

MEN, BEAUTY AND SENSES – A SNAPSHOT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SENSORY BRANDING IN THE JAPANESE MEN’S COSMETICS MARKET.

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the application of sensory branding in Japanese men’s cosmetics (including skincare and color cosmetics) following the growing metrosexual market segment. A qualitative study was carried out to provide a generic snapshot of the application of sensory and emotional branding strategies in men’s cosmetics among Japanese male consumers; their perceptions, experiences and reasons that drove their consumption decisions. The study also reflected that consumerism can develop from popular (and traditional) culture. The findings indicated that sensory branding has not been fully exploited by men’s cosmetics, hence, there is plenty of room for corporations and brands to work on and develop strategies to fully capture the market.

Keywords: Sensory Branding, Metrosexuality, Men’s Cosmetics, Culture, Japan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Physical attractiveness is quoted to be an important determinant of a person’s success and fortune in life (Patzer 2006, Dimitrius and Mazzarella 2001, Jeffes 1998, Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). Studies have even shown that babies prefer beautiful faces (Etcoff 2000, Bower 1987) The importance placed on beauty in society has without a doubt spelt success for the beauty industry.

According to the Global Facial Care report published by Datamonitor (2006), the market volume forecast is expected to hit USD\$ 22.4B in 2010; an increase of 14.6% (from 2005). The growth dynamism in men’s grooming products especially the skincare range has

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been identified as one of the core prospect products sector (Euromonitor 2007). According to the estimates from Euromonitor, from 2005 to 2008, men's grooming products is said will surge by 67% to \$19.5 billion (TimeAsia 2005).

Senses have been cited as an essential factor in successful product and service branding. Successful brands encapsulate and exude sensory appeal, in winning the hearts and loyalty of the consumer (Lindstrom 2005, Schmitt 1999, Schmitt, and Simonson, 1997). From a sensorial perspective, cosmetics do appeal to the senses, for instance the colors, fragrances, packaging and flavors. This is no less different in the men's cosmetics range. Men's cosmetics products (化粧品) have long enjoyed success in Japan (Miller 2006), fueled by culture, societal changes and pop idols (ChinaDaily 2007). Hence, this sets the backdrop for the study in uncovering the effectiveness of the sensory elements found in men's cosmetics.

This work aims to establish, identify and elaborate on the effectiveness of the application of sensory branding in cosmetics with a specific focus on the Japanese metrosexual male market. The term cosmetics in this study mean both color cosmetics and skincare products. The factors that influence consumption decisions are studied to derive the findings if brand choices are influenced by the sensory appeal of the brand or otherwise. This study adopted the qualitative research approach of focus group discussions to examine the drivers of consumption, consumer perceptions, experiences and emotions. The focus group method was adopted as this would enable the gathering of qualitative data regarding products, service and consumer emotions (Skinner 1994, Greenbaum 1993). The findings derived from the study indicated that sensory branding was not fully exploited by brands. This translates to further opportunities for corporations to revisit the incorporation of sensory and emotional strategies in their products.

This paper begins with a review of the main aspects of sensory branding followed by the description of the metrosexual culture in Japan. Next, the results of the focus groups' discussions are described. Finally, this is followed by the analysis of the findings that illustrate that sensory branding is in its infancy stage.

2. THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SENSORY BRANDING

Sensory studies in understanding consumer choices and preferences has long been undertaken by both researchers and corporations on a wide range of products; ranging from food to household items and cars (Peneau, Brockhoff, Hoehn, Escher, and Nuessli, 2007, Prinz, De Wijk, 2007, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2003). The effects and 'pull' of sensory appeal have attributed to creating brand success, consumer relationship and loyalty (Lindstrom 2005, Roberts 2004, Gobe 2001, Schmitt, 1999). According to Lindstrom (2005), brands that appeal to multiple senses will be more successful than brands that focus only on one or two. Underhill (1999) conducted a study and discovered that almost all unplanned purchases are results of the shopper experiencing the product – through touch, smell, sight, taste or sound.

Various researches are extensively undertaken to delve further into the aspects of sensory and consumer choice in a myriad of products and services. Music played in stores witnessed the increase in sales, the attracting of consumers and higher consumer retention rate (Bainbridge 1998, Gorn 1982). Study found that shoppers exposed to pleasant odors such as perfume, cookies, coffee are not only in better moods but also likely to engage in amiable and even altruistic behavior (Baron 1998, Knasko 1985). As for the sense of touch, texture was found to influence the perception of food freshness (Peneau, Brockhoff, Hoehn, Escher, and Nuessli 2007). A research carried out using custard showed bite-size was proven to influence consumer perception of products thus food packaging and spoons should be manufactured to the 'right' bite size (Prinz, J.E., De Wijk, R.A, 2007). In another study, color names were found to influence the propensity of purchase; where positive consumer reactions were demonstrated towards unusual color and flavor names as they perceived such marketing messages to convey useful information (Miller and Kahn 2005).

