

The Importance of Understanding Consumer Preferences for Dermatologist Recommended Skin Cleansing and Care Products

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ABSTRACT

Dermatologist recommendations of skin care products are critical to the management of compromised and healthy skin and appreciated by patients. Professionals must carefully weigh not only the safety and efficacy but also the aesthetics of products if they are to achieve the desired outcome of satisfied patients. This article elucidates the relevance of product sensory characteristics and consumer preferences, with specific focus on what appeals to men vs. women, those with self-perceived sensitive skin, and acne sufferers. Different product formats with novel aesthetics are also discussed. Dermatologists' recommendations are clearly essential to ensure that patients use the most appropriate products; however, sensorial aspects of products should be taken into consideration when making those recommendations, to help motivate continued adherence.

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INTRODUCTION

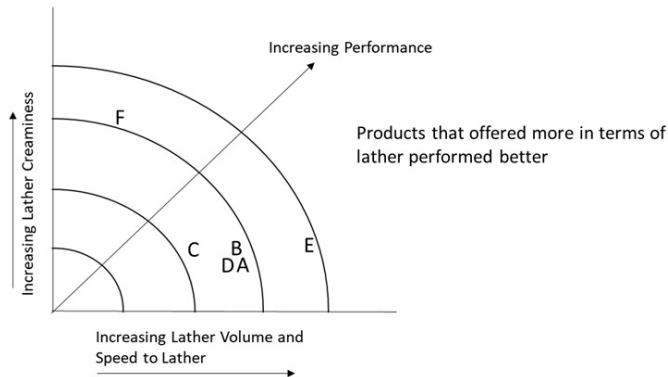
Adherence to treatment is a critical factor for the successful management of dermatologic conditions. It is especially important for conditions where the skin barrier is compromised, such as psoriasis, rosacea, and atopic dermatitis. Published studies have explored the rates and variables relating to adherence to topical medications for such diseases, and evidence has shown that the vehicle or aesthetics of a treatment can be a contributing factor to lack of compliance.^{1,2,3} With many product delivery choices available, dermatologists must carefully weigh both therapeutic efficacy and aesthetics as they make treatment recommendations to patients.

This same principle applies to skin care recommendations. Adjuvant topical skin care as part of an overall regimen can be beneficial to patient outcomes and overall skin health. For example, the use of mild and moisturizing cleansers and lotions or creams can help alleviate symptoms of sensitivity and dryness in those with a compromised or dysfunctional skin barrier.⁴ However, adherence to a daily routine is essential to achieve positive results.

Dermatologists' recommendations for skin care products play an important role. Patients are not only receptive to, but also proactively seek, the opinion of trusted professionals because of the abundance of therapeutic products available on the market today. Typically, recommendations are centered on a goal of doing no harm, ie, reducing the likelihood of irritation, as well as helping to improve symptoms. Therefore, both safety and efficacy are paramount. Yet, patients do not always abide by a recommendation. A 2015 consumer survey demonstrates how

significant the sensory aspects of products can be to adherence. In this survey, 229 consumers who received a recommendation for a skin cleanser from a dermatologist and had started using that product, were queried. When asked if they still use that recommended product, 31% had stopped using it and the top two reasons cited were that they did not like the product or preferred another product/brand.

Given its value, understanding consumer preferences can be advantageous to those who are making skin care recommendations, as well as to those who are formulating the products that are being recommended. Unilever scientists have spent decades decoding the ways in which consumers evaluate products, with particular focus on sensory aspects. For example, in a recent body wash launch, nearly a dozen consumer studies were completed with more than 2,000 consumers having experienced the product during its development. Through this testing, the sensory characteristics of body wash that please a large segment of consumers were uncovered and, just as noteworthy, those sensory characteristics that they disliked, and this learning was applied to the final product development. Abundant effort has also been devoted to understanding what appeals to specific populations, such as men vs. women, sensitive skin consumers, those with conditions like acne, and more. It is known that often there is more than one segment of consumer preference within these groups, but the learnings generalized here represent the sensories most preferred in the population, while other sensories may still be acceptable. This article will further elucidate the aesthetics and sensory aspects of skin care products that appeal to specific types of consumers.

FIGURE 1. Home use test results compared to product characteristics.**Men vs Women: The Ever-Challenging Contrast in Preferences**

It is well known that men and women have different skin biology and skin care behaviors. In terms of biology, men's skin tends to be thicker, oilier, and hairier than women's skin. They also have a lower skin pH.⁵ Because of these differences, men likely have a desire to use stronger cleansing agents that end up being more disruptive to the skin barrier. In terms of behavior, generally men do not consider skin care a priority; they generally think about their skin when an issue arises. Additionally, most men do not moisturize their skin and therefore dryness is a foremost complaint. In addition to choosing stronger cleansers, men also tend to be over-aggressive during cleansing as they believe it is the physical cue that a product is working when they scrub. Cleanser selection is especially important in men's care because of an aggressive cleansing habit and also

because it may be the one and only step in a daily regimen to provide hydration benefits to the skin's barrier.

