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*DISCOURSE & COMMUNICATION* 2007 1: 37

DOI: 10.1177/1750481307071984

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# Gendered discourses on the 'problem' of ageing: consumerized solutions



*Discourse & Communication*  
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 SAGE Publications.  
 (London, Los Angeles, New Delhi  
 and Singapore)  
 www.sagepublications.com  
 Vol 1(1): 37–61  
 10.1177/1750481307071984

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**ABSTRACT.** Contemporary consumer culture sees the body as the crucial indicator of the self and apparent bodily ageing as problematic. All bodies age, but how is evidence of ageing culturally interpreted? This article develops a critical-pragmatic analysis of consumerized body discourses, with particular focus on the semiotics of the visibly ageing face, in the context of lifestyle magazine features and advertisements on skin care. Such texts work to equate ageing with the *look of ageing*, problematize ageing appearance, and offer marketized solutions to the 'problem' of ageing, using markedly gendered strategies. Texts aimed at a female market project skin care as a serious issue, pathologize the look of ageing, offer highly technologized solutions, and naturalize surgical intervention. The (newer) male market is being discursively engaged by strategies designed to normalize male investment in products and processes traditionally seen as in the domain of female bodily grooming. Consumerized male narcissism is enabled by ironic, 'uncommitted' discourses, the use of highly masculinized images and text, and, more recently, discourses which draw attention to the salience of the female appraising gaze.

**KEY WORDS:** *advertising, ageing, body, gender, technology*

## Introduction

Contemporary consumer culture sees much of **individuals' symbolic capital as realized through their bodies** (Bourdieu, 1977). Interested individuals are encouraged to make emotional, physical, time-based and economic investment in their personal appearance, through diet and lifestyle choices, fitness regimes, and purchase of consumer goods including clothing, accessories, and cosmetics. In Shilling's (1993: 5) words:

In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming: **a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity**. ... [this] entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape

and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner ... this involves a practical recognition of the *significance of bodies*; both as personal resources and as *social symbols* which give off messages about a person's *self-identity*. In this context, bodies become malleable entities which can be shaped and honed by the vigilance and hard work of their owners. (my italics)

High-profile media texts including magazines, newspapers, and television programmes exhort both women and men to engage with this project of the self-as-body (see also Giddens, 1991) by presenting and recycling particular body-relevant themes. As Mike Featherstone (1991: 174) puts it, '[c]ertain themes, infinitely revisable, infinitely combinable, recur within advertising and consumer culture imagery: youth, beauty, energy, fitness, movement, freedom, romance, exotica, luxury, enjoyment, fun.'

Facial appearance is invested with particular significance in bodily symbolic capital (Synnott, 1993). The face is a semiotic space for self-identification, a space with key zones, each with their own negotiated qualities for social/sexual attraction: eyes, cheeks, lips, and skin smoothness, etc. The importance of mass media influence on body culture is significant not least due to its 'take' or stance on the **meaning of the ageing body and the ageing face**. Body-culture discourse resists or denies ageing: beautiful bodies are, overall, presumed to be young bodies (N. Coupland and J. Coupland, 1997). But Mike Hepworth (2004: 5) reminds us that bodies must age, and must inevitably *show* their ageing:

We have, we believe, sure and certain knowledge of the reality of old age through observable changes in the appearance of the body, the most obvious being changes in the face, including wrinkling and lining of the skin, graying of the hair, and in the case of men, hair loss.

There is no shortage of reference, within consumer culture, to the semiotic politics of the ageing face. The data I deal with in this article are magazine advertisements and features on skin care products. But cosmetic and pharmaceutical discourses are not the only relevant texts. For example, two greetings cards recently on sale indicate and promote a cultural *preoccupation* with ageing, its effect on facial appearance and how this effect can be 'remedied'. One card is in the style of a comic strip, showing two pictures. In the first picture, a woman asks a doctor: 'It's my wrinkles, doctor. What can be done to halt the ravages of time?' In the second picture, the doctor, looking complacent, holds a smoking gun: the woman slumps, apparently dead, in her chair. The other card declares: 'I must say you certainly don't look 50 years old', and shows a cartoon female smilingly applying cream to her face from a jar labelled 'ANTI-AGEING CREAM'. Inside the card reads ... 'but I expect you did once! Have a very Happy 50th Birthday!!'.

In this matrix of beliefs, anxieties and threats about the significance of the ageing body, individuals are pressured into attempting to retain the appearance of youth, into staving off visible signs of their ageing. As Featherstone (1991: 178) writes:

Advertising, feature articles and advice columns in magazines and newspapers ask individuals to assume responsibility for the way they look. This becomes important not just in the first flush of adolescence and early adulthood, for notions of 'natural' bodily

deterioration and the bodily betrayals that accompany ageing become interpreted as signs of moral laxitude. The wrinkles, sagging flesh, tendency towards middle-aged spread, hair loss etc. which accompany ageing should be combated by energetic body maintenance of the part of the individual with help from the cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries.

It is, then, in the interests of market forces in consumer culture to promote fear and insecurity about ageing appearance and to provide aspirational models of possible age-less futures (Chaiken, 1987; Nabi, 2002). Macdonald (1995: 195) says that 'the fear of ageing is stimulated by the glossy women's magazines and driven by advertisers of the multitude of products claiming age-delaying or even age-reversing properties'. Features and advertisements which focus on maintaining the look of the youthful body (and especially the face) are the source of enormous profit margins for cosmetic companies. As these companies in the early 21st century find new strategies to target female consumers, and new ways of engaging a male market, consumer skin care texts become the locus of new discourses about ageing, culture, physiognomy, control and identity.

In an earlier article, I examined a corpus of advertisements and features on skin care products sampled from magazines aimed at both young and middle-aged women, published between 1999 and 2001 (Coupland, 2003). That analysis revealed the imposition of norms and priorities for consumers' orientations to their facial and bodily appearance. Overriding ideological assumptions were ageist: the characteristic narrative format of features and advertisements was that of 'problem – solution', with ageing as 'problem' and technologized products as 'solution'. Texts in my earlier corpus regularly made assumptions about the desirability of *delaying outward signs of ageing*. The stigmatized indices of age (wrinkles, sagging and dull skin, etc.) were framed as appearing (and mattering) early in the lifespan. In those earlier data, marketized solutions were, as they continue to be, scientized; with the products represented as pharmaceutical rather than cosmetic (of which, more later). Such texts consistently persuade consumers of two important things: that it is undesirable to *appear to be ageing*, and that individuals must *assume responsibility to stay young-looking*, or to *disguise* their physical and physiognomic ageing. Claims made about controlling, slowing or reversing the effects of ageing both key into and reconfirm deeply entrenched socio-cultural attitudes, ideological beliefs, about the meaning of ageing itself. In this ideology, **to age is to lose symbolic capital and self-worth.**

But fast-moving markets appear to have led to an acceleration of ageist formulations in these promotional domains. The data I examined in 2003 now looks circumspect in comparison with recent discourses. Data from 2004–5 product advertisements and features from popular magazines, aimed at both female and male consumers, is used to re-examine the discursive means by which popular media discourses negotiate *ageism*, as it is applied to the body, and in particular, the face. What new strategies have advertisers found to prioritise their products for the female market? And how has the incorporation of men into a traditionally female market of personal grooming regimes been made feasible?

