes were adopted due to different perspectives, namely ‘Gender’ and ‘Design.’ While some viewpoints from the informants overlap, these are in turn analyzed in both the themes in the analysis from different theoretical and societal perspectives. Still, the empirical data was from the consumer perspective and reflected the gendered norms and cultural structure. There is a complexity in relying only on the consumers’ own beliefs, therefore, it is necessary to incorporate the additional aspect of socio-cultural traits of existing theories to establish whether changes in the branding design are achievable. Where the analyzed theories leveraged underlying intentions and attitudes about skincare products. And, the elements and attributes of value in terms of branding design and how these could change.

## Quality of the Study

### *Criteria for Trustworthiness*

Research ethics is of concern, including how a study was performed and how the results were interpreted (Bell et al., 2019; Polit & Beck, 2008). Thus, the researchers’ behavior regarding the rights of those influenced by the study is required (Cacciattolo, 2015; Polit & Beck, 2008). The researchers took several ethical considerations into account to improve the trustworthiness of the study. Accordingly, *Anonymity & Confidentiality, Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability*. Since the topic of masculinity was

deemed to be quite sensitive, the ethical consideration was stressed by the researchers. Thus, before the interviews started, verbal agreements with the informants were made to maintain the interviewees' right to both anonymity and confidentiality in this research. Therefore, all the informants are depicted in numbers, as seen in *Appendix A: Tables, Table 2*. It imposes a greater deal of anonymity, leading to the participants feeling safer, which improves the quality of and in-depth information of the interviews (Wiles et al., 2008).

According to Polit and Beck (2008), credibility is a predominant goal in qualitative research and is highly necessary to state the trustworthiness of the text. It refers to confidence in the truth of the data and its understanding of them (Bell et al., 2019). To ensure credibility, an extensive literature review was executed to be entitled to relevant and precise information. And, in the theoretical framework, it was possible to emanate valuable information to design the interviews. Thereafter, the information was validated through exchanges with the informants. Before the data collection, specific credibility criteria were established to mitigate potential researcher bias, the semi-structured interview allowed for open-ended questions with less structure to reduce the interviewers' influence. Due to more efficiently receiving the informant's personal opinions and reflections. Nevertheless, certain informants were hesitant to speak openly to the desired degree. In such instances, additional follow-up questions were necessary, which potentially impacted the credibility of the findings. Nonetheless, the preparations outlined above served to underscore the credibility of the data collection process.

Transferability concerns whether findings are transferable to other contexts (Singh et al., 2021). The qualitative nature of this research makes the sample size more dense in comparison with a quantitative study. Therefore, making the result more transferable than it is generalized. However, the purpose of this study is not to find out specific numbers but to explore patterns and underlying opinions among younger men. Outlined by Singh et al. (2021) and Given (2008), qualitative research prioritizes two key elements to enhance transferability, the contextual parameters of the findings and assessing the closeness of participants to the context. To foster transferability in this study, purposive sampling was employed, enabling readers to measure the extent to which findings may apply to alternate contexts. For instance, the contextualized findings were thicker in description and gave more details. Another factor that was considered was the fact that this study focused on an evolving societal landscape that possibly continues to change through time. Nevertheless, transcriptions, coding schedules, notes, and informants' demographic information are documented. This ensures dependability and that records follow recommended procedures (Bell et al., 2019). Lastly, confirmability was ensured, see *Table 3 in Appendix A*, which illustrates the coding process and explains how the interview themes emerged from the data, and simultaneously, acted as a measure to reduce misinterpretations of the results.

### *Reflexivity and Positionality*

To further increase the trustworthiness and confirmability of this research the authors included reflexivity, to ensure that biases and unwarranted preconceived knowledge and subjective experiences did not impact the process or outcome of the study (Arsel, 2017; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Reflexivity is especially important when conducting gender studies, and is vital to reduce any sort of researcher's bias (Holmes, 2020). Therefore, a critical stance and the positionality of the authors need to be taken into account (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This became evident due to the researchers being women interviewing men, which may result in probable gender bias on sensitive topics (Lefkowich, 2019). However, it was advantageous that the interviewers were female, as it allowed for a non-judgemental sphere when discussing a feminine topic, such as skincare. It was deemed to be acceptable to speak freely without judgment by the informants. Since the informants were familiar with the interviewers, the positionality contributed to a safe environment to speak freely and become more comfortable opening up during the interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). The disadvantages could have been the lack of ability to relate to the gender-specific cultural norms and language of choice (Sanghera & Bjökert, 2008). However, due to the sense of familiarity and the interviewers being close in age to the informants, it made the interpretation, transcription, and relatability process easier. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the findings was inevitably produced on the aspect of the researchers' preconceived experiences. However, based on previous theories and the notion of reflexive disposition, the findings were merely retold by the informants through the researchers in a scientific manner.

### *Ethical and Societal Considerations*

As argued by Bell et al. (2019), ethical principles require the consideration and assurance of not inflicting any harm on the informants, that there is no deception intended, and that researchers do not invade privacy matters. The researchers also took respondent anxiety into account, due to this being a quite heavy topic. According to Goodwin et al. (2019), discussing identity with informants could be difficult because of its sensitivity. However, it is an important topic to study due to the constantly evolving roles in society and the societal shifts that occur (Tsichla, 2020). Both in the aspects of brands, and how they can manipulate their supply due to a change in demand, but also to follow a more beneficial path in society to aid a generation of men with more unexplored beliefs. Since it contains a relatively small amount of research on the topic. It was of high relevance that the researchers did not manipulate the answers for their gain and kept the discussion impartial to receive realistic answers through unstrict open-ended questions. Tsichla (2020) claims that distinctiveness grows further between genders from a marketing perspective. From only looking at the skincare shelf at a supermarket, the colors vary widely between the female products and the male products. If it were to continue, brands could further manipulate the contrasts between genders and the different consumption patterns even greater (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). Thus, it is worth noting that the outcome of this research could be exploited by brands to increase sales and promote over-consumption. More research has been done on behalf of female consumption

regarding the beauty industry, and as Kestenbaum (2022) proclaims, male consumption within the same industry has proven to increase as well. Therefore, it is essential to continue to research the topic of masculinity within the skincare industry, not only from a branding and industry perspective but also to minimize possible manipulated outcomes. Since incorrect or skewed contributions can lead to severe and wrongful societal consequences.

## Findings and Analysis

*Two main themes were identified after the data analysis procedure. These overlap in terms of perspectives and subjects, and are separated into two primary groups: 'Gender' and 'Design.' These are further divided into sub-themes to categorize the findings in a comprehensible manner. The upcoming chapter will present and analyze the findings related to these themes, connected to and discussed with the theoretical foundation.*

### Gender

*The first theme, Gender, is divided into subthemes: 'Paradoxical Cultural Structures', 'Changing Masculinities', and 'Personal Beliefs, Social Beliefs, and Social Belonging'. Here the findings are analyzed from the perspective of societal and gendered norms, and how skincare consumption and utilization are determined.*

#### *Paradoxical Cultural Structures*

The notion that skincare is considered to be a feminine practice and trait is at first believed to be an obsolete opinion according to the informants. However, it is still present in society, and difficult for the informants to neglect during the interviews. They all agree that the belief is outdated at first. However, as each interview progressed, it became evident that there were aspects that hindered them from fully committing and accepting skincare practices to the degree that women do. And, the informants were quite paradoxical in their answers. Even if there is an increased acceptance of skincare for men, some informants still drew connections between make-up and skincare. The association that taking care of your skin is for women and was associated with beauty. A cultural belief that is deeply rooted within the informants' social norms and rules; however, they are paradoxical in the sense that they still utilized skincare products, and that some even wanted to utilize and learn more about skincare. Additionally, all informants said that they cared about their appearance and how they were perceived, which aligns with Byrne and Milestone's (2023) findings. This unfolds a new perspective, and another paradox in how they behave and their attitude towards skincare. The emphasis lies on them embracing their looks, clothing, and other physical attributes. If one ought to read between the lines, beauty is not the main concern even if one cares about their appearance. As women have been dealing with the cultural norm of beauty and beautiful skin for longer periods, and long-term purposes. The reason why perhaps skincare is connoted and compared to makeup in the informant's eyes, an enhancement of beauty is not a consideration

of theirs. Hence a constant negotiation process for the informants to utilize skincare, a feminine practice. An excerpt from Informant #6:

