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A qualitative examination of the experience of skin camouflage by people living with visible skin conditions

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Dear Editor, Having a skin condition may increase the risk of experiencing psychological distress and stigmatisation.¹⁻² Camouflage products can improve quality of life, and be useful in assisting people in avoiding intrusive responses.³⁻⁵ Nevertheless, some studies indicate that there may be some downsides to the use of camouflage.⁶

There are no in-depth studies of camouflage use, thus we conducted a qualitative study aimed to develop an understanding of the psychological processes associated with camouflage use, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks. We used the qualitative method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)⁷ as we wanted to gain accounts of individual experience, and this method has been used to provide insights into experience of a range of skin conditions.^{2,6}

Participants were recruited through UK NHS and charity camouflage clinics following review by an NHS ethics committee. Children (<16 years), those newly using camouflage (<2 months experience), or with self-harm scars were deemed not eligible to participate, as we wished to gain accounts of adults who were regularly using camouflage. Six participants were interviewed. All participants were female (aged between 49-72 years; 4 were White British, 1 was Asian of Indian origin, and 1 was White of European origin; 2 had vitiligo, 2 had scarring, 1 had a birthmark, and 1 had an unspecified skin condition). Camouflage experience ranged from 10 months to 40 years. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed in accordance with IPA procedures.⁷ An audit process was used to ensure that the analysis was credible and that sufficient attention had been paid to reflexivity.⁷

There were four superordinate themes and nine subthemes (see table 1, where an example of additional representative and anonymised quotes are presented). The first two themes (Society's ideals and being visibly different; The views of others) mirror findings of previous studies that demonstrate that there can be a significant social

impact associated with living with a skin condition¹⁻⁶. However, our later themes (Appearance, camouflage and the self; Camouflage and other people) uniquely capture the experience of camouflage use. As the psychological effects of visible skin conditions are well-documented in the extant research, we will focus the remaining letter on participants' experience of camouflage use (themes 3 and 4).

Some participants discussed the importance that camouflage had in relation to them achieving a closer congruence with their sense of self. Camouflage facilitated looking 'presentable' and was linked with gender identity (e.g. P2 "*I'm a woman who dresses well and presents myself well...*"). The descriptions given by participants suggested that camouflage allowed them to close the gap between their actual appearance and internalised appearance standards. For many participants' camouflage use was thus linked to maintenance of appearance and was built into their routines and normalised (e.g. P6 "*It's very positive, you feel as though you're like other women – you've put your make-up on and even though you've still got a visible difference, you've made the effort.*")

For all of the participants in the sample, the camouflage functioned as a tool for managing reactions of others (e.g. P4 "*I've always got it on when I'm going out... it's to save other people gawping at you.*"). Camouflage use was reported as reducing avoidance of social situations and essentially provided a sense of control (e.g. P5 "*the use of the make-up itself has given me confidence and given me the freedom to do things.*").

All of the participants mentioned application difficulties including length of time to get the desired effect. Some of the participants described concerns that camouflage was noticeable or would come off, and some reported occasions where this was a focus for worry (e.g. P3 "*people look at me and think 'what has she – what's she got on*

her? ’’). However, other participants described reduction or complete removal of their appearance concern following camouflage application (e.g. P3 “*I just didn’t worry about it anymore. Whereas before I was, I was thinking they were.*”).

Our study demonstrates that participants experience considerable benefits but also some burden with camouflage use. Appearance ideals and stigmatisation provide an important theoretical backdrop for understanding the accounts.⁸

Our study has a number of limitations, the sample size is small, however, it is appropriate for IPA⁷, participants were all female and our findings are not transferable to males or people just starting to use camouflage. Nevertheless, our study is the first examination of the experiences of camouflage use and suggest that this product has considerable merits that might be enhanced with the addition of access to psychological support.

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Table 1: Illustrative quotes from the analysis

Themes and subthemes	Select illustrative quotes showing participant number
<p>1. Society's ideals and being visibly different</p>	<p>P1 "it's all part of how people perceive physical beauty ..."</p> <p>P5 "in this day and age it's like if you have a pimple you're clearly a gorgon or something...."</p>
<p>2. The views of others</p>	
<p>2.1 Anticipated reactions or judgements</p>	<p>P3 "if I worked with a group of women they'd be like 'oh, what's that? What's the matter with your nose?'"</p>
<p>2.2 Direct negative experiences</p>	<p>P1 "people do stare, you know kids stare, you know they're curious and you can't blame them, I didn't take it personally but it made you feel very vulnerable at times."</p>
<p>2.3 The role of friends and family and self-acceptance</p>	<p>P5 "I mean people who knew me didn't see the mark..."</p> <p>P6 "around my husband, do you know what I mean, he's never bothered, you know".</p>

<p>3. Appearance, camouflage and the self</p> <p>3.1 Appearance investment</p> <p>3.2 Appearance maintenance</p>	<p>P3 “For me, as – if I wasn’t as bothered about my appearance, I probably wouldn’t have gone for camouflage because I just thought ‘this is me’ kind of thing, but that’s not me – I want to look good.”</p> <p>P2 “I think I would feel completely let down by myself in the way that I didn’t present myself [wearing camouflage].”</p> <p>P6 “I think it’s important, when you have a visible difference, to maintain your appearance.”</p>
<p>4. Camouflage and other people</p> <p>4.1 Managing the anticipated responses of others</p> <p>4.2 Fitting in</p>	<p>P4 “Well, obviously, we do go out with friends etc, and I always put my own make-up on, but I thought ‘well, if that’s [camouflage] going to disguise it to a certain extent, it’ll be less embarrassing for myself, and for other people, if you’re in a restaurant, or whatever.’</p> <p>P5 “in my own experience when you get it [camouflage] spot on people’s reactions to you completely changes and they’ll stop and talk to you or they’ll look you in the eye or they’ll smile at you at the check-out...”</p>

<p>4.3 Camouflage use and appearance</p>	<p>P5 “it’s like getting the holy grail of trying to get the perfect match for the make-up and I try and try.”</p>
<p>4.4 Dependence on camouflage?</p>	<p>P5 “I think the big negative I suppose is that you feel once you start using it you have to use it every day... you know you’re kind of trapped in a cycle of well if I don’t use it then people can look at me ... and what’s the point in using it if you’re not going to use it every day...”</p>