The dataset is from a corpus of high-circulation magazines, published in the U.K. between January 2004 and April 2005. Magazine titles were chosen for being

at least partly concerned with bodily issues and grooming, and informally judged as aimed at a range of readership ages. The women's magazines are *Cosmopolitan*, *Essentials*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Marie-Claire*, *New Woman*, *Red*, *She*, *Tatler*, *Vogue*, *Woman and Home* and *Zest*; the men's magazines were *Men's Health*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*. One (store-linked) magazine *Boots Health and Beauty* was aimed at both men and women, but would probably be read more by a female market. There are fewer magazines for men included in the corpus simply because there are currently, in the UK at least, far fewer high-profile men's lifestyle magazines on the market (Benwell, 2003). Magazines were sampled on three occasions, in spring 2004, summer 2004 and early 2005, and the dataset comprised 40 magazines in total. My initial sample comprised all ads and features pertaining to skin care and sun protection in the dataset, and the texts analysed here represent those ads and features I judged most representative of emergent themes. Thus, I am not arguing a particular distributional case for the data I examine, but the texts chosen had, at the time of sampling, high prominence.

The analysis will examine advertisements and features that make claims about enhancing the appearance of the body and the face, using two main types of products: first, skin care products (mainly marketed as moisturisers) and, to a lesser extent, sun-protection products (cf. J. Coupland and N. Coupland, 2000). First, some remarks about methodological approach, and a brief commentary on gender, sexuality and the body.

### *Readings of consumerized texts: presuppositions, ideology, and influence*

Greg Myers, in *Ad Worlds* (1999: 3) claims that 'everyone over the age of six or so knows that advertisements are trying to sell us something, and cannot be trusted as sources of information or aspirations'. But, he also reminds us, advertising campaigns are expensive and must be justified by sales. Advertising and other promotional texts can only succeed commercially and in a context where people expect such texts to be misleading if they tap into pre-existing ideologies and stimulate concerns and aspirations consistent with these ideologies. Myers suggests that we should 'look at what ads do in culture, besides directly promoting immediate sales' (p. 4). What do these texts about skin care *do in culture*? My analysis takes a critical pragmatic perspective, focusing on ideological presuppositions about, or cultural constructions of, ageing and gender. It is my aim to explore ideological readings of these texts, invited by the textual and visual design of the adverts and features. Reading an advertisement 'amounts to decoding the implicature through which it operates ... the inferences which lead us to [understanding an ad] are triggered by a subtle combination of linguistic and contextual cues' (Simpson, 1993: 131).

It should not surprise us, then, that some of the ideological messages we will encounter are quite indirectly and implicitly conveyed. Indeed, Norman Fairclough's definition of ideology (1995: 14) talks of 'propositions that generally figure as ... implicit in the *presuppositions*' (taken-for-granted assumptions) of

texts'. Fairclough follows Michel Pêcheux (1982) in seeing presuppositions as 'preconstructed' elements within a text, elements which have been constructed elsewhere, in other texts. The notion of ideology also calls attention to *relations of dominance* of course (Fairclough, 1995; Lee, 1992; Simpson, 1993; van Dijk, 1998). In the texts which follow, these relations of dominance rest within the advertisers' and feature writers' power to influence consumers to invest psychologically and economically, through promoting fear of ageing and its unwanted consequences. Thwaites et al. (2002: 158) comment that ideology leads groups to perceive and understand the world in a certain consistent way, meaning that 'apparently personal choices are embedded in a vast and incessant hum of public discourse'. And media discourses which carry ideology about the undesirability of ageing appearance articulate ideologies that are otherwise more latent, being rare examples of texts in which ageing surfaces as an explicit topic.

Like all other texts, popular print media features and ads are designed with particular audiences in mind (Bell, 1984). Thus, text writers and designers offer readers particular subject positions or address 'ideal subjects' (Fairclough, 1989).

But as Fairclough and Myers suggest, audiences do not uncritically accept the positions offered to them; meanings (not least in consumer texts) are culturally constructed and must be negotiated (see also Talbot, 1995; Thornborrow, 1994). And as Richardson (2000: 77) reminds us:

[i]t is a familiar principle within media research that textual 'meanings' are not fixed, but produced in the negotiation between text and audience. Readers are in control of the discourse ... active participants in the sense that they are actively involved in processes of interpretation.

Advertisers need, then, to somehow construct messages that 'break through' consumers' scepticism, or at least perhaps to construct scenarios in which consumers are motivated to 'take control', constituted in products they can buy. So these texts need to use strategies which allow or encourage consumers to identify with their messages, or at least to find some personal relevance in the discourses they use. And, as we shall see, it is not only the age of readers which is made salient to their cultural interpretations, but also their gender.

### *Media texts, Gender and the Body as Commodity*

As Weedon tells us (1987; see also Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Talbot, 1995) gender subject positions are realized through discourse, open to continuous redefinition, constantly shifting. And it seems that in advertising texts, how men and women, as potential consumers, *are positioned* changes, to match marketing ambitions. The preoccupation with bodily *work* to maintain appearance which has (media-influenced) symbolic capital has until relatively recently been culturally constructed as a mainly *female preoccupation*, as the following, from Smith (1988; cited in Talbot, 1995: 145) indicates:

Women aren't just the passive products of socialisation, they are active; they create themselves. At the same time, their self-creation, their work, the uses of their skill,

are co-ordinated with the market for clothes, make-up, shoes, accessories etc. through print, film, etc.

Women's bodies (and little has changed in nearly 20 years since Smith's piece was written) 'always need fixing' because 'without work they cannot approximate the kinds of appearance offered by images in the mass media ...' (p. 47). Likewise, MacKinnon (2003: 98) points out that '[o]ne of the prime concerns of female-advertisement women is first the achievement and then the maintenance of physical desirability'.



The body project, as a female enterprise, has long been linked to the idea of the male gaze, as first proposed by Mulvey (1975) who in a study on cinematic spectatorship focused on how subject positions are constructed by media texts. Mulvey made a distinction between 'woman as image' and 'man as bearer of the look' (p. 27; Chandler, 2000). From this perspective, the woman's preoccupation with working on her appearance is presumably designed for men's appraisals as well as for those of other women and for her own. During the last 20 years, however, popular media texts such as cinema, TV and advertising have increasingly displayed and sexualized the male body (Connell, 2005; Edwards, 1997; Mort, 1996). This revised version of masculinity, with men increasingly being *looked at*, and looking at themselves (Herek, 1987; MacKinnon, 2003) has led to the use, by the mainstream media, of the category label '*metrosexual man*' which has salience through its contrast with the (unmarked) term 'heterosexual man'. The term *metrosexual man* seems to have been coined by Mark Simpson, 'Here Come the Mirror Men' (*The Independent*, 15 November 1994; [http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin\\_board/23/messages/134.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/23/messages/134.html)). Simpson described the *metrosexual* as 'a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object.' Tom Cox (*Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 2005, p. 23) defines the *metrosexual* as less of a narcissistic loner, referring to 'a certain generation of middle-class men which has rejected laddish tendencies, learnt to moisturise, and would appear to be more than happy shuffling around the supermarket with ... [their] "partners"'.

Another in the '-man' lexical set made widely known by media sources is *retrosexual man*, defined by *Collins English Dictionary* (published Thursday 9 June 2005) as 'a heterosexual man *who spends little time and money on personal appearance*'. This definition clearly indicates a growing cultural expectation that heterosexual males *should* and *do* attend in a focused way to bodily self-presentation and grooming. In more recent cultural construction, traditional notions of masculinity are unsettled, the public gaze has turned on men, and men's gaze has turned toward the mirror. But there is still a problem for men, if they appear to be bodily self-absorbed or narcissistic, in maintaining appropriate 'manliness'. The *Daily Telegraph's* article cited earlier continues:

The backlash against *metrosexuals* is well under way in the United States, home of the 'Iron John' movement, which advocated a return of stronger, more masculine man.

American *Maxim* magazine last month warned that men become more feminised, they are in danger of dying out altogether. (Thursday 4 August 2005, p. 23)

Gill et al. (2005: 37), drawing on interviews with young men, confirm not only that 'the body has become a new (identity) project [for men] in high/late/post-modernity', but also 'how fraught with difficulties this project is for young men, who must simultaneously work on and discipline their bodies while disavowing any (inappropriate) interest in their own appearance'.