*“But it might still be like that, that you maybe associate a lot of skincare with make-up too. A girl in the morning uses skincare and then puts on make-up. So it is like a part of their routine in a guy’s mind. I do not say that this is the case, but that it could be easy for a guy to think that. Skincare equals make-up.” - Informant #6*

It was possible to distinguish the restricting tendencies of designs, and that the informants felt pressured to only utilize gender-specific products. Even if they perceived the design of female products to be aesthetically pleasing it was not something they felt as if they could purchase for themselves. This aligns with Askegaard and Kjelgaard (2002), that men do not deviate from achievable consumption, and what is purposely directed towards them. Also how buying a product that does not target men will affect their identity within society (Holt & Thompson, 2004). It could also be as Boeuf (2020) claims, that men typically try to avoid female traits and associations. Hence the easiest, in terms of social norms and rules, is to continue purchasing products specific to men. According to the informants, the practice of skincare is essential for women, while for men it is frowned upon, not equally as an encouraging practice. All 15 informants agreed that this was absurd, and should not be the norm. The underlying judgments on the phenomena are still very present and the stigmatization that men take care of themselves. Because there are boundaries, cultural norms, and practices that are difficult to break (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Butler (1993) argues that gender is constantly performed, and follows the gender norms and expectations from society. Even if the informants gave different versions of answers when it came to whether people would judge them and their skincare usage, it became evident that there is still a stigma behind the practice among men, and that the performance is not in line with the masculine identity. Nevertheless, some informants did not favor and envision female-targeted products as an option. These were very adamant about choosing or favoring male-targeted skincare. Some males felt that they were restricted and that they could only utilize and purchase things that directly targeted men. There was a lack of leeway to explore and move beyond those boundaries. Where the utilization of skincare specifically targeted towards women is not up for negotiation, even if one’s masculinity is solid, and one sees themselves as masculine. If the first option, men’s products, is not available then they would not be willing to try female products. Expressed below by Informant #2:

*“I would not show it off proudly if I used girl products. But I would not be a coward if someone asked me what type of product it was. Because I am quite secure with my masculinity. But then again, it differs from friend to friend. Some friends would never use it, just because it is a bit gay... But in the end, I would still opt for a product from the men assortment” - Informant #2*

In the interviews the informants professed that brands do not need to sell exaggerated masculine products; simultaneously, they concur with the belief that masculine branding strategies have become outdated and that brands stick to obsolete stereotypes. When asked

whether companies need to change gender norms there were inconsistencies in the answers. Some believe that brands and companies carry equal responsibility, and are the ones that can shape cultural beliefs. The same goes for the prominent distinction, if it were to be discontinued, it may impose fewer masculinity negotiations and restrictions on the male consumers. Others believed that taking a more stereotypical approach to branding design could also be beneficial. It could directly encourage some men to utilize skincare and allow for a diverse range of assortment. This shows that there are inconsistencies in the informants' views and answers on this topic. However, as Arnould and Thompson (2005) proclaim, the dynamic relationship between marketplace, consumer, and product is evident, and these will simultaneously impact one another if changes were to be made. Consequently, companies and brands are part of the cultural norms and possess the power to adapt, and decide what consumers consume, as much as consumers affect business decisions and offerings. And, are therefore the cause of the negotiation process, both in increasing the need for it and what is deemed acceptable to reduce the requirement of constantly negotiating the masculine identity.

*“Just tone it down a bit [extreme gender-specific designs] I still believe that people would buy that kind of stuff [skincare]. Well, them... the consumers, of course, they also control the companies. But the companies also choose what is available on the market. So I think that if they were to make products for men that do not have ‘a lot’, like black colors and that whole thing... I still think that people would buy it. Well, even more than they [consumers] do now. But at the same time, I do not know how it will hurt to have extremely masculine designs? Yes, maybe it will increase the distinction between what is masculine and feminine. But I do not know if that does any damage either.” - Informant #12*

Even if branding designs of men's products deliberately utilize 'sport', 'hard', and 'rugged' words and darker colors (Ringrow, 2016), it does not reflect nor are these elements the focal point for the contemporary men of this research. The stereotypical and exaggerated view of what men prefer and how they behave has become outdated in society and it became evident in the interviews. These values and elements do not reflect men's masculinity, and it is a perspective that has shifted in terms of acceptance and beliefs among the informant. Essentially, existing men's products do not live up to the standards and masculinity norms of a society that has evolved from the traditional masculinity norms, and brands within the marketplace should become more progressive and leverage the opportunity to break the gendered norms that are inherently present. Individuals and objects carry cultural meanings, and in turn, affect each other on the premise of meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Holt, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002), it is fair to claim that consumers with a changed perspective can beneficially influence change of products target towards them. Likewise, businesses have the power to influence consumers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Thereby, if brands change their designs to be more inclusive it could transcend to the consumer. This could be utilized to reduce the misconception and outdated views on masculinity norms and cultural meanings of men utilizing skincare. Essentially, the informants considered that they would not need to negotiate their view on masculinity, even if norms differed from their view

on masculinity, and that companies in the first place ought to be those who change rather than consumers.

All informants agreed and explicitly expressed that there are signs of underlying cultural meanings that are prevalent in how they negotiate their masculinity, behave, and hold judgment toward certain skincare users. For instance, botox was deemed as a “*gay person practice*,” and only women could do skin treatments without judgment. The same is applied in the particular aspect of utilizing skincare products that have distinct female traits, such as pink packaging or words connoted to beauty. However, it is not what the informants stand for themselves, they merely pointed it out. Thus, these beliefs are embedded in older generations and their opinions on skincare, and are oftentimes the norm that is prevalent in society (Connell, 1987; Östberg, 2013). This will cause a cultural and normative structural barrier for substantial alterations to existing men’s products, even if it is something that is suggested by the informants. However, a few informants did believe that alterations on the exaggerated masculine elements in branding designs are required, or otherwise the contemporary man may discontinue gender-specific male products, and opt for neutral or female assortments. This was expressed by Informant #3:

*“Before it was like (...) You were supposed to be homophobic and kind of... say things like ‘fuck that is gay’, or be a misogynist and sexist. Then you would earn the respect of other men by fitting into that norm. While now it is more like, if you take part in this behavior, you will most likely draw out a reaction that is the opposite. Because now it is all about being a fun dude and going along with the banter, and do not add on those building blocks anymore. So in that way, I see the masculine identity as far more healthy and progressive. So it feels as if men’s products also should change with regard to this. Because existing products today are quite outdated.” - Informant #3*

### *Changing Masculinities*

The majority of the informants believed that masculinity in its most extreme form is harmful and unacceptable. This aligns with the findings that men feel captive and depressed about following stereotypical masculine roles (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, it did become evident that the majority of the respondents did not deviate from the set norm (Butler, 1993). Only a mere total of four informants had purchased and utilized skincare targeted towards women. The rest of the informants did not have the same positive outlook or open attitude when it came to products for the opposite gender. This further validates Fugate and Philips’ (2010) findings, that men prefer gender-congruent products and that it is their superior choice. To opt for a female product would be deemed as inappropriate behavior both on a conscious and unconscious level (Butler, 1993). Therefore, the informants are strictly opting for gender-specific products, to further uphold and express their masculine identity, and that they are masculine through their strategic choice of consumption (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). However, all informants acknowledged that it has become far more accepted by younger generations. The problem is however, that skincare

does not reflect nor elude masculinity (Kreicbergs et al., 2024), and this opinion still stands among the majority of the informants, and according to them, overall society. Seen below, is a quote that reinforces the need for a connotation that a skincare product is for men.