Today, the modern lifestyle has witnessed the 'aestheticisation' of everyday life – smells and sensory appeal in our everyday lives; both in forms of products and services (Paterson 2005, Dennis, Newman, and Marsland, 2005). Sensory branding strategies have been deployed successfully across a myriad of products and services, for instance Singapore Airlines and its renowned Stefan Floridian Waters, the distinct scent is sprayed in the cabins as well as the towels (Lindstrom 2005). PandG introduced their 'gender-specific' toothpaste - Crest Rejuvenating Effects specifically targeted at the female consumers; it had a shimmery

packaging with a hint of vanilla and cinnamon (Aaker, Kumar, and Day 2004).

Lush cosmetics created a total sensorial experience for the consumer, right from the scents and bright colors to shapes and textures (Clegg 2006). Clinique projected 'total' sensory appeal of dermatology backed skincare right from its faint green packaging (that portrayed the image of more antiseptic than minty) to the lab coat uniforms worn by the sales consultants (Israel 1985). Though the strategies adopted by these cosmetics corporations are positioned to appeal to the senses in the quest of winning consumer loyalty.

However, senses alone cannot act alone in influencing consumer purchase decisions. Herz and Schooler (2002) found that odor-evoked memories are more emotion laden as they transport us back to the past, 'closer' to the past events. In the Resonance Model, the apparent relationship between emotions and senses were highlighted, substantiating the fact that emotional undertones accompany aesthetic appreciation (Schwartz 1973). Lerner, Small and Loewenstein (2004) and O'Neill and Lambert found that emotions can influence people's reaction to the prices of products. Price would have less of an influence when consumers are experiencing positive emotions. While senses have the ability to evoke emotions (Cervonka 1996, Herz 1996, Pooler 2003), emotions and feelings have been proven to influence thoughts (Frijda, Manstead and Bern 2000). This in turn translates to the act of purchasing and consumption decisions.

3. METROSEXUALITY IN JAPAN

Popular culture, or better known as pop culture, refers to the culture of the masses as stated by Martinez (1998). It stems from the daily lives of the majority in society. Mark Simpson (1994) defined the typical metrosexual as a man who spends resources (in terms of monetary and time) in his appearance and lifestyle. The metrosexual spends a lot of time and money in ensuring that he looks good and enjoys the finer things in life; such as enjoying being pampered in the spa. The Yano Research Institute in Tokyo reported that men's beauty care market has doubled in the past six years and now rakes in annual revenues totaling \$248 million (Tashiro 2006).

Men's consumption of personal grooming products has been attributed to the desires to create, develop and maintain identity and self-image (Featherstone 1993, Bocoock, 1993, Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Today, the same needs and desires are reflected in the modern male movement, referred to as the metrosexual which places importance on image and presentation (Simpson 1994). The changing landscape in consumption which led to the postmodern approach has witnessed men playing a bigger role in consumerism and the consumption of 'beauty' products and services; in the pursuit of constructing their own identities and the very essence of who they are (Bocoock 1993, Shields 1992). It is about attaining 'beauty' or the ideal image; which is all about emotions and senses (Rosen and Ablaza 2006, Black 2004, Lee 1999).

The use of cosmetics dates back to 10,000 BC in Egypt where they were in the forms of scented oils, dyes, paints and henna (Johnson 1999, Cohen, Kozlowski, and Vienne, 1998). In early Japan during the Heian period (794-1185), men and women both used cosmetics, textiles, perfumes, textures, colors and nature imagery to express their emotions (Perez 1998). Male cosmetic treatment of the eyebrows has a long history, dating to at least the Heian period; where refined eyebrows are seen on many of the early Buddha statues such as the Chugu-ji in Nara (Tsuda 1985). The Heian-period classic, 'Tale of Genji' by Lady Murasaki described the transformation of male beauty that reflects beautiful young men or known as 'bishonen' or 'beautiful young man' (Hirota 1997). During the Tokugawa era (1600 – 1868), male actors set the fashion in clothing, hairstyle, makeup, dance and even behavior of women today; as the Kabuki like Noh were performed by only men (Perez, 1998). The Meiji era (1868-1912) witnessed the advertising of cosmetics product category include body products for both men and women such as 'Bigan Sui', a 'face water' for clearing up and beautifying the skin (Machida 1997). The mid 1990s not only saw the chapatsu (fad for brown hair) trend being a huge hit with both men and women, leading not only to soaring sales of hair care products, but also the complementing product categories of skincare and nail-care as well (Miller 2006).

