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# The Shifting Beauty Paradigm: Empowering Women Through 'Self-Care', Natural Beauty, and Beauty Experiences Online

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*The 'self-care' movement has empowered women by shifting their involvement with beauty products from cosmetics to one's natural beauty and unique self. The next shift will be purchasing beauty online. Empowering women online in their pursuit of 'self-care' needs to be consumer-centric and address women's concerns regarding comfort, fear, and trust. A COVID-19 postscript addresses online frictions associated with comfort, fear, and trust, and offers five strategies for creating meaningful beauty experiences online.*

## Rise of the 'Self-Care' Movement

The 'self-care' movement deviates from previous consumption patterns associated with buying and using skin care products and cosmetics. Self-care equates with mental well-being, and in some cases, power. It has women embracing their natural beauty. This is evident in testimonials about how it has changed their lives, especially by gaining personal control. "[Skin care makes me] feel like I'm somewhat in control of my own destiny" (Weatherford, 2018). Women now feel free to treat and indulge themselves in skincare luxuries. This control extends to how women use their personal time. "I like the ritual

element . . . I like saying 'It is bedtime, I do these things.' And I look forward to it. My life is so busy, and just setting aside that time is really satisfying" (Weatherford, 2018).

A benefit from the declining use of makeup is the opportunity to assign more resources to buying high quality skincare brands. "Makeup is temporary. . . You can spend the same amount on a bottle of serum or moisturizer" (Saidoun, n.d.). Skincare is very inclusive. Regardless of ethnicity, weight, or ability, "a cleanser is a cleanser" (Weatherford, 2018). Self-care of skin contributes to higher self-esteem in women. "I know what my skin looked like at 22 with acne, and I know what it looked like after using acne treatments. Plus, once my acne cleared up, I wore less makeup, so I was actually spending less money on beauty. Wearing less makeup made me feel more confident about my natural looks" (Kirby, 2018). Shifting the focus to skincare products has empowered women to not wear makeup. Also, it made women more concerned about the transparency of ingredients in both skincare and cosmetics which has created a new demand for clean beauty brands.

Quality skincare products diminishes the need for face correcting makeup (e.g., color cosmetics). Women want transparent skincare that produces clear results for their skincare problems. "When a consumer is picking [products] on their own, they want to know what they're getting . . . they want to know how long it takes to see results up front" (Shapouri, 2016). When women find quality skincare products that rival using makeup for coverage they decide to "stop covering . . . with makeup, and instead get to the root of the problem with skincare" (Solis, 2019). As female consumers seek specific products when they shop cosmetic retailers, they are less likely to spend what they did in the past.

## Shift to Natural Beauty

Skincare and cosmetics are deeply personal. Women want beauty products that benefit themselves personally. They are not looking for universal solutions, they want uniquely personal solutions. "Young adults today are unapologetically themselves. So, for them, beauty is about freedom of individuality, authenticity, and diversity" (Clark, 2019).

In the push to become more inclusive in the beauty industry, recognition of the natural beauty inherent in all women gave rise to feelings of empowerment. This enabled women across all demographic groups to live makeup free; or, if they chose, to use makeup to express themselves. This acceptance of natural beauty is dramatic. As more women invest in better skincare products and routines, sales of cosmetics have dropped (Gerstell, Spagnuolo, Marchessou, & Schmidt, 2020). In this new normal, women recognize that by improving their personal skin care it reveals one's natural beauty.

In the past, many women felt obligated to wear color cosmetics to change the appearance of the face and skin. Fashion magazines and media focused on beautiful women with flawless skin and perfect makeup. These unattainable images had some women trying various cosmetics hoping to achieve a similar look. However, amassing cosmetics is futile

for achieving an ideal beauty that is not aligned with the real self. For some women, cosmetics were used to cover up skin conditions or imperfections such as acne, rosacea, or signs of aging. For them, regardless of race, class, or age, makeup became a mask. Now, women are embracing a new culture of beauty where imperfections and differences are celebrated. Skin conditions are openly discussed with a focus on finding solutions. Clean beauty brands are popular; and women are investing more time, money, and effort into their skin care routines.