In a socio-cultural climate where youthful appearance has a premium, as we have seen, strategies must be found to conceal or counter outward signs of ageing: with a proliferation of marketized solutions, as we shall see. But how do magazine features and adverts discursively negotiate masculine identity for consumerist purposes? What control resources do they offer men, and how do they offer opportunities for men to navigate between the ideological poles of 'metrosexual man' and 'Iron John'? We will first consider ads aimed at women. The first two texts will show reasonably well-established discourses, prevalent in the UK mass media since at least 2003. Later texts will exemplify more recent changes in the orientation of ads aimed at both men and women.

#### 'LET SURGERY WAIT': TECHNOLOGIZED STRATEGIES FOR AN ESTABLISHED MARKET

##### **Text 1: Clinique repairwear day<sup>1</sup>**

Full text. Two page spread: left-hand page a large colour photo of an open jar sitting on lid of the product, peaks of pink cream seen in top of jar (CLINIQUE repairwear day SPF 15 intensive cream); right-hand page text only; black on white.

(*Red*, March 2004, pp. 34–5)

- 1                                   A new day for repair.
- 2                                   Seize the day.
- 3                                   Meet Clinique's new Repairwear Day SPF 15 Intensive
- 4                                   Cream. And help skin repair itself during the vulnerable day
- 5                                   time.
- 6                                   All day, this anti-aging moisturizer helps block and mend
- 7                                   the look of lines and wrinkles. Helps replenish antioxidant
- 8                                   levels. Forms a floating SPF barrier against the sun.
- 9                                   Result? From the surface down, skin's energies can focus
- 10                                  on repair so you face the day looking more vibrant, full of life.
- 11                                  To continue repair at night, add Repairwear Intensive
- 12                                  Night formulas. Day or night, if skin is in need of more
- 13                                  intense treatment, add Extra Help Serum.
- 14                                  New Repairwear Day SPF 15 Intensive Cream or Lotion.
- 15                                  What a difference a day can make.
- 16                                  Clinique.
- 17                                  Allergy tested. 100% fragrance free.

www.clinique.com

With its emphasis on *repair* (cf. the name of the product), Text 1 realizes age resistance. The ageing process is formulated as correctable (*repair* lines 1, 3, 4, 10, 11, 14; *mend* line 6). The moisturizer itself is described as *anti-aging* (line 6),

an oxymoron, in that the ageing process in its developmental sense cannot be resisted, but where the phrase implies anti- the appearance of ageing, as if ageing only achieves its meaning through bodily appearance. This usage is indicative of the ‘unwatchability’ of old age (Woodward, 1991) – an ageing that must not be seen. The claim that the product *helps block and mend the look of lines and wrinkles* (lines 6–7) clearly presupposes the undesirability of visibly aged skin. Further, the reader’s attention is drawn to the role of the sun in causing skin damage, and the associated need for sun-avoidance, both implicitly (*the vulnerable daytime*, lines 4–5; *block* line 6) and explicitly (*forms a ... barrier against the sun* line 8). The advertiser’s strategy is to market multiple technologized solutions in the form of a collection of products (*Repairwear Day, Repairwear Night, Extra Help Serum*) to conceal or counter outward signs of ageing: promising the reader that she (in the context of magazines targeted at women readers) will look more *vibrant* and *full of life* (line 10). The *scientized* nature of these solutions is evidenced in the lexical sets used: *formulas, treatment, serum* (lines 12–13). A key point is that what the product claims to do is help *block and mend the look of lines and wrinkles* (lines 6–7) where *the look of* indicates a need to avoid implying that wrinkles can be ‘mended’. Although we might posit a problem of coherence here, there is none, since the ideological force of the argument here prioritizes ‘appearance’, and so the problem is strategically suppressed. Interestingly, then, we end up with a new semantic association of *mend* and *look* as if appearance itself can have the quality of being ‘worn out’. This quasi-scientific discourse is further extended in Text 2.

### Text 2: Garnier Density

Full text. Two page spread: left-hand page depicts a facial photo of a smiling woman, perhaps in her late 40s/early 50s, hair grey at the temples and smooth-looking skin; a baby’s fist pinches her cheek. Right-hand page depicts jar of product (‘GARNIER SKIN NATURALS Density mature skin’) placed next to two large ice cubes, one containing a halved fig and one some soya sprouts. below lines 1–12.

(*Good Housekeeping*, March 2004, pp. 48–9)

- 1 IMPROVE SKIN DENSITY BY 10 YEARS.\*
- 2 SEE AT A PINCH. (*headline across both pages*)
- 3 NEW GARNIER DENSITY
- 4 OUR FIRST RE-DENSIFYING MOISTURISER
- 5 TO PLUMP UP THIN AND SAGGING SKIN
- 6 A moisturiser enriched with nourishing fig
- 7 and soya nutriflavones. In just 4 weeks,
- 8 skin feels re-densified and facial
- 9 contours look more defined.
- 10 Re-densifying effectiveness: 91% agree\*
- 11 Nourishing effectiveness: 93% agree\*
- 12 Effectiveness proven under dermatological control.

(very small print; laid vertically )

\*Tests on 40 women aged 50–65 years, over 4 weeks

With its reference to *thin and sagging skin* which could benefit from *plump[ing] up* (line 5), Text 2 again carries clear presuppositions about the problematic

nature of ageing appearance, and (partly through the visual elements of the text) the desirability of younger-looking skin.<sup>2</sup> It is striking how directly pejorative the lexical items are. Presumably, this is a strategy of 'straight talk' about age decrement to the individual reader who can buy her way into social situations where the decrement and its lexis are hidden. Readers may be led to infer that the (aspirationally) plump and firm-looking skin on the forties/fifties model's face, which, by juxtaposition is likened to that on the baby's fist, is *dense* (lines 1, 3, 4, 8, 10) (for which read 'desirable') skin. The visual design offers transposition of the skin on babies' cheeks being pinched, caressed or kissed by their elders due to their 'touchability'. Finding techniques to *improve skin's density* (line 1) using solutions such as *re-densifying moisturiser* (lines 3–4) is treated as a serious business. The quasi-scientific discourse (Macdonald, 1995) is redolent of empiricism (Coupland, 2003) with claims made for the 'measurable' efficacy of the product (*improve skin density by 10 years*, line 1) *redensifying/ nourishing effectiveness* (percentages cited in lines 10 and 11, and the reference to 'clinical-type' trials (*proven, control*, line 12 and footnoted). The reference to *10 YEARS* (line 1) is remarkable in positing that age-related appearance can be calibrated so precisely. But this is in line with the empiricist discourse, and the contrast between *10 YEARS* and *4 weeks* (line 7) is surely planned to suggest buying time (Coupland, in prep.). Ageing appearance is thus pathologized (here's the problem), with pharmaceutical-sounding creams, lotions and serums offered (here's the solution).

For female readers, however, such solutions to the 'problem' of ageing appearance are increasingly being discursively linked to more radical interventions.

Text 3 is a recent *Olay* advertisement which can usefully be read in the context of the *seven signs of ageing* series of ads for *Olay's* 'total effects' moisturizer, which have been running since 1999 (see Coupland, 2003). These advertisements claimed to *fight seven signs of ageing*: 1) fine lines and wrinkles, 2) age spots, 3) texture, 4) tone, 5) dullness, 6) dryness, 7) pores.<sup>3</sup> This simultaneously pathologizes ageing (see Sontag, 1991, on 'fighting' illness) and reifies the seven-sign category system.

### Text 3: Olay regenerist

Magazine insert. Extract. Against a black background, a surgical lamp shines a bright light onto a stainless steel surgical tray (of the type commonly portrayed storing instruments in the operating theatre) on the tray, in place of such instruments, are two Olay products and their boxes.