Today men have adopted a different outlook and have become part of modern consumerism as women (Bocoock, 1993, Firat, 1993, Nixon, 1992, Davies and Bell, 1991). The consumption of products has been found to contribute to the production of desired self-image, identity and self-concept (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995, Featherstone 1993, Firat 1993, Kellner 1992, Schouten, 1991, Mort, 1988). The trend for Japanese men to spend time and effort

in their physical looks and appearances began in the 1980s when Japanese women began to feel more empowerment after labor laws called for equality in the workplace (SkinInc, 2006). The collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s and end of life-long job security that made Japanese men realize they should look beyond conformity and the world of 'mere work'. This spurred the interest in looking after and pampering themselves (Manila Times 2005).

Various industry reports reflect the increase in beauty and grooming product consumption for both men and women consumers (Euromonitor International 2007, Fuji Kezai 2006, DataMonitor 2006, Mintel 1995). A myriad of factors contribute to the increase in sales for instance, changes in the economic system (Miller 2006, Kondo 1988), peer pressure (Ono 1999) and the advancement of consumer capitalism (Firat 1993, McCracken 1988, Simmel 1957). Japanese ladies were found to have a preference for 'bishonen' men (Time Asia 2005, Hirota 1997, Mitsui 1993) and by being beautiful, the men will experience a better, improved relationship with women (Tanaka 2003).

The 'Visual Kei' movement witnessed the usage of cosmetics among men and the emergence of bands and singers such as Gackt, Hide, Dir en grey and L'Arc~en~Ciel. This movement had inspired the interest in eyebrow shaping, skin care, various grooming products as well as beauty works (Shogakukan 1999). Young men in Japan became a lot more conscious of their appearance than before. The definition of well-groomed young men began to further evolve and change to the point of pampering the skin and the tweezing of eyebrows (Ono, 1999). The nation has also seen the mushrooming of men's aesthetic salons nationwide such as TBC and Dandy House, offering everything from trimming eyebrows to removing body hair to weight-loss programs, enjoying massive expansions across the nation (ManilaTimes, 2005). The clientele is not only the young and trendy but also Japanese corporate workers who are realizing that the classic suit and tie won't cut it in the age of women's empowerment (Agenda Inc, 2005).

4. STUDY OVERVIEW

The main thrust of the study was to determine the prevalence of sensory elements in the marketing of cosmetics to men in Japan, as to whether it is the main factor in brand loyalty and choice. A qualitative research method was adopted as it would provide an insight into the sensorial aspects that quantitative methods are unable to solicit. Sampling selection was made

based on purposeful critical sampling strategy with participants recruited via a snowball or chain process to obtain samples that are using cosmetics/ grooming products. A total of 42 working, Japanese males within the age range of 27 – 31 (with a mean of 28.95) participated in this study. The preference for respondents who were already in the workforce was to ensure that there was sufficient spending power (versus that of college students). This would reduce the likelihood that purchase choices were made based on economic reasons alone. Out of the 42 participants, 8 were from the investment banking industry, 11 from consulting (including auditing), 15 from sales and marketing and 8 from technology fields.

Focus group interviews were conducted where the respondents formed 7 different groups (6 people per group). Focus group method was selected as they have been popular in marketing and consumer psychology in gathering data about products and services and consumer emotions (Skinner 1994, Templeton 1994, Greenbaum 1993). Discussions were focused on asking probing questions and initiating free and open discussion and debates about men's cosmetics (color cosmetics and skincare). Open ended questions as they allowed individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues and influencing the answers (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2006, Krueger and Casey 2000). Laddering technique was also utilized to derive to the core of issues and emotions as it aids discovering the benefits of the products as well as the emotional connections (Bystedt 2003). Each session lasted between 2 – 3 hours was recorded (using an IC recorder) and transcribed. Observations and the discussion were also noted and recorded down during the sessions.

