



brutish beauty

SERENA COADY WONDERS WHY MEN'S SKINCARE IS SO AGGRESSIVE.

My brother isn't terribly concerned with maintaining a masculine image. Back in the '90s, he attended an all-boys' boarding school in Queensland (one can only imagine the atrocities he saw in his formative years), but as I look at him today, I feel a sense of pride.

My brother has always appreciated main-character attire. In his uni days, he went to every costume party as Jennifer Lopez. But the thing that gets me is the state of his bathroom. When I babysit his daughters and sneak away to shower once they drift off to sleep, the phrases STRESS RESIST, MEN EXPERT, and XL roar at me from bottles of 25-in-1 body wash. My brother's toiletries look like they belong to another man.

Reader, I'd like you to do something for me. Get down to your nearest Priceline as fast as you can. Pass beyond the hot-pink precipice, past the cardboard troughs of micellar water and into the men's skincare aisle. Tell me what you see.

Do you see products packaged to communicate brute force, manliness and an austere kind of hygiene? Do you see labels that adhere to a strict colour palette of black or off-black? Then you're in the right place. Now, if you've ever wanted to know what it feels like to stand in Reese Witherspoon's beautiful, elfin shoes, make your way from the men's skincare aisle to the women's. This journey will mirror her character's experience in the film *Pleasantville*, where she sees the town transform from black and white to vibrant colour.

In 2021, *Saturday Night Live* spoofed men's skincare with a commercial for 'Skin Ammo' by 'Man Stain'. Between shots of Pete Davidson exercising, a foundation-like product called 'Dude Fluid' – which is decanted from a beer can – is said to “level up your mug for peak appearance performance”. Meanwhile, Dan Levy grows progressively baffled by the violent, hyper-masculine language used to market the products. “It's OK to want to look nice!” he cries.

Men's skincare has long been coded to align with a narrow idea of masculinity, bearing brand names like Bulldog, Handsome, and MegaBoi Xtreme (OK, I made up the last one) and packaging that has us believing that 'real men' use concrete to exfoliate and battery acid to tone. Even men's make-up manages to make tinted moisturiser sound like a threat, with brand names like War Paint For Men.

While conversations that challenge traditional masculinity are fortunately becoming more widespread and we're seeing more mainstream examples of gender non-conforming style, we still have 'media personalities' like Andrew Tate who have gained millions of followers by capitalising on a type of masculinity that revolves around fear and shame. I think that's ultimately why men's skincare still looks the way it has for decades. There's fear there – fear that hygiene, grooming and self-care are 'feminine' concepts.

I remember reading an absolutely nauseating Reddit thread where *many* women shared their experiences of dating men who refused to clean between their butt cheeks because they thought it was “emasculating”. So, this is more or less where we're at.

I'd like to end today's sermon with this. Fellas, it's OK to use whichever hygiene products get the job done – they do not have to be for boys only. If you're not sure where to start, try a few drops of your sister's Korean night serum or some of mum's deep conditioner. Whatever you do, remember to wash your buttocks. ❀