(*Red*, January 2004)

- 1            "If you're thinking of cosmetic surgery, try this first"  
2            OLAY: love the skin you're in

If we recover the explication from line 1, (if you're thinking of *undergoing* cosmetic surgery) the ad writer is positioning the reader possibly considering that course of action herself. The product is offered (*try this first*) as a way of offsetting or delaying this 'solution'. The more particular force of line 1 is to invoke presuppositions about the objectives and wished-for results from cosmetic surgery: fast, radical alteration to bodily appearance. A 'sister' ad for 'Olay Regenerist Eye' addresses

the reader as follows: *See, you were right not to consider an eyelift*. The implicature created in both instances is that the product can and does compete with the wished-for results of surgery. But in Text 3, the visible accoutrements of the operating theatre index how radical and painful surgery may be; the reader is invited to infer that purchase and use of (moderately expensive) cosmetic products is preferable to surgery, as a way to be able to *love the skin you're in* (line 2). **Being in a skin is a construction that dissociates a woman from her body, implying that the skin has a materiality which is, in a sense, optional or disposable**. The 'solution' here is to 'love' this skin as an alternative to cutting (some of) it away, or having it abraded. Even so, the expression *try this first* leaves a rhetorical space for what the reader might try 'second' or next'; putting surgery within the frame of possible solutions to the problem of ageing, a notion addressed more explicitly in Text 4.

What are we to make of this incursion of references to the operating theatre into advertisements for cosmetic products? As Davies (1996: 115) puts it,

[c]osmetic surgery is a cultural product of late modernity. It can only emerge as a 'solution to women's problems with their appearance in a culture where the surgical alteration of the body is both readily available and socially acceptable' (Bordo, 1993). It requires a culture with an unshakeable conviction in the technological 'fix' – the endless **makeability and remakeability of ourselves through our bodies** ... it requires a culture where gender/power relations are typically enacted in and through women's bodies – that is, a culture in which **women must negotiate their identities vis-à-vis their appearance** (see also Sobchack, 2004).

Contemporary popular media increasingly provide narratives which involve surgical intervention: personal 'makeover' shows now regularly feature visits to the operating theatre (in the UK, for example, on TV programmes such as *Make Me Perfect*, *10 Years Younger*, and *Extreme Makeover*.) Texts 3, 4 and 5 illustrate the discursive thematizing presentation of surgical alteration in skin care advertisements and features in women's magazines. These texts play a part in normalizing or naturalizing cosmetic surgery, as a means to 'improve' or 'rescue' female facial appearance.

#### **Text 4: L'Oreal Wrinkle De-Crease**

Extract. Two page spread: left-hand page depicts a facial photo of the smooth-skinned 'supermodel' Claudia Schiffer, her face marked with lines reminiscent of the pen marks surgeons make before cosmetic surgery or perhaps of a heartbeat trace on a clinical monitor; these depict arrows 'pulling away' at fake expression marks, or stylized 'wrinkles', depicted on her forehead and at the edges of her eyes; right hand page depicts a jar of product: a small surgical-type spatula holds a little cream above the jar; below lines 1–20. (*Vogue*, March 2004, pp. 193–4)

- 
- 1 LET SURGERY WAIT!
  - 2 The 1<sup>st</sup> anti-creasing cream with **BOSWELOX**™ that counteracts
  - 3 skin micro-contractions\* – to visibly correct wrinkles.
  - 4 **WRINKLE DE-CREASE**
  - 5 **REVOLUTION** ADVANCED ANTI-CREASING CORRECTING
  - 6 DAY CREAM
  - 7 You smile, you frown ... skin contracts. Creases and wrinkles deepen.

- 8 WRINKLE DE-CREASE WITH BOSWELOX™ a unique phyto-  
 9 complex combining boswellic acid and manganese that counteracts  
 10 skin's micro-contractions\* to visibly reduce the appearance of  
 11 expression lines and wrinkles  
 12 CLINICALLY PROVEN RESULTS, REPORTED EFFECTIVENESS:
- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 13 | 76% Reported a visible reduction on expression lines**    |
| 14 | 70% Reported a de-creasing effect♥                        |
| 15 | -28% Measured reduction in forehead wrinkles in 3 weeks♥♥ |
- 16 For a rejuvenated and radiant expression
- 17 DERMO-EXPERTISE  
 18 FROM RESEARCH TO BEAUTY  
 19 BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT  
 20 FROM AGE 30, CORRECTIVE ANTI-AGEING

(small print, rendered vertically) \* *in vitro* test, \*\* Tested on 50 women after 3 weeks, ♥ Tested on 196 women after 3 weeks, ♥♥ Total surface area of wrinkles, tested on 40 women.

Both in the visual detailing (the lines drawn on the model's face, the clinical-looking spatula) and in the text, ageing is once again problematized and pathologized (e.g. *corrective anti-ageing*, line 20). Lexis evokes the science behind the pharmaceutical industry (*from age 30, clinically proven results*, line 12; *dermo-expertise*, line 17; *research*, line 18). The advertisers detail the bio-chemistry of the product and the process it triggers: *a unique phyto-complex combining boswellic acid and manganese that counteracts skin's micro-contractions\** (lines 8–10) and provide apparently precise statistics (within the text box and as the 'small print'). In line 1, *Let surgery wait* is an invocation which once again invites, perhaps 'liberates', readers to *delay* surgery, which we are led to infer would be to *visibly correct* (lines 3, 5, 20) or to *de-crease* (lines 2, 5, 8) wrinkles, which we are told occur as a result of smiling and frowning.

### Text 5: RoC Retin-Ox Correxion

Full text. One page spread; photo on dark blue background of a tube of the product with its 'point' appearing to 'cut' downwards through a layer of the backing colour; facing upwards towards this point is a gleaming surgical scalpel.

(Tatler, January 2004, p. 53)

(to left of the image)

- 1 Now you can reduce the appearance of wrinkles by  
 2 10 YEARS without taking the ultimate step.

(to right of the image)

- 3 Until now, looking years  
 4 younger often meant taking  
 5 the ultimate step: cosmetic  
 6 surgery. Now RoC introduces  
 7 Retin-Ox Correxion. A patented\*  
 8 and collagen-ox™ complex,  
 10 clinically proven to reduce  
 11 the appearance of wrinkles by,

- 12 on average, 10 years (7 years  
 13 off crows' feet, 13 years off  
 14 wrinkles under your eyes and  
 15 12 years off wrinkles on  
 16 your cheeks). It is so effective  
 17 that the presence of even  
 18 the most severe expression  
 19 lines appears smoothed.  
 20 Cosmetic surgery, not yet!
- 21 \*...Retinex-Correxion is an anti-wrinkle cream for the reduction in  
 22 appearance of deep wrinkles and expression lines, and is not intended as a  
 23 replacement for cosmetic procedures.

Again promises about achieving surgery-like results are evidenced in Text 5, one of a series of RoC (Retinex Correxion) ads which make prominent use of imagery of surgical implements, such as the scalpel, the hypodermic needle, and the 'dermabrasion' tool. Again we see references to pharmaceutical ingredients (lines 7–8) and empiricism (line 10), and time (*looking years younger*, lines 3–4; *reduce the appearance of wrinkles by 10 YEARS*, lines 1–2) ... *on average 10 years*, etc. (lines 12–16). Cosmetic surgery is referred to as the *ultimate step* (lines 2, 5), with the large scalpel perhaps functioning as a 'fear' trigger (Chaiken, 1987; Nabi, 2002). The final line of copy, with its *not yet* once again frames surgery as being *postponed* rather than replaced by the product, a point emphasized in the footnote (lines 21–3).

The texts we have considered so far demonstrate how, since 1999 or so, skin care advertisements aimed at women in the UK have formulated the onset of an appearance of ageing as a serious 'problem', but one that can be addressed through the purchase of products with a range of physical or visual effects, and more recently, with cosmetic surgery brought into the frame of reference. Discursive strategies work to persuade female consumers to fully invest, both emotionally and economically in 'anti-ageing' practice to 'remedy' their facial ageing. But in the last few years, advertisers have begun to address a new and, of course, potentially very lucrative market: men. We now turn to an examination of the very different strategies advertisers have recently developed to stimulate new needs, desires and buying habits in male consumers.