Questions generally looked at the driving factors that led to product selection and consumption choices as well as consumption experiences. The participants' 'feelings' and perceptions about men's vanity products were also solicited. The participants also debated on the merits of the various brands and products they were using. The observation and notes were taken on the product/ brand recommendations made to each other along with the reasons (ie. product A improved my skin texture and gave me confidence, the 'coolness' factor). A fair amount of discussion time was spent by the participants sharing experiences of the experiences before and after using certain products, the reasons for the first 'cosmetics' encounter and how did they felt as well as the reactions that they received. The participants' responses and feedback guided this conversation style interview (Sayre 2001). The findings were then analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis which is concerned with how participants make sense

of their personal and social world (Smith 2003).

5. FINDINGS

The findings basically reflected that sensory branding did not play a key role in determining brand and product choices. Four main themes were identified as outlined in the following.

5.1 Societal Expectations

The main driver for cosmetics consumption was found to be due to societal expectations. Societal expectations gave rise to the need for men to look good and presentable in order to ascertain a better future (Patzer 2006, Brand 2000, Miles 1999). Societal acceptance of male beauty and vanity acted as the ‘governing rules’; as such the lack of acceptance led to the weak sales in color cosmetics. The societal ideas of the male image had propelled the participants to address their looks and image, using products to counter their problem areas (such as oily skin, hairloss).

“I think everyone, like me would say that they have to start using (personal grooming products) because it is how it is for us to live in this society.” (Yuichi)

“I had oily skin and I wanted something to make it better.” (Kenichi)

“People said using (grooming products) would make me look better.” (Atsuya)

In terms of effectiveness of the products, twenty six participants actually saw that continual usage had actually addressed their ‘problem areas’ and there were improvements. As for the remaining participants, they continued usage as they identified it as the routine to ‘maintain’ their looks.

5.2 Cultural Influence

93% of the participants shaped their eyebrows and used eyebrow kits frequently. They

felt it was perfectly acceptable to use eyebrow kits in shaping their eyebrows, which is linked to the cultural aspects and practices of shaping eyebrows (Tsuda 1985).

“It is normal and has been even done in the olden days...shaped brows makes a man look ‘sharper’.” (Koji)

“Defined eye-brows make me look a lot better!” (Kei)

73% of this group of respondents cited that they would use make-up to enhance their looks (however, it has to be a more natural look rather than an outright cry that there is make-up on their faces) According to Ono (1999), in a focus group discussion conducted by Shiseido, men were even interested in foundation makeup. The acceptance of beautiful men (bishonen) could be traced back to the Heian period (Hirota 1997).

5.3 Brand Choice

Generally, four main reasons were attributed to influencing or determining brand choices; namely, family/ friends, convenience in purchase (availability), economic and brand name. Family/ friends were pertinent when it came to the participants brand decision-making. Basically, those whose decisions were shaped by family/ friends had either received the products as gifts (and has since continued using the same brand) or received recommendations from family/ friends (word-of-mouth).

“My girlfriend insisted that I look after my skin. So, she gave me a gift set and I have been using the same brand since.” (Nobu)

“My friends were using it so I asked for advice and it came highly recommended.” (Takeshi)

“My mother gave me a set of skincare and asked me to use it....she said it was a good brand. Therefore, I have been using it since” (Koji K.)

The second factor was convenience. This was cited by about sixteen of the participants who stated that they stick to brands that are conveniently available, where they can find in most

drug/ department stores and convenience stores.

“I use this (specific brand) because it is easy to find in convenience stores..no need to take too much trouble to find it.” (Atsushi)

Should their ‘regular’ brand be suddenly unavailable at the drugstore, the participants stated that they would have no qualms in purchasing whatever ‘substitute’ brands are available on the shelves.

The participants had also stated that they made their choices based on price. Almost half of the participants perceived that there was not much utility difference between an expensive and a lower priced range. This brought on a debate by others who disagreed and indicated that expensive brands did have better effect which will be discussed in the following section on product experience)

“I think a 600yen lotion does the same job as a 5000yen lotion. The difference is just the brand...why pay more?” (Masa)

“I am not sure if I want to pay so much yet not really see the huge difference” (Akira)

“I disagree..the better the brand, the more trustworthy the product ..of course the price will be higher...it’s like comparing Boss and Gucci suits to those from the Perfect Suit Factory.” (Nishimura)

The brand name of the product definitely helped chalk-up sales. Participants cited that there was insufficient information being made available for men’s products. Hence, they relied on the brand itself as a referral of effectiveness.

