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The design of skin for all – apart from the mature, or what?

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Abstract

How comfortable are you in your skin? If it is mature and showing the natural signs of age, you may be at ease but probably also aware that your skin is little eligible for marketing publication. In the aesthetic monoculture of smoothness this article sets off to reflect on its social and cultural origin and explore the values attached to smoothness in general and smooth skin in particular. After contemplations of the prevailing connotations of mature skin, it progresses towards the presentation of a renewed look on mature skin inspired by findings of the mature cohort's self-identities. With the construction of a balanced overview of skin connotations, the article contributes to the formation of a more varied aesthetic communication design presenting skin with a texture closer to reality than to fiction.

KEYWORDS:

Mature skin, visual design, age, skin aesthetics, smoothness, marketing.

Introduction

When designing visual marketing communication, every inch is the result of many considerations and choices. The purpose is most often

commercial and as people appeal to people, they are often part of the picture. The models are casted, staged and styled in the chosen contexts which are carefully decorated to support the mood of the production. All visual elements are open for the immediate experience but often the details of texture and surface escape our attention. One of the major surfaces is skin often taking up a great percentage of the presentation, but when we study skin, there is a lot more to it than meets the eye.

For digging deeper into the many angles on skin and texture, the comprehensive work on visual representation by Borgerson and Schroeder (2018) is a rich source illustrating a wide variety of angles. According to them, skin may be regarded as our personal container but in marketing skin becomes a communicator of lifestyle and a signifier of a person's perceived worth to society. This is the case since skin works as a metaphor for a set of values and characteristics much larger than the surface displayed. It connotes the identity of a person and signals ideals of a lifestyle often hosting the most admired traits of the times.

As skin holds a special position being the interface between the person and the outside world, it has the dual function of both representing and positioning the person. The condition or state of the skin places the person in webs of cultural meanings and structures of values and possibilities, and these in turn determine the established possibilities for the individual's agency. Moreover, the outside world engages in interpretations of the person's identity based on the condition of the skin. A condition which is increasingly subject to cosmetic change and outside modification to accommodate the trends rather than the turn of the times. Furthermore, skin's central position as a communicator of age renders it also as precarious one when

aging is an unwanted state. Finally, it may be regarded as a site for commodified expression and as being an object of scrutiny with the potential for gaining increased cultural power or merely surviving in the tensions of social control (Farber 2006 in Patterson and Schroeder 2010, p. 254).

The condensed perspectives outlined above present an introductory overview of the social and cultural perceptions and functions of skin, and work as a point of departure for mapping out a structured elaboration of the implications of skin and its aesthetic design. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to outline a framework for contemplation of the meanings and significances of skin and the construction of its attractiveness in lifestyle marketing. The framework will support a discussion of the characteristics of what is socially and culturally considered to be attractive skin especially with a view to age. It will continue with reflections of the positive aspects with a potential connotation to mature skin but largely ignored by lifestyle marketing. It is the purpose of the article to create a framework and contribute to the discourse enabling a discussion of the perceptions of age and appearance. An aim which is relevant also for designers of communication, professionals in the lifestyle industries, and scholars with aesthetic interests. The article does not pretend to be exhaustive but rather selective and resting on interpretative work with its limited range of materials for highlighting the boarder scope of implications.

Consequently, the article begins with a focus on smoothness as a concept and ideal from an interdisciplinary perspective and continues with considerations regarding smooth and mature skin. Subsequently, it will consider what we are deprived of in the present visual monoculture of skin surface and point towards future perspectives of

a more diverse skin presentation. As the article does not include any visual material, the reader is encouraged to recall the marketing of any lifestyle product while reading. Be it marketing of skincare, cars, make-up, household appliances, fashion, industrial design and tourism. The world is rich in examples with people depicted for drawing our attention to products and services with the hope that we will fancy what we see.

Smoothness as a condition

Smoothness is power. It is the ideal and the aim of many processes of production and refinement. In commercial photography any element disturbing the smooth impression is photoshopped. Blemishes and stray hairs disappear as do any sign of age. But what are the origins of the ideals of marketing and the application of visual technological tools to produce the shining armour of a wide range of commercial presentations? What is the basis of smoothness as a social and cultural concept and ideal?