#### 'PARTY LIKE THE STONES': VALIDATING MALE NARCISSISM

Earlier, I noted that men's bodies have moved into the public spotlight alongside women's, and that for some years men's bodily regimes have been a focus of popular media texts. Whitehead (2002: 182) says that 'new discourses surrounding men's bodies have emerged into the public domain' and that there are 'new scrutinies on men in terms of body shape, style and deportment', that 'previous boundaries surrounding men's bodies appear to be eroding or changing with increasing numbers of men, like women, pursuing a form of individual legitimation through body enhancement, whether this be an exercise regime, cosmetic surgery, or the application of face creams.' He comments that some

writers have termed this trend the 'Adonis complex' and connected it with the 'crisis of masculinity thesis' (p. 182). MacKinnon (2003: 97) refers to the 'more feminized male, who appealed to and was partially created by the glossies'. His argument is that the 'new men's glossies show the influence, to some extent, of feminist ideas and form their ideas about work and sexuality in the light of this (limited) awareness. All of them are clearly of major interest to advertisers, who must produce advertising images and copy that take account of a revised version of masculinity'.<sup>5</sup> He continues '... advertising of such products as moisturisers, face cream and fragrances has had to overcome decades of their association with exclusively female consumers. It is not hard to see, when this is borne in mind, why striving after more "securely" masculine imagery ... part of advertising's task has been to free such products as hair-spray or cologne from an earlier association with the feminine' (p. 97). How can advertisers persuade male consumers that it is acceptable and even desirable to buy moisturizing products and to incorporate them into their grooming regimes, alongside 'safely' masculine shaving products? As we turn to examination of skin care products for men, we can trace the strategies used to provide 'securely' masculine imagery in a traditionally feminine marketplace. This will allow us to consider some presuppositions about gender, and in particular to examine an interesting case of media negotiation of complex aspects of gendered identity. It is true that some (if not all) of the general discourse strategies used in ads aimed at women do recur, but these are reformulated into subtly different frames of meaning, taken to define 'men's values' and men's stances, as the following analysis will show. The first text is an 'advertorial' (van Leeuwen, 2005) a hybrid feature/advertisement, chosen because it testifies to the need for men (here, as represented by the editor of a high profile men's lifestyle magazine) to *account for* social change, to be reflexive about it, to raise issues of 'shame' and to work through them.

#### **Text 6: REAL MEN DO WEAR MOISTURISER**

There's never been a better choice of grooming products for men

Extract. Six (inauthentically clean-looking) men dressed in rugby kit are shown in a stylized representation of them playing rugby.<sup>6</sup>

(*Boots Health and Beauty*, September/October 2004, pp. 78–9; four page feature, by David Waters, grooming editor of *Men's Health* magazine. The text gives detailed reports of the six men's tests on the 'grooming products'; four skin care products tested alongside four shaving products and four hair gel/paste products.)

1 How my bathroom cabinet differs from my dad's back then. Instead of his  
 2 three items [scary razor blades, Old Spice, Hai Karate] I have at least 13.  
 3 Instead of burning liquids and blunt blades, I have unguents, balms and  
 4 moisturisers; drops and goos which smooth, soften and caress my skin into  
 5 peachy perfection (well, that's the promise on one of the bottles)...surprisingly  
 6 to some, the boys have leapt on the products aimed at them: liquids and gels  
 7 their fathers would have been shamefaced to use.

.  
 .  
 .

8 Women have a different take on all of this, inevitably. For some, any man who  
 9 spends longer than they do in the bathroom just has to go. For others, a whiff  
 10 of BO would be enough to show him the door. Men have to negotiate these  
 11 two extremes without being unmanly or too much of a caveman. It's a tricky  
 12 business, but fortunately, we're getting better at it.

The headline appeals to, and attempts to subvert, readers' presuppositions about real men and their grooming regimes, or lack of them). In the UK at least, the rugby team serves to provide significantly masculinized imagery (Thorne and Coupland, 1998): to be a rugby player is to display hegemonic norms of masculinity, to align with 'norms which prescribe "acceptable" maleness' (Coates, 2003: 196). These norms are 'typically associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power and authority, competitiveness, and the subordination of gay men' (p. 196). So what kind of men are these 'unreal' men who, we might have presupposed, were more likely to use moisturizer? Presumably gay or metrosexual men. But if men who play rugby are 'real men', (and the reader is invited to infer that the depicted rugby players are in the habit of wearing moisturizer), Text 6 works to enable 'real men', (and perhaps their partners) who might empathise with the rugby male identity and semiotic, to buy moisturizer, and to incorporate it into a grooming regime. The text begins by working to normalize a textual image of contemporary young man (one of *the boys*; line 6) and his well-stocked bathroom cabinet (lines 1–5).

Line 1, then, portrays a changing set of rules and norms for the acceptable accomplishment of masculinity, as indexed in Edley and Wetherell's (1995) interviews with men of different ages. One of their older male respondents, brought up in the 1930s and 1940s reports on his generation's antipathy to using grooming products: 'if you had ... the sweet smelling brilliantine on ... or scented soap ... you were going that way to, you know, femininity'. (He even mentions deodorant and aftershave as problematic; p. 166.) In Text 6, lines 8–12 explicitly address the problematic and 'shameful' negotiation of masculinity (cf. Gill et al., 2005) and within an explicitly heterosexual framing. The *peachy perfection* (line 5) of male skin is arguably given ironic framing as a possibly false promise on one of the bottles. This seems to refer to moisturizing as a female, or not fully male practice. A warrant is provided, but men are represented as needing to manage their grooming habits without being seen by women (line 8) as *unmanly* (through being overly narcissistic; line 9) or *too much of a caveman* (line 11) through being too careless about personal grooming.

This is the problematic in which current promotional texts find their place. As we shall see, Texts 7–11 work to dispel 'feminized' attributions using a range of strategies which construct new associations between skin care and some stereotypically male domains and styles (including styles of language). Text 7, for example, gives us text and imagery which, like Text 6, invokes **hyper-masculinity**:

#### **Text 7: Adidas Active Skin Care**

Full text. A young man is depicted, from waist up, in a locker room, with intent, aggressive facial expression, dressed in a sports vest, fists bandaged and raised as if poised for boxing.

Products labelled at the foot of the page: adidas ACTIVE SKIN CARE for MEN triple action FACE CREAM ALL DAY HYDRATION UV FILTER PROTECTION SKIN REVITALISING PROTECT

(*Men's Health*, February 2004, p. 92)

- 1 ADIDAS ACTIVE SKIN CARE FOR MEN
- 2 KEEP YOUR SKIN IN SHAPE
- 3 DEVELOPED WITH ATHLETES
- 4 > ADVANCED SKIN CARE RANGE SPECIFICALLY
- 5 FORMULATED FOR MEN'S SKIN
- 6 > HYDRATES AND CONDITIONS ALL SKIN TYPES
- 7 > NOTICEABLY IMPROVES LOOK AND FEEL OF SKIN
- 8 EQUIPMENT FOR FIT SKIN

Like many of the ads aimed at females, this text is reminiscent of Featherstone's (1991: 174) 'infinitely revisable, infinitely combinable' themes which 'recur within advertising and consumer culture imagery'; which include 'youth, beauty, energy, fitness, movement'. But in its visual and textual handling of the final three of those themes, this advertisement implicates an aggressively 'masculinized' ideology. This works to legitimize use of the grooming product by association with archetypally hyper-masculine imagery (to have the model dressed and posed as a boxer invites associations not only with energy, fitness, movement, but also with, sport, aggression, readiness for conflict, danger). Discursively, both the product name brand (*ACTIVE SKIN CARE*) and the claim about provenance *DEVELOPED WITH ATHLETES* (line 3) adds to the locker-room association (socially sanctioned bodily work). *SKIN CARE* (line 1) is relocated from the domain of the woman's beauty routine to that of the man's sports or fitness regime (see also *KEEP YOUR SKIN IN SHAPE*, line 2 and *FIT SKIN* line 8). The self-referential 'for men' targeting has for some time been a warrant for gender expansion of a market (compare 'Kleenex tissues for men'). Lexical choices are also, arguably, marked for gender, for example, *HYDRATION* and *REVITALISING* (on product labels) in equivalent semantic slots to those occupied by lexis like *moisturising* and *anti-ageing* in ads aimed at women (see Thornborrow, 1994: 141).