Women “have different values than they did at the start of the beauty boom. Now, it’s all about wellness and a proactive skincare regimen” (Schiffer, 2019). Skin conditions are no longer something to hide. Women are investing in “skincare-adjacent products like setting spray, lip balm and tinted moisturisers” (Schiffer, 2019). Women are starting to embrace a more authentic natural look and feel if they “take care of their skin with skincare, then their faces can be more natural, resulting in a need for fewer cosmetics to cover it up” (Schiffer, 2019). With the American trend for causal living, women no longer feel the need to wear flashy glamorous looks. “Trends like heavy contouring have fallen out of favor as consumers take a more natural approach to their skin” (Biron, 2019). Women now desire to look like they “just rolled out of bed looking flawless” (Moore, 2019).

### Change in ‘Self-Care’ and “Color Cosmetics” in the Global Beauty Industry

The global beauty industry has four product categories: (1) fragrances, (2) color cosmetics (e.g., makeup), (3) skin care (e.g., ‘self-care’), and (4) personal care. The industry’s total retail sales (TRS) were \$500 billion in 2019. Of this amount, skin-care products were \$140 billion for 28 percent of TRS. In comparison, color cosmetics were \$72 billion at 14.4 percent of TRS. A three-year analysis of global TRS from 2017 to 2019 shows a dramatic shift in consumer purchase behavior. In this period, skin care products as a percentage of TRS grew 12.4 percent while color cosmetics sales fell 2.1 percent TRS (Gerstell, et al., 2020). This is notable as it represents a total growth differential of 14.5 percent which establishes skin-care products as a strong evolving product category compared to color cosmetics. See Table 1.

Category	2017		2018		2019		% TRS 3-Year Growth (14.5 B) <sup>2</sup>
Total Retail Sales (TRS)	\$456 B		\$477 B		\$500 B		
Retail Category	REV by Category	% TRS	REV by Category	% TRS	REV by Category	% TRS	
Skin-Care Products <sup>2</sup>	\$123 B	26.9	\$132 B	27.7	\$140 B	28.0	+ 12.4
Color Cosmetics	\$67 B	14.7	\$70 B	14.7	\$72 B	14.4	- 2.1

<sup>1</sup> Source: Data extracted from Figure 1, Gerstell, et al., 2020 (Source *Euromonitor*).<sup>2</sup> Calculated from Figure 1 data.

Growth of skin-care products over color cosmetics may continue as consumers change the category of beauty products purchased most. It was evident for prestige cosmetic brand purchases which dropped 55 percent from 2019 to 2020 (Gerstell et al., 2020).

## Importance of Consumer-Centricity in Beauty Experiences Online

Shopping for beauty products is a consumer-centric experience. The objective of the retailer or brand should be to offer positive customer experiences during and after a sale. By tradition, shopping for beauty products is an in-store experience. “Purchasing beauty products is both [an] emotion and physical experience – beauty shoppers react to the texture, color and overall feel of the product” (Egan, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, customers often consult with sales associates and beauty professionals. They are perceived as qualified to answer questions and make trusted recommendations in real time as the customer tries products. Attending to the customer’s needs and wants is central to every engagement and each decision when purchasing a beauty product.

Consumer-centric experiences are vital when shopping for highly personalized products such as beauty. This is critical in online beauty sites as the consumer can easily and quickly leave a site when a friction is encountered. A site is failing if it is not centered on the customer experience. As women transition to beauty online, they will expect to be empowered by a consumer-centric experience that results in the best beauty solution.

## Impact of Comfort, Fear, and Trust in Beauty Experiences Online

Beauty products and services are high involvement purchases that often elicit emotional consumer engagement prior, during, and post purchase. Egan (2020) identified three areas of consumer concern associated with shopping for beauty products: (1) comfort, (2) fear, and (3) trust. These concerns create friction points that can compromise consumer engagement and impact purchases.

Comfort comes from a low stress situation where the consumer is shopping in a relaxed state. Many in-store purchases of beauty products occur within the comfort zone of the beauty counter. In this space the customer engages with products and often interacts with a beauty consultant who is perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Moving to beauty online requires strategies that offer a similar level of comfort such as easy access to product information and engaging with a beauty consultant via live chat. Advances in technology may also increase a customer’s comfort zone when buying beauty products online. L’Oréal developed Perso as “a smart skincare device that uses artificial intelligence (AI), location data and a user’s preferences to formulate personalized moisturizer” (Hines, 2020, p. 1). Also, personalized selections are possible through AI-powered conversational search where customer responses to questions are used to identify the product best suited to that customer (Egan, 2020a). However, while digital products are available such as skin care diagnostic tools (Vichy) and online advisor (The Body Shop), beauty is still in early stages of technology application (Driver, 2019).