As stipulated by Iqani (2012), the idealisation of smoothness can be traced as far back as 1756 with Burke's stipulation of smoothness being a prerequisite for beauty. Iqani points to the historical transfer of the social status of smoothness in depictions and evaluations of skin. One example of this is when European cultures and colonisers idealised middle-class skin in contrast to the rough and scarred skin of people in less fortunate positions and thus placed smooth skin on top in the hierarchies of meaning and status according to texture (p. 316).

Iqani (2012) presents a preliminary but illustrative typology of the connotations of smooth and rough textures on a range of objects

including skin (p. 313). The typology outlines smoothness as connotating civilization, safety, culture and a refined state whereas roughness connotes wildness, danger and the unrefined. In other words, the desired versus the avoided. Even though classifications of surfaces may be criticized for leading to stereotypical readings, they have continued to function as an established approach in a range of practices. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) add another dimension to the signal of smoothness when pointing out that a smooth and even glossy surface as seen on the covers of magazines sends a message of seduction and luxury (p.122). This is opposed to the more practical and matter-of-fact connotations of matte paper. Also the surfaces of textiles can be contemplated in this perspective where the surface of silk satin communicates its social status. Given that these signs of smoothness indicate its ideological function serving as markers of elevated status, it is crucial to recognize that higher positions carry not only admiration but also power.

In the field of marketing, power entails the power to attract and to seduce, and skin seems like a natural inhabitant in the landscape of seduction. But not any skin goes. Reinforced by the social construction of the status of smoothness and its close affinity to the concept of beauty, the preferred strategic resource for marketing is smooth skin. Skin which in Connor's terms has "skinshine" and appears as "a kind of visual immune system" making it similar to an endless surface and an empty space (Connor 2004, p. 55 in Borgerson and Schroeder 2028). And as the design of surface and skin has been refined and developed based on these the intrinsic understandings for decades, the reflections on the aesthetic alternatives to marketing's display of the desirable and smooth remain rarely challenged or

considered in detail. Nor are the wider cultural and social implications of the smooth landscapes.

Smooth skin

Narrowing the focus from a wider range of surfaces to that of skin allows considerations regarding another set of aspects moving from values in general to the values connoted to people and age. Apart from the basic biological fact that smooth skin in its natural state is closely connected to the reproductive phase in life, there are numerous other understandings of what smooth skin brings along. It may be regarded as representing the present and the future, which in commercial and cultural terms is often understood as central when it comes to development and progress.

Apart from these inherent promises, smooth skin also needs to be considered in terms of gratification. Since marketing communication is predominantly populated by smooth skin what we witness is can be regarded as a representational fetishization, where it becomes part of the “meta-fetish” of smoothness. During castings models are carefully selected to be part of the tool of seduction and argument for acquisition and as industry professionals operate in the tradition based on the predominance of smooth skin, it seems safe to conclude that it works as a criterium for the selection in the first place. However, since the display of smooth skin is not limited to products and services concerned with skin but rather a staple in all types of lifestyle marketing, it seems to underline the power of the fetishization of smooth skin. Smooth skin becomes a co-representor of the brands and their products and an element in the mechanisms of worship with the inherent promise of gratification. Interestingly, as discussed by

Borgerson and Schroeder (2018), fetish items are often contextually isolated.

This is also the case for smooth skin being on display in marketing where it promotes a broad range of lifestyle products rather than products related to the skin or texture. The explanation for this may be that fetishisation is supported by repetitions, and as such maintaining the habits seem more important than obtaining internal visual cohesion in the design of the communication product. If the market is disturbed by part of the picture being out of context this is still pending to become uncovered, just as precise information of the status of smooth skin within more defined market segments are rare. In the meantime, as pointed out by Faber (2006), skin still seems to hold a particular currency which needs to be protected from the loss of slimness and youth. In other words, it needs to be protected from nature. So, while social capital of smoothness upholds its position as being a prerequisite for participation in many areas, it seems pertinent to investigate the connotations of its opposite - mature skin - in order to comprehend why this is so.