Additionally, consumer research has shown that men and women have different preferences in terms of aesthetics of body cleansing products. Women tend to look for opaque, creamy-looking products that produce a thick, creamy lather and leave skin feeling comfortable and moisturized. See Figure 1 where product's lather characteristics are compared to overall liking performance in a home use test (HUT). This test was performed on 1200 women, ages 18-59, where each bodywash was used by 200 of the women. The products that offer more in terms of lather perform better than the other products during use.

A male preference mapping study was done to further understand the US male body wash consumer. This was a home use test where 850 men, ages 16-65, tested 10 products at home in their shower. The analysis uncovered different segments of the male consumer. Figure 2 shows a simplified version of this map dividing the male preference and sensory space into two groups. The largest group, segment 1, are characterized by their desire for clean, quick rinsing, and no residue on skin. They also dislike thick, creamy lather. For this group of men, abundant, open lather and transparent appearance are a must. On the opposite side of the sensory map is segment 2, characterized by their preference for opaque, thick product with creamy lather, and their acceptance of residue on skin that imparts softness and smoothness to the skin post use.

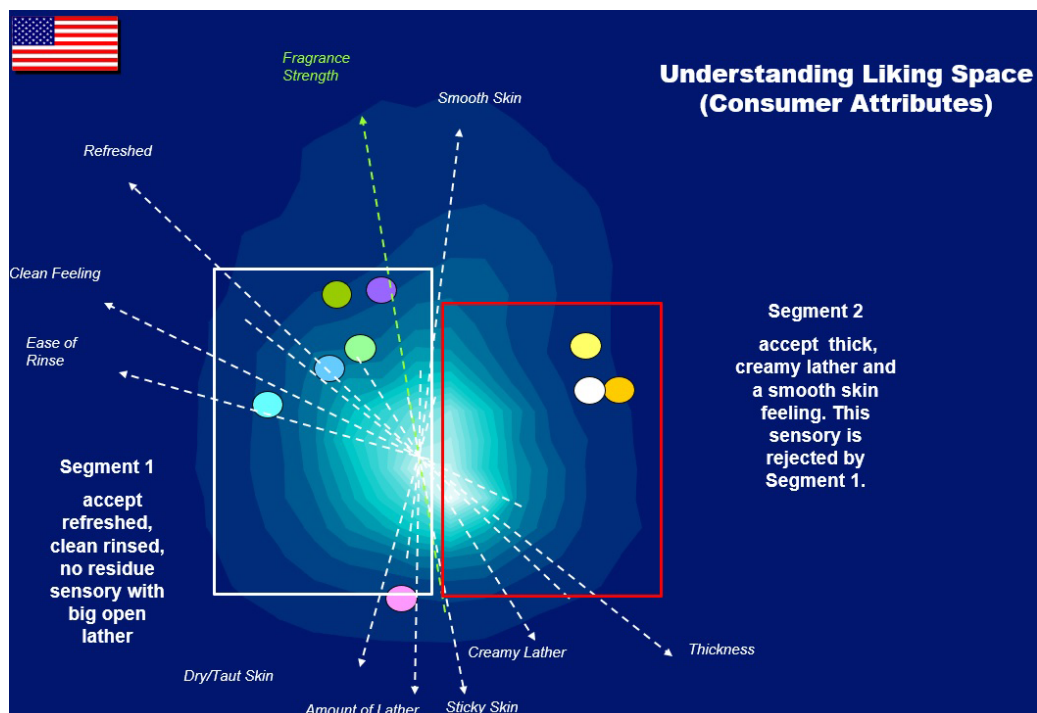
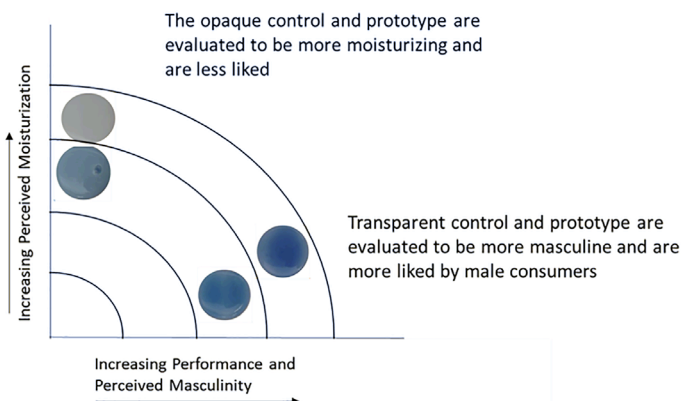
FIGURE 2. Sensory preferences of US male consumers.