If Text 7 has an unremittingly masculinized approach, Text 8 is ideologically more complex in terms of its orientation to personal responsibility for bodily health, well-being, and grooming. And if the ads we have so far examined do not use the phrase 'anti-ageing', they evoke the theme in less direct ways.

### **Text 8: Nivea for Men Revitalising Creme**

Full text. One page spread. A large facial photograph of a broadly smiling young male with smooth skin. At bottom right of page a picture of the product and its box (*REVITALISING CRÈME Q10 NIVEA FOR MEN*)

(*Men's Health*, March 2004, p. 84)

On a banner 2/3 down the page, apparently on brushed steel:

- 1 PARTY LIKE THE STONES.
- 2 DON'T LOOK LIKE ONE.

*In the text below the photo, yellow and white on blue*

- 3 NIVEA FOR MEN Revitalising Creme Q10 revitalises and  
 4 refreshes your skin to keep it feeling good and looking great.  
 5 It contains stuff (Coenzyme Q10, UV filters and vitamins if you  
 6 really want to know) that protects against all sorts of pollution and  
 7 actually helps with your skin's natural repair process.

First, in comparison with, Texts 1–5, the ads aimed at women which appear to expect women to be in thrall to scientific expertise, the discourse here affects indifference to the pharmaceutical make-up of the product (*it contains stuff*, line 5, *if you really want to know*, lines 5–6). Yet these very disclaimers frame the details (Coenzyme Q10, UV filters and vitamins) they apparently 'background' or construe disinterest in. This is an ironic marketing ploy, which appears to mitigate the serious commercial purpose of the advertisement: its mocking tenor arguably constructs an 'acceptable' level of male (dis)interest in grooming products. In addition, if this text (like Texts 1–5) is constructing concern about the 'look' of ageing, it addresses this concern only by implication (see *repair*, line 7; *revitalising*, line 3; *refreshes*, line 4). The product name refers to vitality *Revitalising crème* but the *look* is by implication linked to late nights (or playing hard) rather than to ageing itself (*PARTY LIKE THE STONES. DON'T LOOK LIKE ONE*, lines 1–2). The Rolling Stones are a familiar target for British media moralizing on rock and pop music icons of the 1960s and 1970s who are regularly pilloried as 'dinosaurs of rock', with close up facial photos (displaying wrinkled, weathered, rough-looking skin) captioned with expressions like 'repaying the debts of yesteryear' (N. Coupland, 2004). But there is also plenty of endorsement of their star status, which is far from being undermined by their craggy facial features.

Text 8 therefore negotiates its way through some conflictual messages about individual and moral responsibility for bodily maintenance in relation to ageing (Featherstone, 1991). The ultimate message is that the reader/consumer can have it both ways: that is he *can Party like the Stones* (by inference, involving late nights, generous consumption of alcohol, etc.) and *can* maintain the appearance of youthful clean living and adherence to the project of bodily maintenance. The reader is invited to infer that, even with a party lifestyle, signs of bodily deterioration can be avoided, and skin which is *looking great* (line 4) maintained. Another *Nivea for men* advertisement (*Revitalising eye relief*) is captioned *LATE NIGHTS ... NO TRACE. ULTIMATE EYE CARE* (*Men's Health*, March 2005, p. 100).

Despite the rise of the image of young women as hard-drinking partying 'ladettes', this message (live hard, play hard, consumerized solutions can keep you looking good) is quite unlike any message given out in ads for women's products. There, the only *behavioural* link with 'damaged' or ageing appearance is attributed to smiling, frowning and other facial expressions (*you smile, you frown*, Text 4; *severe expression lines* Text 5; mentions of the effects of facial expressions on the skin are referred to also in Text 10). Lastly, Text 8 indirectly implicates the role of (ageing) sun damage in skin appearance and care (*UV filters*, Line 5); a theme more explicitly addressed in Text 9.

**Text 9: Lab Series for Men Day Rescue Total Face therapy**

Extract; advertising feature

On a black background, the (brightly-lit) product (LAB SERIES FOR MEN DAY RESCUE TOTAL FACE THERAPY SPF 15) is seen resting on a stylized gold sun-like disc. (*Men's Health*, August 2004, pp. 173–4)

1 RESCUE PLAN  
 2 Say what you like about Dracula (womaniser, bloodsucker, all-  
 3 round fly-by-night...), the man understood the secrets of  
 4 eternal youth: eat well, get plenty of sleep and stay out of the  
 5 sun. With UV radiation thought to be the cause of 90% of  
 6 wrinkles, you can see why the count was so tanophobic. "If  
 7 you could actually protect your face from the sun all the time,  
 8 it would probably remain relatively young looking and wrinkle  
 9 free, even into old age" says Professor John Hawk, author of  
 10 *The Family Doctor Guide to Skin and Sunlight* (DK, £4.99). But  
 11 it's not just baking on the beach you need to avoid. "Even  
 12 walking to and from the office or shops may expose our skin to  
 13 enough sunlight to cause some photoageing" he warns. And  
 14 your skin's at risk from winter sunlight as well as the summer  
 15 stuff. The solution, of course is to protect your mug from the  
 16 sun's rays daily and all year round. For this you have two  
 17 options: do the coffin-in-the crypt thing or use an SPF  
 18 moisturiser.  
 19 MH RECOMMENDS: Lab Series for Men's new Day Rescue  
 20 Total Face Therapy (£24 for 50 ml). This new addition to Lab  
 21 Series' Rescue Range is a revolutionary cream containing a  
 22 solar-activated sunscreen that cleverly switches itself on when  
 23 exposed to harmful UV radiation. Slap it on every morning  
 24 after shaving, and again after lunch, and you're protected for  
 25 the rest of the day by an SPF 15 sunscreen.

The style of Text 9 is not uncharacteristic of advertorials aimed at the men's market, which treat the business of skin care semi-seriously, inviting the reading that bodily/facial grooming work is 'too feminizing' to be given full, sincere commitment. But the text is infused with contradictory discourses. Dracula is described as a male reprobate, but in approving terms. And the playful, ironic stance on the desirability of offsetting or delaying the effects of sun exposure and skin ageing, as seen in lines 1–5, 15, 17 and 23, does not detract from the ideologically anti-ageing perspective (cf. *the secrets of eternal youth*, lines 3–4; *remain relatively young looking and wrinkle free, even into old age* lines 8–9). How to account for this? Myra MacDonald (2003: 28–9) persuades us that media texts can hold ideological influence even through framing their messages ironically:

In discussions of the media, irony is often claimed to pose a challenge to all forms of serious discourse. If everything is 'tongue in cheek' ideology may indeed become obsolete or at least moribund. But playful irony does not necessarily contest established power. She cites Eagleton (1991: 40) who claims 'that such irony may act as a seductive decoy to distract attention from the underlying ideological purpose'. The so-called lads' magazines that became popular in Britain in the 1990s may, for example, have been

more rather than less persuasive in their sexist impact by being apparently 'jokey' and non-serious in their approach.