Mature skin

We learn the lesson from childhood with fairytales read aloud by relatives and visualized in Disney animations. The evil stepmother of Snow White and the wicked fairy dressed up as an old woman poisoning Sleeping Beauty set impactful examples of the “true nature” of age. In her analysis of Snow White, Gašparovičová (2021) finds that the Queen is unable to reconcile with her natural aging process. She perceives her beauty as her power, her primary asset, the source of her status, and she sees herself as the most powerful because of it. Without beauty she will be stripped of identity and the

fairytale's understanding of her "non-beauty" renders her evil. Age and evil united in a long-lasting partnership. Also physiognomists have circulated around the concept of beauty. In their search for a definition of beauty they have supposed that certain features popularly believed as being ugly were also evidence of undesirable and low moral characteristics. Even though these works have historical origin, they have appeared as sources of inspiration feeding the general perception of skin condition and appearance with their portrayal of uneven skin structure as examples of the socially unwanted (Wegenstein and Ruck 2011).

Another discussion of the mechanisms of exterior evaluation and attribution of value is found in Fanon (1967) stipulating that epidermal schema draws attention to skin and attribute identity and social possibility based on the reading of skin. Even though Fanon's work is particularly focused on skin of colour, it still illustrates the mechanisms of the outside evaluation's ascription of social and cultural value based on visual characteristics of skin (Borgerson and Schroeder 2018, p. 116). Gordon (2015) draws our attention to the fact the external evaluation can also work as a basis for "othering" and stereotypification since the attention remains on the surface and thus ignores individuality and inner life (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2018, p. 117). But to escape the negative attributions of mature skin the market offers still more remedies, still more options for so-called self-improvement. In this respect a closer inspection of the contrasts between smooth and mature skin may shed light on the context of what can be left behind by buying into the make-over culture.

When contemplating the connotations of mature skin in marketing, we find it in a landscape where health, active lifestyles and perseverance of a youthful appearance are the aims. The socially

admired state central in the logic of self-improvement as discussed by Borgerson and Schroeder (2018). Mature skin, however, seems to hold the position of the opposite of self-improvement. It appears to represent decline, self-deterioration, and to represent loss - not gain. As discussed above, also here attention is not on the possible interior or personal gains but remains on the evaluation of exterior. The need to avoid the state and look of mature skin indicates a perspective of retrospection in the sense that it is essentially understood by what it is *not*. Neither young, attractive nor marketable. When it is marketed, the discourse is often designed to show it as an object in need of improvement. Skin becomes the container of an object in need of self-improvement and failing to meet bodily norms and the ideals of smoothness but rather indicating passage through different stages (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). It seems to be a marketing logic, that skin's signs of passage through life bear testament to the recollections of past times as opposed to potential present and future contribution. It is noteworthy that in marketing's understanding of time, the present cannot be "owned" by a cohort showing evidence of previous times on their skin but only by a cohort with very short track records. Mature skin as a personal curriculum vitae does not qualify as a sales argument nor to being part of the picture. But what if it did? Which perspectives are missed by marketing in its search for new markets and segments?

What mature skin could bring to the table

While still lingering in the negative narrative of age as decline and loss and perceiving age as a uniform group identity, marketing is restricted to repeating the stereotypes. The industry will replicate the portrayal of the social capital of mature people as regarded from the

external perspective and its production will remain ignorant of the embodied social capital in all its shades. Some of the nuances shared by the mature cohort are that they feel vibrant, have a lot to offer (Bennett 2019), and they do not necessarily lose interest in fashion. On the contrary, they seem to enjoy it more than earlier (Sadowska et al. 2017). Also noteworthy is the mature view on their own appearance in the work by Mair and Cili (2016) finding that less than 3% of their 40-89 years old respondents said they wore make-up to look younger. Moreover, it has been found that the fashion-conscious cohort often have younger cognitive ages, have different value orientations and are more eager to try new products (Nam et al. 2007).