FIGURE 3. The result of opacity on overall opinion and perception of masculinity and moisturization.

As seen in the preference mapping work, a large segment of men prefer a clear formulation, light airy abundant lather, and a clean rinse without a residue. Additionally, a nation-wide consumer test was done in the US on over 1700 men who were potential consumers of men's bodywash products. Figure 3 shows that as opacity increases so does moisturized skin feel, but overall opinion and perceived masculinity is low. The transparent products are evaluated to be more masculine and are more liked by male consumers. Thus, many body cleansing formulas that are marketed toward men are structured as translucent, gel-like washes that provide abundant lather and a clean rinse. However, some cleansers in the market, in order to provide desired sensories, rely on relatively harsher formulations. Therefore, it is valuable for dermatologists and other recommenders to understand the relative differences among types of cleansers.

The skin care market has recently seen an explosion of products specifically targeting men, including face wash and shave gel. A sensory targeting exercise was conducted in several countries with between 35 to 50 men ages 18-40 that were regular users of face cleansers and/or face care products. They were asked to evaluate a range of products representing a wide array of sensories, each compared to a control product. Results of this research in the US have shown that, for facial cleansing, the products that performed well with men delivered on the perception of "refreshes and revives tired skin." These perceptions can be delivered through a blue transparent color, a smooth skin feel after wash, and a crackling sound. The novelty of a cooling/crackling soap drove the perception of refreshment. As with body wash previously described, men do not want thick, opaque formulations, but prefer clear products with suspended bubbles in the formula. In this same sensory targeting exercise, we have seen similar results for men's lotions as well. For a product to be well-liked, it must deliver on the perceptions of refreshment, revive tired skin, and appear attractive. The visual appearance that cues these attributes are blue and light green

colors, translucency, gel texture, and glossiness. Oils and extremely thick creams do not deliver on these attributes. Overall, the US male consumer is concerned about feeling refreshed and avoiding skin problems such as dryness. In a shaving HUT, completed with 123 men, aerosols (both foams and gels) performed well and creams did not, showing that format plays a role in perceived performance.

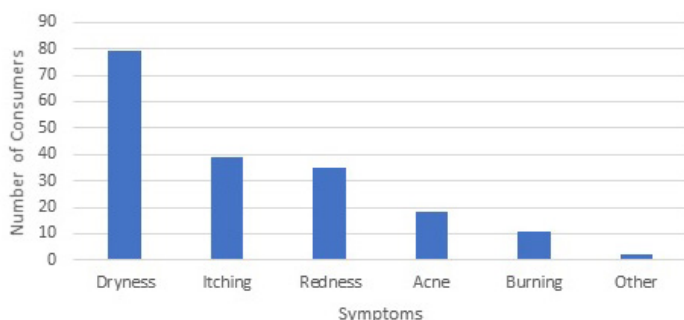
Overall, men and women have very different preferences with respect to lotions and cleansers. A large majority of women prefer thicker, creamier, more opaque products and, in general, men prefer more translucent products with a lighter skin feel. Keeping these preferences top of mind could be useful as recommendations are considered, to help encourage continued consumer use.

Self-Perceived Sensitive Skin

Almost 50% of the US population has self-perceived sensitive skin.⁶ Research has shown that the symptoms and causes of sensitive skin vary along with the product sensory preferences and benefits sought by consumers. While ultimately the dermatologist is the most appropriate expert to identify which products are best for each patient to help reduce sensitivity symptoms, an important goal is patient adherence to the regimen, which could potentially be better achieved by taking patient preferences and priority product attributes into account.

According to Unilever consumer research that surveyed 151 consumers that use sensitive skin body wash, the most common sensitive skin complaints include redness, acne, dryness, and burning (see Figure 4). Sensitive skin consumers are looking for products that do not exacerbate these symptoms and further aggravate their skin. This means that mildness is a critical attribute for sensitive skin cleansers, however, consumers typically cannot perceive it and may be judging efficacy by other product attributes and claims. In one US consumer study, 208 self-perceived sensitive skin female consumers were asked what they were looking for in a sensitive skin body wash. At least 90% agreed that it should be non-irritating and gentle, it should leave skin feeling clean, moisturized, nourished, soothed, soft, and smooth, and be easy to rinse without leaving a residue. When asked open ended questions, answers show that these benefits were cued by a thick, creamy, dense product texture, moisturized feeling without greasiness, mild clean, fresh smell, minimal dyes, and no beads or other abrasives.