*“But women, I believe, do not care if it says ‘women’ on the product. No, because it is more like, as a man you do not want to seem feminine. If it says ‘men’ on the product, then men would subconsciously buy it because it says ‘men.’ So yes, it is needed.” - Informant #13*

All 15 informants agreed that being homosexual does not make a man less masculine and that this is a stereotypical and old-fashioned view of masculinity. Nevertheless, everyone in the sample had at some point in their life received the comment “*Are you gay?*” when straying from the masculine norm or showing feminine traits, such as being sensitive, vulnerable, or upset (Boeuf, 2020). This both refutes and aligns with Connell’s (1987) and Östberg’s (2013) statements on hegemonic and heteronormative masculinity. Another paradox in how the informants express themselves, and how they behave when faced with criticism of others. This contributes to a new definition of masculinity in the sense of embracing feminine traits, but also being comfortable and secure with one’s identity rather than exaggerating the stereotypical masculine traits. This was a recurring theme in the interviews. While all informants considered themselves masculine, they all pointed out, more or less, that other individuals and society might not perceive them as such. There is a new secureness and distinction to what is normatively masculine, and less focus on the traits distinguishing masculinity and femininity. It is more about embracing and welcoming a new type of masculinity. The outdated perspectives are no longer appreciated, performed, or negotiated by the informants. By showing feminine tendencies and personality traits, such as compassion, sensitivity, and expressing emotions (Boeuf, 2020). It was not emasculating nor unacceptable by the informants. On the contrary, they all felt that actors in the marketplace and society should emulate these beliefs, and change accordingly to new perspectives and understandings of masculinity. The exaggerated masculinity traits, such as aggressiveness, emotional unavailability, and stoicism (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), were not appreciated, nor did they like the change in behavior of men in groups. Especially “*toxic masculinity*”, and how men in groups are detrimental to society and themselves. Nevertheless, all informants did utilize and consume skincare, but to various degrees, and would do it in the future even if they had to constantly negotiate their masculinity. The choice of consumption is therefore to opt for the male assortment to maintain the sense of masculinity. However, this highlights the norms and what is expected to be masculine, and how there is an incongruence in how men truly think about the stereotypical masculinity traits and how men behave in the belief of what is expected from them. It is worth noting that this is from a larger perspective and that this does not apply to the informants, their social settings, and their friends. It is the society at large and other individuals that are not in their proximity. The misconception of attitudes, and drawing the lines further than their closest sphere of friend groups becomes evident is an underlying problem in the socio-culture. This quote by Informant #6 exhibits that a shift has occurred in the social landscape.

*“I love football! (...) In various football games (...) I have to witness masculinity from its worst side. Because men in groups are not always super friendly. (...) You quickly notice the hostile environment, and aggressiveness towards people (...) You notice that you become insecure and uncomfortable (...) When hundreds of people are throwing bengalis at the police. It reflects pretty much how masculinity is in Sweden today. This with insecure guys who believe that masculinity is cursing, drinking beer and throwing shirts and fighting the police.” - Informant #6*

All respondents were in agreement that socio-cultural opinions on masculinity have changed, and thus, that products should reflect this shift in terms of inclusiveness and contemporary efforts. Therefore, it may not coincide with the contemporary males within society and their acceptance of skincare products as these may not adhere to, or reflect their identity or personality. Nevertheless, this leads to the fact that the majority of informants, do not care nor have an interest in skincare. By taking it a step further, a lack of interest in skincare could signify masculinity and a trait that is considered to be the norm in contemporary society. This aligns with Connell’s (1987) proclamation, that men tend to avoid behaviors that are perceived as feminine.

*“But that might be my problem or the thing with me, that I might think that it is manly to not meddle a lot with skincare. Could that be it? (...) It is masculine to not deal with skincare at all. Maybe guys think that I am more masculine if I do not take care of myself.” - Informant #11*

This came to the surface during one of the interviews, that the absence and avoidance of the practice is considered masculine to not utilize skincare. Hence, may be why skincare brands do not put as much effort into the male assortment, and why there is a reluctance among men to embrace skincare products. Essentially, there is a limited willingness to negotiate a new definition of masculinity in society and to include skincare practices as a masculine trait.

### *Personal Beliefs, Social Beliefs and Social Belonging*

All informants claimed that there is a lack of representation of men when it comes to skincare. While they perceived the men’s section most often as more secluded and hidden, in the skincare section of the store (Machado et al., 2021). Some informants did not care to know, or have been educated or exposed to what different skincare products do, thereby, they believed that a lot of products were not for them. The informants claimed that only athletes, especially football players, promote men’s skincare. Similarly, overall marketing efforts in the skincare context are not directed toward men, hence why they did not have in-depth knowledge on which products to utilize. However, they stated that there is a need to include normal people in skincare advertisements for men to understand that they are represented and included in the target audience. Simply not only in the men’s product category but in general, and show that skincare is not for a specific gender. This may transcend to the beliefs that the practice of skincare is not achievable, and the connotation that a normal man is not the

targeted audience for such products. Holt and Thompson (2004), similarly discuss the topic, that the depiction of stereotypical traits will further make men conform and abide by the social norms. However, in this case, it is rather the absence of inclusivity. Thus, not giving any sense of social belongingness (Holt, 2004) in the realm of skincare. On the contrary, normal women and non-celebrities, are seen utilizing skincare in various advertising, which will have a contradictory effect towards men as the element of relatability is eliminated. Hence the negotiating aspect is removed amid the belief that the products are not for them, as discussed by Informant #1 below.

*“If you watch TV and see commercials on skincare, then it is mostly women who apply products on their face. (...) So that is maybe why [skincare is associated with women]. (...) You can easily understand why a guy would believe that skincare is only for women. I would not react, but I could easily understand if a guy would not think that that specific product was for men. I think it is because everything is divided into femininity when it comes to skincare and everything that revolves around personal hygiene. So it feels as if they [brands] need to be overly clear that a product is specifically for men.” - Informant #1*

In the interviews, the informants were shown picture slides of the male, neutral, and female options of deodorants. It elicited a negative response and somewhat of a discussion on bringing a deodorant with the colorway of pink and white to a men’s locker room (See Figure 4). It brought on responses that were quite negative. When informants were questioned regarding this, they could not see themselves ever bringing a girly deodorant. Not abiding by gendered norms would lead to different repercussions (Butler, 1993; Östberg, 2013). And this action would lead to comments or harassment from other men. They were unanimous that a woman’s deodorant, specifically looking feminine, would never be accepted in a locker room, as presented below.

*“Well, I think that men would have said “damn that is gay” or something. (...) But that is just the way it is. (...) I think men would have laughed or made a comment if I brought a girly pink deo to the locker room. (...) Women are not as judgemental in that way when it comes to the products they use in comparison with men. (...) It is not supposed to be some pink shit. You just do not want that attention. I just do not want people to comment. (...) - Informant #9*

This concludes that the invisible consumption of a pink deodorant is accepted, but bringing it to the public sphere is not. However, one informant did say that he preferred women’s deodorant and encouraged other men to opt for the female option instead. This participant did stray from the norm. and What can be drawn from this is that the colorway of pink is heavily embedded as a feminine color. These findings align with Randell et al. (2016), and Holt and Thompson (2004), that societal pressure and those who are more prone to social conformity will opt for the more stereotypical option instead. Equally, the importance, representation, and indication of one’s identity and belonging within the collective group (Butler, 1993; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Therefore, pink, feminine skincare, cannot be deemed as

masculine. Therefore, the sense of masculinity is not up for negotiation in this aspect. This supports Biswas (2016), proclaiming that the color pink is considered to be for women, and thus, the consumption of said color in the skincare context reflects the gender identity of a woman. Additionally, the informants did draw upon the connection that homosexual tendencies and feminine traits do not express masculinity and manliness, which aligns with Östberg (2013). Therefore, a radical change in men's skincare products cannot be made, especially the color pink, due to social pressure and cultural beliefs at a larger scale.