When relating the above to studies of age and self-identity, they add that identity construction as an ongoing process which is not restricted to chronological age or changes in the body. Rather, identity is connected to people's activities and their relations (Cook 2018), and people perceive themselves as still being in the making or in the process of becoming. In other words, the ongoing identity construction is a personal process and one of continued reflection, revision and transformation evolving with time (Cook, p. 188). These findings contrast the general misconception of mature people as being struck and limited to retrospective contributions. The outcome presents a group of people at ease with their own appearance and who could easily be inspired to embark on new designs in fashion and lifestyle products. Additionally, it underlines the inadequacy of the surface condition of skin as being a sufficient indicator of the values and lifestyle of the mature segment. By subscribing to the idea of skin as valid representation and by adhering to the outdated the validity ascribed to these mechanisms, it seems that the social and

commercial bars work as substantial obstacles. Not only are people barred and excluded from activities and recognition, but also culture and marketing are barred from interaction with the mature groups.

Discussion

<i>Smooth skin</i>	<i>Mature skin told</i>	<i>Mature skin untold</i>
<i>Attraction</i>	<i>Retrospection</i>	<i>Experience</i>
<i>Desirability</i>	<i>Loss</i>	<i>Curiosity</i>
<i>Social status</i>	<i>Decline</i>	<i>Age-independent self-identity</i>
<i>Seduction</i>	<i>Stagnation</i>	<i>Continuous development</i>
<i>Fertility</i>	<i>Self-deterioration</i>	<i>Vibrance</i>
<i>Refined state</i>	<i>Obsolescence</i>	<i>Contribution readiness</i>
<i>Luxury</i>	<i>The past</i>	<i>Openness towards new designs</i>
<i>Gain</i>		<i>At ease with own appearance</i>
<i>Development</i>		<i>Younger cognitive age</i>
<i>Progress</i>		
<i>Marketability</i>		
<i>The present</i>		
<i>The future</i>		

Table 1 A preliminary overview of the connotations of skin inspired by Iqani (2012)

A display of skin connotations as in Table 1. can aide the formation of a new understanding with a relative perspective as a context. As stated by Borgerson and Schroder, marketing does not just exist in a closed circuit but need to be considered as cultural text which often substitute the personal experience and shapes how people construct their understanding of the world (2015). Consequently, inspiring alternative views on the aesthetic design of skin in marketing as in

the third column of Table 1. may very well move beyond the commercial circuit. Additionally, new mature skin connotations may illuminate the paradox of the habitual erasing of signs of character and experience in an era of individuality (Lemma 2010). It is remarkable, how deleting the signs of age is prioritised and the result of aesthetic similarity accepted in the process of skin modification and cosmetic procedures. The traces of personal story and personality are effaced maybe honouring the perception that this is needed to fit in, be accepted, be found attractive – and ultimately sell. A new set of skin connotations as a balancing element against the known couple of new-versus-old, offers a different narrative with a wider perspective in the professional evaluation of what can be subscribed to when involving design of mature skin in marketing.

When contemplating Table 1. it is evident, that the three columns shift from positive (Smooth skin) to negative (Mature skin told) and back to positive again (Mature skin untold). The positive-negative contrast from the first to the second column is remarkable even though it is not presenting a novelty. However, we need to reflect on how much influence this contrast has. Apart from the consequences outlined and discussed above, it may also carry significant weight in the evaluation of beauty as being present in smooth and absent from mature skin.

Furthermore, as beauty is such a central carrier of social capital, it means that its significance is far greater than attracting the odd admiration. Consequently, a continued refinement and development of Table 1. may not only help drawing attention of the habitual recruitment and design of skin in lifestyle marketing, it may also inspire reflection on the concept of beauty on its own and in relation to age-diversity.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to discuss the design of the visual monoculture of skin in lifestyle marketing from an interdisciplinary perspective. With elaborations on the origins and the connotations of smoothness as a concept and subsequently of smooth and mature skin, the aim has been to create a deeper understanding of the social and cultural significance of the habitual thinking and evaluation when it comes to skin texture. The areas outlined establish a framework for the construction and meaning of skin in lifestyle marketing but also for a broader discussion of social and cultural views on attractiveness. Moreover, Table 1 may work as a source of inspiration when searching new ways for designers of communication, professionals in the lifestyle industries and scholars with aesthetic interests. With a continued academic exploration of the significance of the habitual visual and aesthetic designs of different stages in life, increased consideration of the design of mature skin and age-diversity in marketing may follow. A discourse of mature skin needs to be further developed, and the prototypes for this process may come from a wide variety of sources.

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