The title of the feature *Rescue plan* (line 1) uses the name of the product in a way which carries connotations of activity and adventure, if not military engagement (images of Hollywood action films come to mind). The facetious Dracula narrative here uses gothic fantasy to frame bodily grooming and care as semi-serious at best; *you can see why the count was so tanophobic* (line 6); *you have two options; do the coffin-in-the crypt thing or use an SPF moisturiser* (lines 16–18). The invocation to *protect your mug* (line 15) and to *slap it on every morning ... and again after lunch* (lines 23–4) represents the kind of 'tongue in cheek' attitude MacDonald refers to above, in mimicking the style of 'blokey banter', contrasting with the much more serious, committed and fear-based style of women's features and ads for sun and skin care regimes (see N. Coupland and J. Coupland, 1997; J. Coupland and N. Coupland, 2000). The expression *slap it on* (line 23), though reminiscent of the Australian sun care mantra 'slip slap slop' (Coupland et al. 1998) explicitly invokes easy, *careless* use of the product, even while recommending twice daily applications and informing the reader *your skin's at risk* (line 14) ...of *photo-ageing* (line 13).<sup>7</sup> A discourse which, in this example, invokes highly technologized solutions *solar-activated sunscreen that cleverly switches itself on when exposed to harmful UV radiation* (lines 23–4) stops short of the level of technological or pharmaceutical detail we have seen in Texts 1–5. So we have a highly strategized text that calibrates apparently contradictory messages, in order to mitigate, for male readers, commitment to bodily care and protection implicated in the regular use of sun screening products.

But in contrast to the semi-committed tenor of Texts 8 and 9, some recent campaigns aimed at the male market articulate explicitly ageist discourse and treat skin care as a serious body project. *ClarinsMen Total Wrinkle Control* (*Men's Health*, August 2004, p. 175) asks the male reader *Are the lines on your face making a deep impression? Hard work and hard play, aggravated by environmental pollution, wreak havoc on your skin. It looks tired and drawn. You look older than you'd like.* But it promises that, after use of the product, *You won't notice those lines so much and neither will anyone else. A freshness replaces that stressed look. So you appear healthier and more dynamic ...* And in April 2005, *L'Oreal Paris* claimed the launch of the 'first men's anti-aging line'. A high-profile, four-page advertisement (Text 10) indicating a great deal of investment in sales of the product, explicitly marks the product as a male product, as Texts 7–9 have all done. But, as a new strategy, Text 10 constructs hetero-relational narratives in which the effect of the female gaze is specifically addressed. A range of products, marketed to address skin care 'problems' of men of different ages, is advertised as follows:

**Text 10: L'Oreal men expert**

4 page spread; extract

(GQ, April 2005, pp. 51–4)

page 1 depicts four facial close-ups of smiling men, apparently ascending in age, one in 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s)

1 *at head of page:* Guys, you think you've got the look?

2 *at foot of page:* And the girls, what do they really think?

- 3            *overleaf, at top of page* There's room for improvement!  
*Photo of each man, each superimposed with one of the following phrases (skin 'problems') in white lettering*
- 4            *Close up of man in 20s* Shiny skin
- 5            Shiny forehead, oily nose, skin that regreases? Fight back...
- 6            PURE & MATTE ANTI REGREASING MOISTURISING GEL
- 7            Anti-sebum complex
- 8            Matte, clear and pure-looking skin, long-lasting results
- 9            *Close up of man in 30s* Looking tired, worn out
- 10          Looking tired and worn out? Not getting enough sleep? Fight
- 11          back...
- 12          HYDRA ENERGETIC DAILY ANTI-FATIGUE
- 13          MOISTURISING LOTION
- 14          Vitamin C
- 15          Your skin feels recharged with energy. Revived skin.
- 16          *Close up of man in 40s* Expression wrinkles
- 17          1<sup>st</sup> expression wrinkles? Fight back...
- 18          WRINKLE DE-CREASE ANTI-EXPRESSION WRINKLES
- 19          MOISTURISING CREAM
- 20          with Boswelox™
- 21          Instantly smoothed expression wrinkles. Reduces the appearance of
- 22          wrinkles.
- 23          *Close up of man in 50s* Sagging
- 24          Seeing the signs of ageing, sagging and deepening wrinkles?
- 25          Fight back...
- 26          VITA LIFT COMPLETE ANTI-AGEING MOISTURISING
- 27          CREAM
- 28          Pro-retinol
- 29          Anti-sagging on face and neck. Wrinkles appear visibly reduced.

(on 4<sup>th</sup> page)

- 30          For everyone who thinks they're looking good but still could do a
- 31          little better, L'Oreal creates Men Expert, its 1st skin care range
- 32          especially for men. Now it's your turn to take action!
- 33          L'OREAL men expert YOU'RE WORTH IT TOO

With direct address to male readers (*Guys*, line 1), the ad begins by objectifying males' bodily appearance, *you think you've got the look?* (line 1) vis-à-vis the female gaze: *And the girls, what do they really think?* (line 2). This is a **transposition of the stereotypical objectification of the female by the male** (Mulvey, 1975) through the imagined pejorative appraising 'voice' of the *girls* (line 2): *There's room for improvement* (line 3). The persuasive strategy here appears to rely on male readers' commitment to their success in the (hetero-)sexual marketplace. Even so the key difference is that the male gaze is never mentioned in advertisements for women in either of my data sets (this article and Coupland, 2003). Advertisers envisage the female consumer to be more concerned with her symbolic capital in a more generalized way, with the public marketplace subsuming the male gaze, which therefore doesn't need to be mentioned. But in Text 10, in the conventional advertising narrative pattern, aspects of male facial appearance are problematized,

and consumer solutions offered. Problematized 'looks' are variously attributed to male skin: *Shiny skin* (phase 1, line 4); fatigue: *looking tired, worn out* (phase 2, line 9) and facial 'wear': *expression wrinkles* (phase 3, line 16). Only in phase 4 (lines 24–5) are the 'problems' explicitly linked to ageing: *Seeing the signs of ageing, sagging and deepening wrinkles?* The recurrent exhortation to *Fight back*, in all four phases, is once again reminiscent of the metaphor of fighting disease, similar to the pathologizing discourse that is prevalent in ads aimed at women, as we saw in Texts 1–5.

Through this four-phase problem-solution discourse, four life-stages are visually and textually implicated. In its discursive representation of the 'problem of ageing', Text 10 resembles texts aimed at the female market far more closely than do Texts 6–9. What is distinct here is the early, specific reference to complementary male–female roles of bodily work, appraisal and attraction. *L'Oreal* man is clearly being constructed as heterosexual (interested in attracting the female gaze; line 2), made responsible for taking care of his appearance (*Now it's your turn to take action!*, line 32)<sup>8</sup> and given licence to groom and pamper himself just as his female peers do (*YOU'RE WORTH IT TOO*, line 33). This last line is an intertextual reference to the famous 'You're worth it' by-line, which has accompanied *L'Oreal* ads for products for women for some years (see also Text 4, line 19). Line 33 explicitly frames female consumerized skin care discourse as the unmarked form, and carries multiple presuppositions about new versions of masculinity in body culture. But generally, in designs like that of Text 10, skin care product marketing for men has moved into an ideological frame that was formerly exclusive to women's ads.

## Discussion

The ideological frameworks sustained in recent and contemporary skin care product ads and advertorials in the UK lie at the intersection between *ageing* and *gender*. In ads for women, consumers as young as in their 20s are targeted with invocations to take responsibility for 'delaying outward signs of ageing' through regimes involving marketized solutions. In ads for men, the signs of ageing are represented as appearing, and mattering, much later in the lifespan. Text 10, for example, made reference to signs of *fatigue* juxtaposed with an image of a 30-ish man, and only to signs of *ageing* juxtaposed to an image of a man appearing to be in his 50s. In advertisements which explicitly construct ageing appearance as problematic (many female ads, few male ads), the ageing process is formulated as 'correctable' or 'repairable' *aberration*. **Marketed products, particularly those targeting women, are largely scientized**: the products are represented as pharmaceutical rather than cosmetic, with claims made about empirical verifiability, often (exclusively for the female market) making 'precise' claims about how much younger such products can make skin appear to be. Readers are persuaded that skin care is a serious business in which highly technologized products can, with care and conviction, make significant and capital-enhancing changes to facial appearance, similar to those associated with surgical intervention. Indeed, as we have seen, for female readers, the use of product solutions is discursively linked, logically or temporally,

to cosmetic surgery (dermabrasion, botox, face- and eye-lifts). Surgery is an element of the persuasive repertoire, even if it is represented as a more extreme 'step beyond' the use of creams and beauty treatments.