Fear evokes emotional responses regarding personal concerns about safety and well-being. Due to COVID-19, consumers have heightened feelings of fear and risk associated

with trying and buying beauty products in-store. When engaged with in-store situations, customers often test products to find the best match. Consumer fear acknowledges the risk due to COVID-19 in continuing in-store trials of beauty products. Some solutions are available to replace in-store testing. Sephora's Virtual Artist uses Smartphone apps and store kiosks for virtual trials of lipsticks and eyeshadows. It tracks the face in real time and knows where to apply the cosmetics. Launched in 2016, it has had over 200 million trials by consumers (Thomas, 2019).

Trust is belief in a person to be reliable and to tell the truth. Consumers expect trust when buying beauty products as these products are applied directly to the body. Key elements in decisions on beauty products are accurate information, personal assistance, and professional confirmation of the decision. Consumers expect to trust these human sources. In virtual spaces, trust may shift to technology. Olay offers Skin Advisor, a Smartphone app, which uses Augmented Reality (AR) to visualize how a consumer's skin and face will look in the future. HiMirror is a "smart mirror" that takes a photo of the consumer every time she logs on to the site. The face is scanned for "wrinkles, red spots, pores, fine lines, and brightness levels" and rated from poor to good. However, HiMirror critiques revealed problems of inconsistent scores and bad lighting interference which suggests consumers may not be ready to assign trust to this technology (Thomas, 2020).

## Postscript COVID-19 – A Catalyst for Beauty Online

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 85 percent of all beauty sales were made in-store. Even tech-savvy Millennials and Gen Z consumers shopped in-store for about 60 percent of their beauty purchases (Gerstell, et al., 2020). However, out of necessity, the pandemic has prompted consumers to switch from in-store to online for much of their shopping. "Consumers are trying online purchases for goods they have never considered previously, others are increasing online purchases because it is the only option" (Stoltz, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic may be the catalyst that shifts beauty sales to online (Skrovan, 2020). Gerstell, et al. (2020) projected a 20 to 30 percent growth in online beauty product purchases as consumers transition to a new normal in their shopping behaviors. Opportunities for promoting beauty online exist in "direct-to-consumer e-commerce, brand websites, shoppable social-media platforms, and marketplaces" (Gertstell et al., 2020, p. 7). This new online paradigm for beauty will require a fully integrated consumer-centric experience where concerns regarding comfort, fear, and trust are eliminated.

## Strategies for Online Beauty Experiences Post-COVID-19

When the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, the consumer economy will be dramatically changed. Chan, Dhar, Haas, Novemsky, and Teichner (2020) suggested five adjustment strategies post pandemic. We applied them to online beauty experiences.

First, positive new consumer beliefs need to be reinforced. For beauty online, these beliefs will be associated with comfort, fear, and trust. Each will need a solution-based strategy that resonates with the consumer.

Second, it is important to shape emerging consumer habits with new offerings. For beauty online, technology innovation will most likely meet this need. Digital applications, AI, AR, and IoT technologies are needed to replace in-store beauty services and product testing.

Third, contextual cues are necessary to sustain new consumer habits. These cues can solidify consumers assessment of the personal value they gain from beauty online. This value is an especially potent strategy as it can impart empathy with the consumer. This aligns with the consumer's need for comfort and trust and to mitigate fear.

Fourth, beauty online needs to understand the customer's mindset and align relevant messaging. By doing so, it will be possible to measure how well the messaging resonates with the consumer's expectation for a satisfying beauty experience online, including how well the retailer and brand met needs for comfort, trust and mitigation of fear.

Fifth, addressing consumer empowerment and centricity is key to success. Chan et al. (2020) suggest consumer beliefs and behaviors be analyzed at the granular level. This means the beauty retailer and brand must understand the individual consumer's unique needs, wants, preferences, and levels of involvement with beauty products and services. To do this, investing in continuous consumer research is imperative. By doing so, women will be further empowered in their online pursuit of 'self-care' to achieve natural beauty.

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