Even if all agree that being gay does not make you less masculine, there is an incongruence and deeply rooted social belief that a typical feminine practice would make you less masculine. Similarly, the next quote eludes the same issue of the informants not being comfortable or brave enough to utilize skincare. There is a hyper-awareness of how the practice will be perceived by others, especially regarding being considered gay or feminine (Butler, 2004). There is insecurity and difficulty in embracing the practice, for fear of judgment from others. This was further reinforced when the informants were asked whether skincare reflects masculinity, and why men do not talk more openly about the practice. Hence a constant negotiation process of avoiding topics that are perceived feminine, in other words, skincare, is consciously avoided.

*“Well, beardcare, from what I have heard, has become more popular. People [men] can have their beard care but skincare I have not heard that much about. It feels like a beard symbolizes masculinity. If someone would have said ‘Wow you have really nice skin!’ People would then say ‘Okay, are you gay?’ If that comment were uttered then everyone would acknowledge it. Well, it is a thing that is deeply rooted within society... I do not agree... but it [homophobia] is present in society.” - Informant #13*

A beard is perceived as masculine, as noted above. It was the most common association, and beardcare products were far more popular than ordinary skincare. A masculine trait, such as a beard, was deemed far more accepted in terms of usage. Even if some informants had increased usage of medical, or ordinary skincare, it was due to current and visible issues with the complexion, for example, acne and dryness. While anti-aging benefits, routines, and products were not up for discussion. For instance, wrinkles were not a major concern, or even at all, for the informants. Instead, skin issues such as dryness and acne were the driving force rather than the beauty and anti-aging benefits of utilization. The only skin preservation concern is the prominent short-term effect rather than the long-term advantages and benefits. Hence, one can draw the connection that men approach skincare differently than women. It is a matter of tackling a visible issue that is currently present, not a routine that is upheld by preventative practices. What became quite clear after the interviews was that those with girlfriends, or had been in committed relationships, were those who were more eager to diversify and utilize skincare products. They could envision themselves using their girlfriends' skincare. Also, those who had a genuine interest in skincare had been encouraged by their girlfriends and had an existing skincare routine. This could be due to encouraged performativity, and reinforcement by the opposite sex. Where the social need and pressure for

conformity in masculine settings are erased (Holt, 2004; Östberg, 2013). For instance, when comparing the first quote made by Informant #9, who was single.

*“Yeah, there is definitely an external pressure. Well that you are judged by people. Like this, when they see you use a little too much skincare creams or skincare products or generally, what you put on your face (...) Then you will be judged.” - Informant #9*

And then Informant #15, who is in a relationship at the time of the interview.

*“I really do not think so. At least not anymore. Since skin is not different depending on gender and all women’s products that I have tested are better, it is unreasonable to then use skincare products for men.” - Informant #15*

It can be concluded that the pressure to be masculine is less invasive by women as opposed to men. This is strengthened by the informants’ when it comes to their answers on men in groups and that the majority of them seldom discussed skincare with their male friends. It is therefore argued that social reinforcement, especially from other men, would enable more men to utilize and consume skincare without having to negotiate their sense of masculinity. Another correlation could potentially be that female relationships reinforce the utilization of skincare, and reduce the need for negotiating one’s masculinity if consuming skincare.

## Design

*The next theme will focus on the design aspects of the findings and includes the main themes of ‘Skincare Convenience for Men’, ‘Product Preferences’, and ‘Product Opinions’. These findings are analyzed on the premises of informants’ opinions, preferences, perceptions, and experiences of skincare products for men.*

### *Skincare Convenience for Men*

It was possible to distinguish a pattern of resistance among the males toward purchasing and consuming skincare products. As mentioned in the Gender chapter, the apparent opposition could have many different motivations and grounds due to social norms or individual beliefs. However, all 15 informants mentioned the importance of convenience in skincare consumption. As long as it was not time-consuming, or too expensive, to name a few factors, the motivation increased. Thus, convenience was especially protruding for the informants, as they did not consider themselves as individuals who care a lot about skincare. On the other hand, those individuals who actively seek or utilize skincare put more effort and emphasis on pursuing new venues of consumption. For instance, actively searching or ordering products online as opposed to opting for an easily accessible product in-store.

The informants were more imposed on utilitarian needs rather than hedonic, and aesthetic needs. This contradicts the findings of Oblong (2012), as the informants did not care for an aesthetically cohesive design of the products, but rather price and function. Even if they did express that the design was not appealing. Regardless, the function was the predominant trait. However, they did recognize the paradox and incongruence in their answers as each respective interview went by. This initiated the internal discussion of a few informants whether function truly was the sole reason for purchase, or whether it was the gender-specific design elements. Since gender is heavily infused into the socio-cultural sphere, it implies that the gender-specific convenience of opting for a certain product cannot be neglected. Bakshi (2012) argues that males usually possess a different path to consumption, in comparison to females. One of the most prominent factors why the respondents were resistant to purchasing certain skincare products was the design of the product packaging. Where eight informants described how they desired and preferred limited and sparse text on the product, and twelve informants explained their preference for clean and simple product design for minimalistic attributes, as well as darker and earthy tone colors. These factors could link to their less involved path of consumption, and having easily recognizable traits. And, it could be stated that to increase males' skincare consumption, focus on design and minimize details, to support males' convenient purchasing route.

According to the informants, skincare is supposed to be purchased to solve a problem rather than an interest, rather than minimize the chances of receiving a problem in the future. These revelations are also linked to the communication and motivation styles more commonly exhibited by men compared to women. Specifically, Bakshi (2012), and Mitchell and Walsh (2004), highlighted how men tend to approach purchasing decisions as problems to solve rather than enjoyable experiences. Followingly, accessibility and making a low effort were of high importance for several of the informants. Thereby, aiming to simplify in-store branding to enhance the accessibility of the purchasing journey. This involves ensuring clear, transparent product branding across all touchpoints: including web page designs, product design, and product portrayal. A smaller number of the participants expressed that their skincare purchasing path included research, comparison of products, and reading reviews as of opposed to other informants. Additionally, these individuals tended to experience skincare problems to a greater degree. Thus, this also correlates with the presented facts of how males are more interested when faced with a problem that requires resolution.

When product packaging contains information on multi-usage the interest among the informants increases. For instance, body washes or lotions that showed a '3-1' or '5-1' symbol were quite appreciated by several of the informants. The price would preferably be quite low and the product should be functioning the way they wanted it. For example, having a nice smell, consistency, and impact on the body and face. All these factors are associated with convenience, and products can be easily recognized by the informant (Mortimer & Clarke, 2011). Hence, many of the respondents desired convenience above everything else regarding skincare. For example, Informant #11 said:

*“I shop [skincare products] in-store, at Hemköp. Then when I walk by the shampoo aisle I will pick an option I like. Two in one, shampoo and body wash in one. It is very convenient and then I am done there.” - Informant #11*

However, males can be more risk-takers when it comes to the financial aspect (Bakshi 2012; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004), and since many of the respondents made it clear that they did not want to put an excessive amount of money on skincare, it could be concluded as males retain a quite small interest in skincare in general, since they are less likely to spend a lot of effort and money on it. Still, to increase or maintain their interest in the future, it is vital to keep the design neat, and the branding clear, and that the visualizing elements target the audience on the products in a subtle but clear way through colors and in-store portraying.