Male-oriented texts, which are a recent innovation and one that is rapidly evolving, evidence conflicting discourses. Marketized body culture and its narcissistic overtones is at times set against conventionally strongly 'masculine' ideological stances, styles and identities, using images of the boxer, the rugby player, the actively heterosexual male interested in the effect of his appearance on the onlooking female. This 'male-ing' of a previously female market involves using suffixes which literally render products for men as lexically *marked*: for example, 'for Men' (Nivea, Adidas, Lab Series 'Men Expert' (L'Oreal) or simply 'Men' (Clarins, not included here). Discursive strategies are resistant to those widely adopted in advertisements aimed at female consumers, although Text 10 gives us an example of a much more closely parallel design that may become normative.<sup>9</sup> Males are told their asceticism need not necessarily extend to healthy living or self-sacrifice, 'live fast but still look good' (Text 8). Ironic, ostensibly uncommitted discourses (Text 9) send the message that a care-free approach to skin care can reap sufficient reward. Together the marketing strategies used in Texts 6–10 reveal an ideologically complex and changing version of masculinity, as it relates to the risks associated with ageing and the solutions available to counter these risks. This shifting version of masculinity is encouraged to turn its gaze to the mirror under the protection of a range of mitigating discourses which offset potential attributions of unmanly narcissism.

Like all texts in mass media that touch on our public selves, and our diffidence about them, the texts this article has examined are potentially influential. The sheer economic scale and market saturation of multinational cosmetic companies suggest that the texts' ideological work will be formative. But what, in a more general sense, do these texts tell us about how ageing itself is defined in our society? Even if the gendering of skin care product advertising is apparently being levelled, ageing – the ageing face in particular – is continually being vilified as the unwatchable demon inside all of us. Being 'of an age' is of course a cultural experience, and cultural boundaries are constantly being redefined by discourse. Commercial discourses such as adverts and features in high-profile media sources both confirm and shift boundaries. Being, or at least looking older is undoubtedly being consolidated in the texts I have discussed as a cultural formation, viewed and described as a self-identity to be avoided, with marketized solutions offered to stop potential consumers crossing boundaries into being, or again at least looking, as if we inhabit old age. We are exhorted, not to display visible *lines* or *wrinkles*, to buy the *vibrant and full of life* look (which, importantly presupposes that wrinkles cannot indicate vibrancy). Later, suggest the ads, we may seek surgical intervention to stave off signs of ageing, as the *ultimate step*.

This may seem morally objectionable, a sign of a 'sad world' as argued by Germaine Greer in *The Whole Woman* (1999). Hepworth (2004: 26) identifies the 'mask of old age' which creates a 'trap or prison' whereby older people (who still feel young inside) describe being 'constrained by the expectations of others (often younger people) into a mask or disguise of physical ageing that ... they cannot

remove'. This makes attempts to assume a 'youthful mask', to present a youthful self, through marshalling contemporary techniques of body maintenance and repair (p. 32) seem seductive. In a marketplace which continues to put a premium on the desirability of youthful appearance, technologized solutions to the 'problem' of ageing can therefore be liberating, as they offer a certain amount of control (see also Lupton, 1996).<sup>10</sup> But 'buying in', both attitudinally and financially, to the quest to offset the look of ageing brings its own constraints and ultimately must be self-defeating. Old age cannot, as Hepworth (2004) observes, be adequately identified in terms of visible changes on the face and body. Liberal society has long since been convinced that the visible indexicalities of race, but also gender and sometimes sexuality, cannot be entertained in accounts of personal value. Sooner or later, each of us needs look beyond *past* narcissistic, cultural constructions which equate the *look* of ageing with ageing itself. We are told that certain aspects of living inevitably cause facial 'wear and tear': being in the sun (Texts 1, 8 and 9) smiling and frowning (Texts 4 and 10) staying up late and having fun (Texts 8 and 10), and to that extent our faces do narrativize 'having lived'. But 'having lived' does not preclude 'living', particularly if the start-age for sequestering age is (in some product ads) the third decade of life. It should be possible to demonstrate that 'the problem' is not so much physical and physiognomic ageing itself, but the gerontophobic discourse that seeks to unsettle personal identities – at almost any age.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Nik Coupland, Peter Garrett, Adam Jaworski, Virpi Yläanne and (for help with data collection) to James Hunt, Victoria Pailthorpe, and Dan Smith. Thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for most helpful comments on the article.

#### NOTES

1. The orthography and layout of advertisements are reproduced as closely as possible to the originals, including line breaks, bold and capital typeface, etc. 'Extract' indicates that only part of the advertisement is reproduced. Vertical or horizontal dots show where text has been omitted, to save space.
2. The large range of 'anti-ageing' skin care products marketed by Garnier is apparently aimed at women of different ages, and includes a product called 'Stop', advertised with the slogan *STOP THE FIRST SIGNS OF AGEING SNEAKING UP ON YOU*. It is said to be a *Multi-targeted moisturiser to help fight the first signs of ageing*. The accompanying photograph appears to be of a woman in her early 20s.
3. These do not seem to be skin 'qualities' of the same order: 'texture', 'tone' and 'pores' for example are arguably age-neutral/quality-neutral nominal items.
4. As I have commented elsewhere (Coupland, 2003) such claims may be described as pseudo-empiricist; un-detailed experiments, low numbers of 'informants', etc.
5. McKinnon was here including *Esquire* and *GQ*; both sampled in my data.
6. How styling and stylization relate to social identity is addressed in N. Coupland (in press).

7. A small sample of recommended application methods for skin care products from a feature aimed at women (*The Skincare Report, Boots Health and Beauty*, spring 2004, pp. 84–6) shows a contrast with the men's *slap it on* invocation: use a high factor facial sunscreen; *try applying* serum under your regular moisturiser; and in a feature on applying make up (*Good Housekeeping*, March 2004, p. 128) *blend* different shades of concealer to get the right colour; *finger-blend* cream blush over [your] cheek apples.
8. From about April 2005, men's skin care ads started to appear in women's magazines, presumably as encouragement to female consumers to influence their male partners. *Marie Claire* (June 2005, pp. 100–4), in another *L'Oreal* ad similar to Text 10, uses the same photos of males, with captions such as 'he thinks he looks the business, you think he looks overworked' (HYDRA ENERGETIC) 'what he thinks are great lines, you think are premature wrinkles' (WRINKLE DECREASE).
9. This raises the possibility of future ads being gender-blind or unisex, though space precludes discussing the likelihood of this here.
10. In a more recent advertising campaign, even the *Dove* series of beauty product ads, which explicitly seek to counter stereotypes about female beauty and desirability by using large models, models with skin imperfections and old models, carries ageist pre-suppositions. Below a billboard photo of a model in her nineties, the reader is given 'tick boxes' to choose: *wrinkly?* or *wonderful?* (To invite the choice, though apparently respectful of the appearance of a face in deep old age, precludes construing a wrinkly face to *be* wonderful.) These ads do not bear more detailed comparison with my dataset, as they did not appear in the magazines I examined and are not in any case specifically marketing facial moisturiser and sun protection products.
11. Lupton (1996) makes a similar argument about menopause and women's *choice* to take HRT.

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