

FRAGRANCE AND PERSONAL CARE

## Why Chinese men want to be beautiful

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*The market for male skincare got overlooked for many years. But in 2021, young male beauty brands began booming in China. What changed? Image credit: Kiehl's*

By **Tanguy Laurent**

In 2019, Chinese livestream star Austin **Li Jiaqi's** only failure was that he couldn't sell male skincare sets to his female fans. That's because they all said: "He doesn't deserve that! What's next?" But the next day, he changed his approach to selling these products. His new pitch? "Buy him his own skincare so he won't steal your expensive ones."

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The **market for male skincare** got overlooked for many years. But in 2021, it began trending in China. From 2020 to 2021, more than 15 fundraising rounds took place for brands targeting young male beauty brands in China, including six for Make Essense and three each for Dear Boyfriend and Tabula Rasa, the latter having been on the market for less than a year.

So what has changed among Chinese men?

Male appearance is under more scrutiny

The rise of internet buzz words that describe young men as "**little fresh meat**" or a "puppy dog boyfriend" (aka pretty boys) is marking a new era of male objectification.

Based on research, independent young women today now expect more than financial status from their partners. Today, they demand more from their dates in terms of style, culture, and appearance. Some men are obviously against it, but more are joining the trend.

"My appearance is my social token"

In the age of social media, when watching TikTok has become a daily habit, people are becoming more obsessed with visual perception and men are no exception. That has led more men to view their "yanzhi" (face value) as a valuable commodity at work and in romantic relationships. Based on a questionnaire created by Boss ZhiPin (China's online recruitment platform), 95 percent of young people said looks directly impact salaries.

Various expressions of virility

Additionally, a series of gender stereotype-busting movements are spreading through China. With the rise of non-traditional male celebrities and influencers like Zhou Shen or Austin Li Jiaqi, virility doesn't only mean being masculine. Today, being delicate and clean-cut is also finding approval. And Chinese men have fewer concerns about using skincare products or wearing makeup.

In fact, 20 percent of male Gen Zers in China have used BB (beautifying balm) cream. Sales in the male cosmetics category on Tmall in 2021 saw dramatic, year-on-year growth. And the male lipstick category has increased by 278 percent, while men's BB cream increased by 249 percent.

But compared to women, men have their own preferences in skincare and cosmetics. Male consumers hold their rational problem-solving mindset for self-care, by all means. Helping them solve their problems or reach their goals directly and scientifically is the first step to winning their heart.

Give them the right of being lazy

Women think of their skincare routines as rituals, with more steps meaning more self-care. Men, on the other hand, are less passionate about the process. They are all about looking good without much hassle.

Products like toners, serums, all-in-one creams, or BB creams, are trending among male consumers. "I feel I need to take care of my face. Before, I didn't bother to wash it," said a typical male comment under a L'Oral men's moisture product on Tmall.

Another interesting find is that 11 out of the 15 best-selling male skincare products on T-mall use pump dispensers. Clearly, twist-off caps are too much work for guys.

Allow them to wear makeup (secretly)

Keeping a man's makeup secret starts with the product name, so tricky names are a must. BB creams for brightening up, evening out skin tones, and little coverage for acne scars are called "toning cream" (in Chinese, it is literally called no-makeup cream). Lipsticks are called "color reviving lip balm" for a healthy complexion.

But tricky names are not enough. Makeup product packaging must also look like skincare brands, just in case anyone sees the gent applying them. Ten of the 15 bestselling men's toning creams are white cream, just like a regular moisturizer. In that way, it does its job and will never look heavy or cakey. Plus, guys don't need to choose from different shades, which is a lifesaver. Meanwhile, lipsticks get made to look like lip balms, and their tinted colors only show up when on the lips.

Let them be with their pals in their man cave

Roughly 52 percent of the male consumers will only purchase products or brands made solely for men. Rationally, they feel that the formulas are better suited. And emotionally, they don't want to be caught using products for women. In fact, the Korean brand MIP has created skincare with a "toolbox" concept so guys can feel like they are working in their garage.

But don't worry many guys don't fall into the cultural norms of masculinity. And they feel that gender shouldn't be a consideration when choosing beauty products. They will smartly go for the ones with the best reputations, not those that claim to be only for men. Still, we found that men prefer gender-neutral brands or products like Kiehl's, SkinCeuticals, and the Ordinary.

Women wear the pants

Women, however, have a big say in the male beauty category. They influence men's decision-making as they all seem to be experts for guys in the beauty department. Sometimes they are even the ones who purchase the products. From the Tmall men's skincare consumer reviews, we see many comments like, "it's for my boyfriend," husband, son, or even dad. It's no wonder some male beauty brands are talking directly to women about their male products on Xiaohongshu.

Be his wingman

The motivation for a man purchasing beauty products is the opposite of a woman's. It is often related to pleasing others or a specific occasion. A consumer who has purchased a toning cream says, "I'm dating a nice girl; I need to be more put together" or "I need to look sharp for an interview; what products should I choose?" That's why a brand called Dear Boyfriend markets itself as a "wingman," claiming the scent of their body wash makes 92 percent of

girls want to approach you.

The overall market size for male beauty is not as large as the women's market, but it is growing fast, and the competition is less fierce for now. Because, in the end, everyone wants to be better-looking, right?

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