### *Product Preferences*

The informants spoke freely and often brought up their preferences concerning skincare products, especially the design of the products. These discussions started, not only from the researcher’s questions but also from showing products or pictures of products. Some elements that most of the informants were unanimous about were the importance of the text, word choices, colors, and fonts. The majority of the informants, as mentioned, desired limited text on the products, which could imply a lower interest in improving their knowledge of the subject, or simply a quite narrow understanding of what skincare can offer. Moreover, several informants appreciated the clean and larger fonts, the same for the logo. The word choices were preferably short and protruding which again suggests how the products need to be convenient and stick out in assortments of products. Regarding colors, the participants could be divided into four different groups of preferences. One group of informants mentioned that the stereotypical male products containing blue or dark colors, word choices, such as ‘active’ or ‘sport’, and strong masculine smells were preferred. This group could be linked with the assumption that individuals connect a certain gender identity (Butler, 1993; Machado et al., 2021), essentially, words that reflect masculinity. Another group of participants preferred products with earthy tones and minimalistic designs, such as brown, beige, and green colors with simplistic details, and no mention of stereotypical word choices like ‘sport’ or ‘active’. This group could be those who lean more toward gender-fluid designs and do not connect with current gender-stereotypical branding designs. However, two of these participants were also placed in the first group. These participants mentioned that they would probably purchase stereotypical masculine products, but would not feel proud of it. Instead, they thought that the design of those products was quite “ugly” or “immature.” And, if they could design the products, they would choose a much more simple design with unisex features in comparison to the blue colors, and sharp edges. This concludes a sort of incongruence among the informants and their answers. They consume in one way but would prefer to consume or opt for something else. Randell et al. (2016) argue, that the effects of peer pressure can increase the likability of men to continue purchasing in a certain normative way, and exposure to specific branding can make men abide by the active norms (Holt & Thompson, 2004), which could be an explanation to these incongruent actions by the informants. Another

group of participants mentioned that they often purchase neutral skincare products over gender-specific ones, such as products and designs seen in pharmacies, as compared to grocery stores. However, most of them still described the design as ugly and “*medical*” but considered them as trustworthy. Hence, incongruence can be found in their choice of consumption here as well. The last group of participants preferred more feminine designs and products directed to women, with lighter colors, more detailed word choices, and more complex layouts. Nonetheless, it was not a clear and direct answer, and those participants still did not usually consume those products even though they mentioned the design as far more favorable. Once again, an incongruence is possible to notice within the informant’s consumer behavior. A few of them mentioned that this occurrence was due to simple habits and routines. However, it is possible to distinguish societal pressure from masculine commercials and gendered branding in this context as well.

In the logo discussion, whether logos should include the word ‘men’ or ‘for men.’ The participants could also be divided into groups of two this time. The larger group considered it to be “*unnecessary*” and “*immature*”. The reason was that they did not see themselves as “*incompetent*” or “*untaught*” to make their own choices. Informant #5 said:

*“Simply why? [the word men is needed] It’s like when people call women’s football for women’s football. It’s still football, right? It’s like, why do we need to brand it in another way? It’s just like, the fuck? I mean, we usually have similar skin and hair right?” - Informant #5*

According to Ulrich et al. (2020), simply adding the word ‘men’ to the brand name does not make it more appealing to men, as it does not increase their sense of masculinity. In this case, they considered it to be ridiculous. Still, some of the participants did enjoy that addition. They believed it supported and directed them in their purchase decision. Neutral, or unisex branding design can affect male consumer responses negatively due to confusion (Bhanja & Mehta, 2022; Blazquez et al., 2019), which could be a reason why the word ‘men’ is necessary for some informants. They appreciated quick purchases with mainly one important factor, that they purchased products targeted to men, and thereby, thought it facilitated for them. Informant #2 said:

*“It is kind of good so that I know which products are for men or not. So that I don’t accidentally purchase something wrong. If there is a right or wrong.” - Informant #2*

Most participants could understand why brands wanted to keep the word ‘men’ on a logo. Some of them mentioned that it is probably efficient for brands to keep it as a safety measure in case some men do not want to purchase skincare products without the security and promise that they are the main target. However, it was not necessary from a design spectra according to them. Randell et al. (2016) proclaim that peer pressure is one common factor regarding why men continue walking along a stereotypical masculine path during consumption. It could be seen that brands are a major part of that pressure. Consequently, not only social pressure from peers. Brands that keep this certain masculine design on their skincare products create

tension among some men. From only a manager's perspective, it could be, if only looking at the presented results in this study, proficient to keep logos with words of 'men'. However, the results also showed that many informants considered it to be childish, and thereby it could be necessary to rethink those standpoints. Not only to satisfy those men's pleasure during consumption but to pursue a more broad-minded view of society and societal changes.

### *Product Opinions*

Many of the informants agreed that the design of feminine skincare was more elegant and nicer looking than masculine products presented during the interviews (*see Appendix B: Figures*). According to them, the lines were softer, and the shape of the packaging was more subtle and smoother. The colors were lighter, happier, and more colorful. A lot of informants emphasized that colors such as pink and purple were significantly recurrent. Thus, the informants consider products targeted mainly towards women to be portrayed and branded significantly stereotypically feminine. Hence, branding design plays a vital part in social and cultural forces that discover and uphold gendered stereotypes, which in turn could lead to consumers attaining a certain gender through almost everything they consume (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Leuthesser et al., 1995; Östberg, 2013). However, since a few informants, remarked that they would choose *Figure 4*, the feminine products, before the masculine or natural products, it could show that it is necessary to change gender-specific branding or move more towards gender-fluid designs. Maybe, even reconfiguring existing men's products, and introducing new design cues that are still distinct to female skincare. A design change, or a step to make the gender-specific designs opposites to each other was further encouraged as well. For example, informant #13 mentioned:

*"No, but it would have been nice if it [men and women skincare products] was not so two-sided, and each other's polar opposites." - Informant #13*

As aforementioned, one group of informants was more interested in purchasing the feminine products due to the design, and that these portrayed a more trustworthy appearance. However, most of the participants agreed that the theme of how this looks, despite its beautiful design, was slightly exaggerated for their taste. Thus would therefore not prefer to purchase these specific products. However, this group of informants also considered feminine products to be "*extensive*" and "*ambitious*". Initially, they expressed a form of jealousy or reverence that many girls, according to themselves, used multiple products for many different motives. Such as eye cream for the skin under the eye or anti-age cream to keep their skin looking "*smooth*" and "*young*". However, after a while of discussing the topic, they all seemed to feel that this phenomenon is exaggerated and there are too many excessive and unnecessary products on the market. This inconsistency could be due to the social norms of how men have been portrayed within skincare and how they should consume according to society (Avery, 2012; Azar et al., 2018; Guittar et al., 2022; Kumar, 2022), and therefore, do not act on their actual feelings. Hence, it aligns with what Avery (2012) and Lee (2006), state about how men tend

to be instinctively drawn toward cues that are far from feminine. Informant #1 argued about the extensive skincare:

*“Okay like this, some things just cannot be fixed [skin issues]. Like, scrubbing your face all the time? That is too much. They exaggerate a lot and, like, who has a skincare routine with 12 different steps or products? I do not think that is good for anyone.” - Informant #1*

In coherence with this, several of the participants mentioned how much intricate text the product packaging contains of the more feminine products. It was clear that they did not appreciate this aspect. Many informants stated that if they could design their own skincare products, the packaging would contain a small amount of text, and it should be clear what the products have to offer with large fonts, easily understood. The same informants also said that the female products were more niched than the male products. As mentioned, more products for specific areas like wrinkles or under eyes. They considered that fewer male products have those types of offerings, suggesting a lower supply in comparison to female lines. However, when presented with some pictures of actual male products containing active skincare or specific attributes, they still expressed that these were not of interest. The reason behind many of those arguments was that they assumed that a lot of these attributes and specific skincare for women were scams. As Informant #8 expressed:

*“My spontaneous reaction when you showed these girls’ products was that I would not really buy them because it looks like it is a bit of a scam for girls. Like this scam thing they sell a lot of products for girls, so I just compare the looks to that compartment.” - Informant #8*

Which Informant #15 proceeded to criticize the skincare industry:

*“I think somewhere that it is an industry that is based on a lot... I do not know, but I think it is a completely insane industry. And to some extent, it is great that you can care as much as you want about your skin. But, I also think that if we had just let it be, it could have been just as good.” - Informant #15*

Hence, even though more men’s targeted skincare brands offered active or more specific skincare, most informants did not seem to be interested. Once again, it is possible to notice a bridge between the argument presented by Bakshi (2012), and how men, to a greater extent compared to women, desire to solve an issue through consumption. And, if they do not believe that the issue can be solved with certain skincare products, they might not be as interested in buying. Furthermore, as stated, several studies show that women are more encouraged or likely to purchase products containing masculine traits in comparison to men who are likely to purchase products with feminine traits (Kumar, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2020). Consequently, if men connect active and distinctive skincare products with femininity, it is coherent with them not wanting to purchase them for their connection with women. Thus,

skincare that is active and contains many different precise attributes, are considered feminine by several informants.

This part discusses the opinions of skincare products targeted toward men, with more stereotypically masculine traits (*see Figure 2*). The portrayal of male skincare relies on the discourse of complete opposites to female skincare, and this was noted by the informants as well. Brands distinguish the segments of gender on the premises of color, logos, word choices, and images (Lieven et al., 2015). Therefore, the opposite and darker elements of men's products enable the consumer to understand which skincare product is targeted to whom. However, the informants expressed various opinions about this division. Each of the informants described the look to be “harder” compared to the feminine products, more masculine, aggressive, dark-colored, and sporty. A few of them mentioned that the packaging was more rugged, containing sharper edges or angled contours that gave them a more robust appearance. A majority of the informants stated that this design was “quite ugly,” “lame,” “useless,” and even “exaggerated.” Nevertheless, some continued to consume said products, because it was the option available for men. They suggested that the design does not have to be exaggeratedly stereotypical, instead, it could lean towards a more neutral design for them to be satisfied. A few found it crucial for their benefit and sake to know which product is specifically for them. Informant #13 mentioned:

*“I do not think everyone fits in this tough and cool image. Certainly not everyone. If it could be toned down a bit, it would be more inclusive.” - Informant #13*

Several informants considered this design to be childish, with many of them associating the most masculine products with childhood memories, such as sports camps and gym classes at school. Moreover, the smell was a factor many informants brought up as something negative. They related some specific skincare brands with an intense masculine smell that they did not understand or prefer. However, a few participants did enjoy the smell and said that they appreciated smelling traditionally manly. When discussing preferences, the interviewer asked what brands the informant did not want to be associated with. Informant #2 said:

*“AXE, I would say. It feels like something a twelve-year-old boy would use. Long story short, they probably have good products but it is not something I have used since I was a teenager.” - Informant #2*

Hence, continue questioning the level of maturity. However, some of the informants seemed to appreciate the masculine design and stated that it was clean and relatable. Those informants demonstrated their rapid recognition of these certain products due to their extensive experience and familiarity with them.

*“It is pretty clean, the design. Like, simple and easy. Not something that screams in your face.” - Informant #9*

Hence, a greater majority of the informants did not care for the extreme stereotypical design of men's products. They consider them “ugly,” “too dark,” “too stereotypical” and “childish”. Still, many informants preferred them due to familiarity, the smell, and that the products integrated well with their image. As stated earlier, brand gender is of great importance due to consumers being able to relate and connect with a brand (Machado et al., 2021). Essentially, consumers who strongly identify with a particular gender are more likely to prefer brand design elements associated with that gender they identify with (Aaker, 1997; Belk, 1988; Grohmann, 2009). Several studies show that it is important to target males carefully to minimize risks of confusion (Bhanja & Mehta, 2022; Blazquez et al., 2019; Neale et al., 2016). Thus, arguing for continuing with these stereotypical designs. However, multiple informants argue for something else, that the design is simply too much. One possible link to Ulrich's et al. (2020) statement, is that adding the word ‘men’ to a logo, for instance, does not make a brand or product more appealing to men, since it does not increase the sense of masculinity. Hence, some of the informants regarded the stereotypical rugged design as something that is not necessarily masculine either, rather that it was “childish” and “awkward.”

One discussion was about the opinions regarding the design of the more neutral products (*see Figure 3 in Appendix B*). Many informants agreed that the design was very medical, and looked like something you buy from the pharmacy. It was not a positive connotation according to the informants. On the contrary, they consider that to be a rather boring design. Still, they all agreed that these products looked more trustworthy than both the feminine and masculine products. Furthermore, some participants indicated that the products were remarkably white with a clean and neutral design, but still stylish and fairly modern. Also, some informants associated these products with girls, hence, products that are targeted towards women. Finally, many informants associated the design with products without any smell or scent, which was considered both a positive, and negative aspect, depending on who the interviewers' asked.

*“Yes, very medical. I guess that this is, kind of, generated through research. And it looks trustworthy, 7 out of 10.” - Informant #3*

As stated, men are less agreeable to using feminine products than women are to use masculine products (Kumar, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2020). Multiple informants consider the neutral products to strive in a more feminine direction, it is not entirely unfamiliar that men have a harder time purchasing products outside gendered borders. However, once again it is clear that multiple informants do not consider a significantly masculine design to be remarkably trustworthy since they have discussed the trustworthiness of both feminine and neutral products. This could imply a future growth towards the neutral skincare division among men. Since they have a certain restriction towards feminine products. However, they still feel that both the feminine and the neutral products are more trustworthy. Perhaps the neutral-designed products will rise in preference and be favored in the future. Although the design was multiple times considered boring, other colors such as beige, brown, and green were still considered neutral but not as boring. Thus, depending on one's own opinions and

design preferences, the neutral design division can be expanded and more prevalent among men's product designs. Informant #12 expressed this:

*“So, I think that some products for men are a little bit too focused on marketing, and then I do not take it very seriously. Like, I want something, recommended by, what is it called, skincare specialists. And, therefore, I would prefer something that feels more medical because I think that will be better, even if it is boring.” - Informant #12*

## Conclusive Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore whether the evolving societal landscapes encourage a shift in masculine identities and gender-specific branding designs. This was specifically in the context of skincare, and skincare products for men. The first research question on how men negotiate their masculinity through the consumption and utilization of skincare was answered from various angles. Firstly, the men constantly negotiated for the utilization of skincare, to find socially acceptable products that do not carry connotations of beauty. It became evident that female-targeted products were not favorable or perceived to be a choice for men. The men's responses were paradoxical of what they truly believed, and incongruencies with their behavior. Inevitably, this caused restrictions on the choice of consumption, the willingness to negotiate masculinity, and the possibility of exploring beyond the boundaries of gender-specific men's products. Furthermore, companies were deemed to be equally responsible for shaping cultural meanings and affecting the willingness to consume and utilize skincare among men. The consumer sought alterations on gender-specific designs, to promote inclusiveness, and reduce stereotypically masculine designs to lessen the need for negotiating one's masculine identity. Currently, existing stereotypical masculine designs do not reflect nor elude contemporary masculinity. Since the opinion on what defines masculinity has been redefined, the embracement of femininity has increased. However, skincare products do not reflect masculinity nor is the practice fully accepted amongst male consumers. This could be due to the lack of male representation in skincare advertisements and branding efforts. Hence, the need for negotiating is removed amid the belief that the products are not for them. Nevertheless, it was non-negotiable to incorporate the color pink into future skincare designs among men. It does not represent masculinity nor do men want to be associated with pink skincare in public. It was also concluded that the pressure to be masculine is majorly from other men. Therefore, when men are removed from a sense of security and social conformity it forces consumers to negotiate the choice of consumption and utilization to preserve their masculinity.