“I would just pick the product of the brand that I know is famous like Shiseido. Yo u can’t go wrong....it is a good brand and they have been in the cosmetics industry for ages.” (Nakamura)

“Branded is better...sometimes I have to consider the price too but usually it is not very expensive..around 3000 yen per bottle.” (Takuya)

5.4 Product Sensorial Experience

Product experience was crucial in determining the level of sensory branding for men's cosmetics. The experiences were explored from a sensorial aspect and only three senses were identified to having been experienced. A handful of nine participants indicated that their preferred brand/ product range had 'a pleasant' smell. They cited that the scent created a positive first impression. However, when explore further, only two participants identified the product/ brand as having a distinctive, pleasant scent while others felt it was pleasant but forgettable.

Texture was another key feature that was brought up during discussion. Product texture and skin texture post-consumption were the main themes. Participants preferred products of less oily and 'lighter' textures for lotions, and balms. The lathering effect for facial wash was viewed as important. They voiced satisfaction from using products that fulfilled the mentioned requirements. Some participants had used moisture rich products and experienced an uncomfortable feeling of the after effect of a layer of oil.

"It lathered well and removed the oil from my face...nice, clean skin. It worked well." (Hirota)

"I like the natural feel like I had not applied lotion at all." (Ota)

Product industrial design was also debated. Participants indicated that packaging only differed in colors and material (such as plastic, glass). No one touched on the ergonomics and texture of packaging. When probed further if they felt the packaging had features of added value (for instance, dispenser, design), all the participants felt that there was nothing special or noteworthy, however some responses that noted the shape of packaging was 'convenient' for taking with them.

"Packaging is the standard...but small and easy to take with me. Nice shade of blue is used." (Naoki)

"It comes in normal packaging...nothing special...just like the other brands as well." (Osaki)

"The only exterior difference between brands would be the labels and packaging...it's like if you see

Clarins Men, it is blue and white but Shiseido Men’s is white.” (Koike)

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Consumerism has not hit an all time high as there is no end in sight to the desires, wants and needs of man that continues to witness the introduction of new products, fads and trends that endlessly fuel consumption and spending (Schor 2005, Graaf, Wann and Naylor 2002, Stearns 2001). Against this backdrop the rise and popularity of the metrosexual culture has opened a new door in the creation of male consumerism. When in the past, men’s ‘hot’ products have only been skewed towards cars, sports and gadgets. Today, metrosexuality adds new realms of fashion, cosmetics and services to the equation.

The findings of the study reveal that skincare has become a norm in the daily grooming ritual. A prevalent theme that emerged from the discussions was the participants selected the types of products to use based on perceived ‘problem’ areas as opposed to female consumers’ which is fueled not just by problem areas (Begoun 2002, Berg 2001). The men consumers did not feel the necessity to delve deeper in obtaining information on the effects and added benefits of each product. As most of the participants stated that they did not have the time to spend on product research,, they preferred a simpler approach – a solution for their ‘problem zones’.

Participants gave various accounts providing reasons for using cosmetics. However, the underlying common thread that ran through all these was that consumption was found to have been driven by societal factors. Society has placed importance on the physical attributes; the ‘prettier’ or more ‘handsome’ a person, the higher the chances of attaining success and ‘favorable treatment’ in life (Irons 2006, Calton 2001, Etcoff 2000, Peiss 1998).

This study has also reflected the intricate relationship between culture both traditional and popular and consumption. The findings show that participants were more opened to being ‘beautiful’ owing to the ‘*bishonen*’ roots that have long existed in the Japanese culture. The incorporation of cultural aspects into sensory branding could be an area of future research. This may lead to a more effective adoption of sensory branding.

The findings revealed that the main drivers for the participants' brand choices and preferences mainly stemmed from non-sensorial factors such as convenience or availability and word-of-mouth. This reflected that participants did not perceive cosmetics as 'valuable' products as they would rather not go through the hassle of trying and purchasing products from exclusive (and limited) outlets. Basically, the participants stated that they could not really tell apart the different brands based on product 'features' and consumption experiences. Although the participants talked about the sensorial elements of the products, they did not identify any distinctive properties (in relation to sensorial aspects). Even though there was feedback that reflected the positive effects of the adoption of sensory branding, for instance the indication that scents were pleasant and had enhanced the consumption process, none of the participants had attributed brand choice based on the sensorial elements.

The findings of this study contradicted the core essence of cosmetics which encompasses senses and where assumption has been that sensory branding would be at a matured level. This provides an opportunity to develop a market where consumers are captured pre-consumption and during consumption. It is evident that brands have not fully exploited sensory branding in men's cosmetics and is at its infancy stage. Therefore this presents an opportunity for future research in deriving methods and strategies in incorporating effective sensory branding in men's cosmetics.

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