

The striking similarities between diet and skincare culture

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According to recent research, the global skincare market size was valued at USD 130.50 billion in 2021 and is expected to continue to grow exponentially at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.6% from 2022 to 2030. This is partly due to an escalating demand for different skin products as more people seek to achieve the promise of “flawless” or “glowing” skin. Sales have also been boosted by the e-commerce sector as more consumers have come to rely on online shopping since the pandemic.

In reality though, the obsession with skincare is not a new phenomenon. With critics and observers arguing that the culture appears to resemble the patterns we saw perpetuated by the diet industry at its peak. This desire to achieve the promise of what is an otherwise unattainable “perfect” skin echoes the previously striking desire to achieve the so-called “ideal” body type – alluding to the fact that at the core, both practices are influenced by the same forces that seek to enforce narrow notions of beauty standards. A 2021 report argued that “both of these phenomena depend on the binary of the ‘desirable’/‘undesirable’ body, the illusion of control over the body, and manipulation of the body for profit” in some way or the other.

This very common issue around beauty standards predominantly focuses on the female consumer as the target market, of course. In the book *Living Dolls* (2010), Natasha Walter argued that the reason this is the case is because “throughout our culture it is constantly suggested that women’s journey to self-fulfilment will inevitably lie in them perfecting their bodies”. Susan Sontag wrote in her 1972 essay *The Double Standard of Aging*, that “the single standard of beauty for women dictates that they must go on having clear skin.” Insinuating that having visible wrinkles, lines, scarring, spots, grey hair or an imperfection of any kind, as some sort of defeat or failure to achieve acceptable or true femininity.

This narrative has become even more intensified in recent years because, for many people (including women), life has become too unpredictable, with few factors within our control. What we do to our skin can give some people the illusion of control. Therefore, managing, prodding, plucking and starving our bodies became one of the ways in which we could control some aspect of our lives – at any cost – further cementing the striking similarities between these two cultural trends.

Which factors have been attributed to the rise of the fascination with skincare?

1. The rise of the self-care rhetoric

Over the past few years, more people have begun to subscribe to a movement that encourages them to prioritise “self-care” as part of their daily lives. This is a cultural phenomenon emerged with the intention of encouraging people who were experiencing the feeling of burnout from hustle culture to take time out to look after their mental and physical health. Experts saw the self-care practice as a tool meant to help people manage stress, lower their risk of illness and increase energy through practices like mindfulness. Thus, the initial idea was not to focus on buying things, it was simply about being intentional about taking small daily steps like walking, meditating or resting that would have a bigger impact on the mind and body in the long term. Unfortunately, this space has been co-opted by a consumerist culture that encourages buying stuff like candles, spa treatments and skincare products as an intricate component of self-care. Now, many people cannot think of self-care without thinking about skin routines.

2. Beauty influencers

A 2017 study found that nearly seven out of ten millennial women research beauty products before making a purchase (the number is higher with Gen Z). So access to peer-to-peer suggestions in the form of beauty influencers, along with

unprecedented access to information, helps consumers make decisions about their skincare regimen. Thus, the more consumers rely on and trust recommendations from their favourite influencers, the more this trend grows. Over time, brands have leveraged the growing social currency of influencers (through brand collaboration) to attract more consumers to their products. The same influencers today play the role of gatekeepers or drivers when it comes to trends in skincare. This tactic of partnering with influential people, like celebrities, to land messaging also mimics diet culture. The diet industry used to rely on such figures to market their products to consumers who admired of their work – which meant trust was already built in. If someone's beloved celebrity recommended diet pills, or a new way to lose weight, they would adopt it as part of their own routine.

This means that beauty influencers/content creators who focus on beauty and skincare play a big role when it comes to the emergence of this skincare culture that feeds into the same negative self-perception that was observed within the diet culture messaging.

What are some of the similarities between the diet and skincare industry?

- **The chase for perfection**

Both skincare and diet culture lead consumers to believe that there is such a thing as either the “perfect” body or the “perfect” skin, driving home the message that either one of these extremes will position the consumer as attractive by mainstream standards.

- **Relying on insecurities**

In some cases, both the diet and skincare industry not only rely on people's insecurities but also trigger and invent new ones in people who were not previously thinking about those parts of themselves. This creates an unhealthy fixation on one's “flaws” and the eventual desire to correct them, with shame often used as a tool to drive people to “take action” against the things they are told need fixing – from their skin to their body.

This rhetoric heavily leans into language that focuses on good vs bad skin, inspired by a diet culture that differentiates between “ideal” vs “unattractive” bodies. Over time, many consumers cannot ignore a message that convinces them that flawed skin is “unhealthy” and “unattractive”. Hence, with this new standard comes a variety of products on offer to help people achieve the ideal skin type.

- **Moving product is the end goal**

In both cases, the motivation isn't about what's in the interest of the consumer, but rather, selling products. Products are always positioned as the solution for said “skin problems”.

Like its predecessor, skincare culture seeks to create an unattainable standard of beauty that profits on people's insecurities. It abnormalises the parts of us that are a normal part of being human, especially with things like skin pores (which everyone has), ageing, and wrinkles that come with it. This is in an effort to get people to buy items like detox teas, anti-ageing products, laser treatments and many others.

Essentially, this skincare phenomenon seeks to achieve its bottom line by making women feel like their skin is not enough, therefore requiring changing, instead of making people feel empowered and self-accepting.

In reality, like the fallacy of the “ideal” body, “perfect” skin is not attainable because it does not exist. We need to learn that there are no holy grail ingredients to solve most of our skin problems. This is not to say that people should not use skin

products; it's about ensuring that using them doesn't happen at the expense of one's self-esteem. Keeping this in mind can help people avoid the disappointment that comes from this endless pursuit of narrow beauty standards. Perfection shouldn't be the end goal. It's also essential to understand that how our skin looks can be influenced by factors beyond human control, like genetics. The skincare culture that promises new and better products every season is just a newer version of the yo-yo dieting culture that sought to push new products on women every season, with the promise of better and miraculous results for their bodies. Trends come and go, so self-acceptance should be the principle we chase over and above externally fleeting influences.