The second research question, on how men perceive and experience existing gender-specific branding designs in the skincare industry was answered. The aspects of convenience addressed were factors that could increase men's consumption and motivations in their limited interest in skincare. It was evident that consumption acted as a solution to problems rather than for personal enjoyment. Most men stressed the importance of convenience during skincare purchases. Where opportunities were discovered to simplify their consumer journey,

such as minimizing the text on skincare products, utilizing comprehensible logos, and brand names, and utilizing recognition cues in-store. Moreover, the men's design preferences showed possibilities of changes in skincare branding. It was revealed that there is an interest in more neutral designs and more feminine design aspects. Despite this, several consumers expressed that branding designs that deviated from stereotypical masculine designs did not align with their stated preferences, exhibiting an existing incongruence among men of their actual purchasing behavior and preferences. Accordingly, the main reasons among men are due to peer pressure and practiced routines. Finally, the opinions of men regarding gender-specific designs on skincare, including masculine, feminine, and neutral styles, were presented and revealed various incongruences. Feminine designs were generally perceived as more trustworthy than masculine. However, a significant number of men conveyed that feminine branding designs were part of a sales scam with excessive product features and purposes, and an exaggerated amount of products. Overall, masculine designs were less appealing to men than neutral and feminine designs, since these were often perceived as childish and lame. However, it is challenging to fully embrace feminine designs. This argues for a gradual branding transition, with minor adjustments from stereotypically masculine designs toward more neutral ones. Hence, a social shift among consumers is prevalent, which could make more brands compelled to adapt and change from consumers' opinions. Nevertheless, habits are ingrained and difficult to break, and societal and cultural influences cannot be removed overnight. Therefore, continuous minimal changes are a suitable solution to increase men's opinion and consumption of skincare.

*In conclusion*, it was possible to distinguish that there needs to be a change in the skincare industry regarding men's assortment. It can become more inclusive and break the stereotypical roles held on men to contribute to the apparent societal shift. Corporations and brands need to equally be a part of the change and transform together with the norms to make fair inclusivity for all men, broaden the assortment, and accommodate different skin types while still imposing the necessities of taking care of one's skin, and educating men on the short and long-term effects of skincare. Concludingly, from all the findings, it is argued that the perspective on masculinity is changing in terms of norms and cultural acceptance of alterations in existing skincare for men. The changes need to be minor and the socio-cultural beliefs that are still prominent should not be neglected by skincare companies. However, it is essential to keep in mind that changes on all levels in the marketplace, on products, and consumers, respectively, need to follow said changes to accommodate the gender-specific branding designs, and for these to be accepted on a socio-cultural level. By also acknowledging the complexity of these restrictions and possibilities, it fosters new insights and elements of contemporary society.

## Theoretical, Managerial and Societal Implications

### *Theoretical Implications*

This research contributes with new perspectives on how men negotiate their masculinity through the consumption of skincare, as well as their experience of existing gender-specific branding. This allows for valuable insights into academic research. These findings are deemed to be transferable to other contexts of consumption. While previous research argued that gender-specific branding should continuously change and adapt to gender norms and societal shifts (Boise, 2022; Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019), this research paper tried to fill the existing research gap and exhibits that more research is required. Businesses often do internal market research on their specific product assortments and branding designs, and the competitive advantage is seldom shared across the marketplace (Ethington, 2018). This research on the other hand makes such findings available for academia, and the entire marketplace, to research studies on gender, masculinity, gender-specific branding, and branding designs. While previous literature has been concerned with masculinity in advertising (Kreichbergs et al., 2024), men's invisible consumption of skincare (Byrne & Milestone, 2022), and gender-specific designs and their differences (Pettersson McIntyre, 2018), this study has instead focused on norms and culture changes that enable these changes, and in turn, the consequent alterations to gender-specific designs. This approach has been neglected in academia, even if contemporary masculinity allows for such change. The contribution provides findings on how the portrayal of gender limits men in their way of consuming skincare. Furthermore, the findings act in coherence with studies on how men somewhat fear consuming products with feminine traits (Bhanja & Mehta, 2022; Blazquez et al., 2019). Albeit it was demonstrated that the perspective of masculinity in society was not in agreement with the classical definitions of heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Östberg, 2013). Similarly, existing skincare designs emanate these stereotypical traits. This further validates Byrne and Milestone's (2022) argument that research on the skincare industry needs to be conducted from men's perspective. The contribution regards evolving patterns of socio-cultural masculinity, and this topic deserves further recognition in future skincare studies. Even though the choices of methods in this research focused solely on skincare products, there are still other products that are classified as gender-specific, such as shampoos and perfumes. Opinions and preferences are equally as vital in the gendered discussion of designs and consumption.

### *Managerial and Societal Implications*

The marketplace and brands carry the responsibility to adapt to the market of consumers based on social and cultural norms. Even if the change may be slight, marketers must adapt, and move past the stereotypical masculine designs and roles that have been prevalent in consumer goods, to adhere to the shifting norms. The shift in gender structures discussed throughout the entire research could support brands and managers in the development of campaigns, products, and marketing strategies. It is possible to distinguish several design preferences as well as how the products are portrayed in-store. Convenience is of high

importance when targeting males to reduce complexity, such as enlarging the text on products, making clear and elegant logos, and straightforward explanations of products to increase the willingness to learn and their skincare knowledge. Furthermore, clean and minimalistic design aspects that were appreciated, and fostered trustworthiness of the products' functions, as well as switching to beige and green colors, more neutral colors but not boring. A lot of the existing masculine designs possess an outdated design, associating these with childish consumption and negative memories of locker rooms. This could lead to younger men opting for competing brands and purchasing non-gender-specific products that follow in terms of contemporary preferences and opinions.

The societal implications are the insights into inclusiveness and the aspects that need to be altered and reduced that make men question their masculine identity, and how this can change for improving mental health. Therefore, it is suggested to address the needs of younger men who do not conform to masculine stereotypes and to alter existing gender-specific branding designs to be less stereotypical. Even though a change is necessary to satisfy a larger group of men, it is vital to not exaggerate. For instance, if the stereotypical word choices such as 'sport,' 'energy', and 'active' are removed, it is not required to change the choices of color as well. Since, as presented, both color, shapes of products, and word choices can assist consumers in understanding what products they should buy to follow societal norms; therefore, changing too many cues could confuse them excessively in their consumption process. The darker colors of the products were not appreciated, but it is clearly stated that the color is the first aspect recognized in physical stores. The colors could be slightly modified in a direction towards a new representation of men's products, but the alterations require a longer and softer transition process than changing everything at once. Moreover, it emerged that detailed skincare with intricate text, specific purposes, and active ingredients possess feminine traits. Therefore, if increasing active skincare for men, it is noteworthy to be cautious and camouflage it well with masculine attributes. The suggested modifications need to be made progressively, and large alterations cannot be made since these would disrupt the choice of consumption. From these minor efforts, active skin interest may rise among men as well. Furthermore, by leveraging the competitive advantage of the findings of this study, it can increase sales and revenues and equally support the shift among gendered structures. If no measures are taken, it may cause companies and brands to become stagnant. Not only the gender-specific product lines but businesses may become a part of the societal issues that neglect changing masculinities.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research shed new light on an existing phenomenon that may not have been investigated beyond the scope of businesses. While this paper focused on revisiting and getting a clearer picture of what is necessary to change existing skincare products for men, it can further be explored with other approaches. A recommendation for future research is to expand the age frame, to investigate whether older generations have the same opinions and preferences as younger men. Due to the informants not agreeing with stereotypical gender norms, maybe

these beliefs align with older men as well. The stigmatization of skincare is heavily induced in society and the assumptions and projections that the underlying opinions are distinct. Men consume due to utilitarian aspects of skincare, and factors such as price, scent, and functionality, outweigh the aesthetic attributes. This could further be investigated, the aspects that determine gender-specific branding designs, or generally, all skincare products. Ultimately, price, scent, and function have an impact or whether design has a limited effect on the choice of consumption. A path to consider is the epistemological approach to the phenomenon. Whether a quantitative strategy is to pursue when it comes to the superior choice of design for men's skincare products. Where surveys or experiment settings could leverage initial responses, without any judgments or distractions of the interviewers. Essentially, investigates whether the positionality of the interviewers may affect informants' answers. And, if the responses would differ if the interviewers would have been of the same sex. Furthermore, there could be other markets or industries to research, and if these share the stereotypical design aspects they could benefit from alterations.