When it comes to skin care products developed for those with sensitive skin, it is important for the product to provide a pleasurable experience. Masking unpleasant product odors, natural non-irritating colors, and a comfortable after-use skin feel contribute to creating an enjoyable cleansing experience. Unilever understands the value sensitive skin consumers attribute to the usage experience, and recently launched a therapeutic range

FIGURE 4. Complaints reported by those with sensitive skin.

designed for extremely dry, sensitive skin using sensory profiling to inform the formulation direction. The range included a body lotion that was designed to not only provide robust moisturization efficacy but also feel less greasy than other typical therapeutic lotions. It was also formulated to be thick and creamy and provide a soft, smooth post-use skin feel to help meet those specific consumer needs.

Overall, sensitive skin consumers seek a variety of benefits from skin care products. Some wish to avoid specific ingredients, while others are looking for products that do no harm or provide extra moisturization. Often the color, scent, and skin feel are all important to deliver an overall “skin calming” effect. Patients may be arriving at the office with preconceived notions about the cause of their sensitive skin and what kind of product they need as a result, which may affect the conversation around recommendations.

Acne

Acne is a common dermatologic disorder. As a result of both its prevalence and often highly visible presentation on the face, consumers wish to find immediate relief and often choose the internet or other sources for counsel. This creates a challenge for dermatologists, who understand the complexities of this condition and the critical need for adherence to a therapeutic regimen to resolve it. This may include recommendation of a facial cleansing product to be used concurrently with a prescription medication. Research has been conducted to better understand the product preferences sought by acne sufferers and the sensory cues that would signal efficacy.

An online qualitative study was conducted in eight different countries, including India, UK, Philippines, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa. Results show that consumers rely heavily on in-use sensory of products as proof of efficacy. Globally, among the acne consumers studied, the feeling of dryness is desired. Tightening of facial skin is a positive cue that pimples were on their way to disappearing. Cooling, tingling, or the roughness of a scrub gave consumers a sense

FIGURE 5. Sensory targets for consumers in each group.

Sensory Targets for a Majority of Consumers in Each Group				
	Women	Men	Sensitive Skin	Acne
Visual Appearance	Opaque, creamy	Translucent, gel like	Minimal dyes, no beads	No preference as long as it is non-offensive and effective
Lather Characteristics	Thick, rich	Light, airy	Thick, creamy, easy to rinse	
Skin Feel	Comfortable, moisturized	Refreshed, revived, cooling	Non-irritated, clean, moisturized	Tightened facial skin, cooling, no oil/greasiness

that something beneficial was happening during use. Face washes were viewed as effective if they felt refreshing and left the skin looking different after use (no oil, lighter/brighter). Unfortunately, many of these sensory cues do not align with the types of products that dermatologists recommend for acne. That said, based on these findings, if a mild, non-irritating facial wash could help to control oil and leave skin feeling refreshed as well, it may be more positively accepted by these consumers.

Formats

With the proliferation of skin care products in the marketplace today, it would appear as though there is a product to meet every need. See Figure 5 for a summary of sensory needs by consumer segment. Their needs can be met through traditional cleansing products or with newer formats. Consumers have become accustomed to continual expansion and rapidly-appearing innovation, so they crave new formats with novel sensory experiences. Some examples of new formats in body cleansing include mild self-foamers, aerosol foams, and scrubs. These can now be designed to provide specific skin benefits and sensory experiences that appeal to consumers, while also maintaining a mildness profile that dermatologists desire. While foams have been traditionally viewed as harsh due to the types of surfactants required to generate lather, new sulfate-free, self-foaming technologies have been created with glutamate and glycinate to provide mild cleansing along with an easy rinse, for those consumers looking for a lighter feel than traditional body wash. Directly Esterified Fatty Isethionate-based body scrubs are now being made without sulfated surfactants and a softer level of abrasion combined with a creamy, cushiony, experience consumers view as gentle, unique, and effective. As always, it can be advantageous for dermatologists to become familiar with these new skin care product formats as they arise, so that they can make suitable recommendations for patients who seek novel experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, it is well-recognized that a dermatologist’s recommendation can be vital to encourage patients to try a product that is suitable for their skin type, yet the role that aesthetics play in their continued use is sometimes overlooked. Efficacy, safety, and sensory aspects of products should all be weighed

as recommendations are determined. It is important to note that consumers often devise their own perceptions of how well products work based on in-use experiences and sensory cues. How these products look, smell, and feel can all contribute to the user experience and the assessment of skin benefits. Preferences also stem from factors such as gender differences and skin types or conditions. Balancing all of these considerations could have a potential impact on adherence.

DISCLOSURES

The authors are employees of Unilever.

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