This research limits its scope to Sweden and Swedish participants, a new research path to pursue is other demographic and geographic segments. The role of gender and masculinity differs across nationalities (Hofstede et al., 2010), and Sweden is a society where individualism is more accepted (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Therefore, gender norms and cultural structures vary and the pressure to conform to masculine self-images may not work or be accepted. Equally, the findings may not be transferable amid the socio-cultural aspects in terms of regions, which require recognition by companies in their branding strategies. The beliefs, preferences, opinions, and norms may vary according to this study's findings. Likewise, an approach to the feminine stereotypical designs may carry similar dispositions and discourses in terms of relevancy, and cultural shifts. Therefore, this research opens up new venues and contexts to (re-)discover, and ultimately, update current assortment designs. The suggestion is to further approach the matter on new settings, and gender-specific branding design directed towards both females and males. Therefore, expanding research on the gender frame on branding designs that are deemed as stereotypically outdated and the required changes.

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## Appendix A: Tables

**Table 1.**  
*Topics in the Interview Guide*

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
The Customer Journey	The process of introducing the topics to the informants and easing into the research topic and sphere.
Brands and Gender	Comparison between brands provides what is most important to them regarding brand, function, or design.
Gender-specific Branding Design Elements	The physical attributes of existing skincare products. Here the informants were shown three picture slides of “men”, “neutral” and “women” products.
Gender, Norms and Masculinity	An overview and reasoning behind their skincare consumption. A discussion on gender roles, identity, norms, and their beliefs on masculinity. A picture slide with specific gender designs and providing insights into how gender-specific products differ.

**Table 2.**  
*Informant Description*

<b>Informant No.</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship status</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1	Male	27	In a relationship	Customer service agent
2	Male	25	Single	Student
3	Male	25	Single	Student
4	Male	24	In a relationship	Consultant
5	Male	26	In a relationship	HR recruiter
6	Male	23	In a relationship	Student
7	Male	23	Single	Property technician
8	Male	23	In a relationship	Designer
9	Male	23	Single	Student
10	Male	27	Single	Warehouse worker
11	Male	24	Single	Student
12	Male	25	In a relationship	Engineer
13	Male	27	Single	Student
14	Male	26	Single	Sports agent
15	Male	26	In a relationship	E-commerce specialist

**Table 3.**  
*Identified Themes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<i>Norms, Cultural beliefs, Women practice, Skepticism, Stigma, Upbringing, Social codes</i>	Paradoxical Cultural Structures	Gender
<i>Masculine identity, Masculinity, Femininity, Beard, Sport, Masculine, Ignorant, Avoidance</i>	Changing Masculinities	
<i>Associations, Personal beliefs, Conformity, Social belonging, Perspectives, Social Beliefs, Gender normative insecurities, Social Identity</i>	Personal Beliefs, Social Beliefs and Social Belonging	
<i>Simple text and design, Price, Accessible, Function, Low Effort, Cues, Routine, Low activation, Uneducated consumers</i>	Skincare Convenience for Men	Design
<i>Color, Font. Minimalistic design and packaging, Logo, Brand name, Need direction, Word choices, Less text</i>	Product Preferences	
<i>Feminine products: Extensive, Ambitious, Multiple and excessive products, Too much text, Niche, Detailed, Scam, Pink, Purple, Softer lines, Smooth, Nice looking</i>	Product Opinions	
<i>Masculine products: Multifunction, Aggressive, Dark, Masculine looks, Sporty, Ugly, Lame, Need to change towards more neutral, Strong scented, Fast recognition, Relatable, Clean design</i>		
<i>Neutral products: Stylish, Modern, Trustworthy, Medical, Pharmaceuticals, Associations with girls, No scent, Clean, White, Neutral, Boring</i>		

## Appendix B: Figures

**Figure 1.**

*Male products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 2.**

*Neutral products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 3.**

*Female products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 4.**

*Masculine, Neutral, and Feminine Products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 5.**

*Masculine, Neutral, and Feminine Products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 6.**

*Masculine, Neutral, and Feminine Products - slideshow from the interviews*



**Figure 1.**

1. L'Oréal Paris Men Expert Pure Carbon Anti-Imperfection Daily Face Wash 100 ml
2. L'Oréal Paris Men Expert Hydra Energetic 24H Moisturiser Anti-Tiredness 50 ml
3. AXE Shower Gel Black 400 ml
4. NIVEA MEN Protect & Care Deep Cleansing Face Wash 100 ml
5. Dove Men+Care 72h Advanced Clean Comfort roll-on 50 ml
6. ACO For Men Face Cream Moist Perfume Free 60 ml
7. Biotherm Homme Aqua-Fitness Homme Shower Gel 200 ml
8. Bulldog Original Face Wash 150 ml
9. NIVEA MEN Hyaluron Face Moisturising Cream Anti-age Hyaluron 50 ml

**Figure 2.**

1. CeraVe Foaming Cleanser 236 ml
2. La Roche-Posay Cicaplast Baume B5 40 ml
3. Lactacyd Shower Creme No Perfume 1000 ml
4. Eucerin Dermaclean Cleansing Gel 200 ml
5. Neutral Sensitive Antiperspirant Deo Roll-on 50 ml
6. Cetaphil Facial Moisturizer Dry Skin 50 g
7. Miniderm creme 20 % 500 g
8. Cetaphil Moisturizing Lotion 500 ml
9. ACO Sensitive Balance Face Cream Ansiktskräm 50ml

**Figure 3.**

1. The Ordinary Squalane Cleanser 50 ml
2. Clinique Moisture Surge 100-Hour Auto-Replenishing Hydrator 30 ml
3. Indy Beauty Moisturising Oil Wash 400 ml
4. ACO Face Cleansing Milk 200 ml
5. Emma S. Deodorant Powder Fresh 50 ml
6. Dr.Jart+ Ceramidin Skin Barrier Moisturizing Cream 15 ml
7. Biotherm Lait Corporel 400 ml
8. NIVEA Cleansing Cream Caring 150 ml
9. Smuuti Skin Watermelon Jelly Cream 50 ml

**Figure 4.**

1. NIVEA MEN Antiperspirant Deo Cool Kick Roll-On 50 ml
2. La Roche-Posay Sensitive Skin 24H Deodorant 50 ml
3. Dove Pomegranate Anti-Perspirant Deodorant Roll-On 50 ml

**Figure 5.**

1. NIVEA MEN Active Clean 3in1 Shower Gel 250 ml
2. Lactacyd Shower Creme No Perfume 1000 ml
3. Emma S. Fresh Grapefruit And Lilies 350 ml

**Figure 6.**

1. L'Oréal Paris Men Expert Hydra Energetic Wash 100 ml
2. Weleda Moisture Cream for Men 30 ml
3. CeraVe Hydrating Cleanser 236 ml
4. La Roche-Posay Effaclar Mat Sebo-Controlling Moisturizer 40 ml
5. Dermalogica Special Cleansing Gel 500 ml
6. Dr. Ceuracle Vegan Kombucha Tea Gel Cream 75 g