

Advertising for Natural Beauty Products: The Shift in Cosmetic Industry

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Abstract

The following article aims to present and give an overview on the role played by advertisement for natural beauty products within the current social, environmental, and economic environment, taking into account the existing mechanism that regulates the current market and the way that the consumer is informed about specific products. Nowadays, the cosmetic industry returns to the “less is more” concept. As people have become increasingly informed about potentially harmful chemicals in beauty products, they are learning to read labels of their skin-care products and cosmetics. Moreover, they have begun to recognize those substances less friendly to health and the environment, becoming more aware of what to avoid.

Keywords: Advertising, cosmetics, organic, beauty, marketing

Introduction

The desire to achieve beauty and to have a longer lifespan has always been a natural tendency that both women and men possess. The main reasons for this fact, as proven by research in diverse fields such as sociology, archeology etc., are rooted in environmental conditions, lifestyle, mentality, and especially the instinct of self-preservation. Throughout the history of beauty and of cosmetology, there has been an essential relationship between different people and nature and their unlimited resourcefulness to find cures, lotions, potions, and paints for both health and esthetic purposes. Over time, women’s interest for beauty became more obvious, wanting to perfect themselves in order to be admired both by the opposite sex and fellow women. Beauty was a treasured concept in art, history, and literature, and many famous figures stressed with their thoughts and work the importance of beauty in every woman’s life. Madame de Stael, who was appreciated by her contemporaries for her knowledge and wits, once stated that she was willing to give half of her knowledge, in exchange for a beautiful countenance.

As technology evolved, cosmetics and medicine began to share purposes – like health, youthfulness, and beauty – which made them more accessible, highlighting a social progress of real importance. Chemistry also greatly contributed to supporting the cosmetics industry, as it is known today. However the whole process marked a slow removal and replacement of what was natural found in the cosmetics. While the present cosmetics industry gently rose, the marketing strategy revolving around such products slowly gained complexity through diverse branding, advertising, and communication strategies.

In an era of accelerating economic globalization, the importance of advertising increases as brand visibility requires promotional campaigns that are increasingly complicated to keep up with the new demands of the consumers. Advertising is one of the most visible forms of commercial communication; and taking this label into account, it is also likely to receive public criticism. As much as advertisements can attract and fascinate, they equally can be disliked and can even offend the public. Contemporary reality is flooded with advertising messages – whether it comes from traditional media (television, radio, film, and print media) or the new media form, whose content is available on the Internet through blogs, websites, and social media.

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The beauty products industry is surely one of the most prolific industries; in 2015 the industry generated \$56.2 billion in the United States, and in Europe the cosmetics market valued approximately 69 billion Euros in 2014. While the beauty industry's sales rise, so does the awareness of the consumer, paying more attention to the ingredients, natural formulas, and competitive performances in comparison to the “conventional” beauty products. Traditional, conventional cosmetics are based on synthetic ingredients that in other words, are saline substances that tend to harden the skin, whereas natural cosmetics with their organic ingredients tend to maintain the skin within its better physiological state. Real luxury is now represented by organic products manufactured in a sustainable (environmentally conscious) manner. Through the way that the niche product is displayed on the shelf and the advertisement is prepared, the present impact on the beauty market becomes obvious. The natural, original is turned into a public statement and many young people are willing to assume the glamour of the organic, but as soon as a new trend rises, new challenges appear among brands, with some of them resorting to misleading advertisements and fake “natural” cosmetics in order to beat their competitors.

The consumer invests in the myth of status, in the impression that those around have of him, based on his purchases. Berger said in his collection of essays, *Ways of Seeing*, that advertising “proposes to each of us, that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. The more, it proposes will make us in some way richer – even though we will be poorer by having spent our money”(Berger, 1972, p. 131). Also Berger stated that the true meaning of the word glamour is “the state of being envied” and that “advertising is the manufacturing of glamour” (Berger, 1972, p. 131). This convinces the viewer that his life will be transformed by the product, by showing people, whose lives were improved by buying something seemingly more. The American critic notes that “publicity is always about the future buyer, it offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell” (Berger, 1972, p. 132). He puts emphasis on the link between the need of the individual for envy, in order to validate himself, the need to be noticed, to stand out. Therefore one can securely say that glamour is supported by envy. This is one reason why advertisements for cosmetics stand out, having an imaginative and embellished composition.

Today, young people are very much drawn to what is new, a phenomenon that may be linked to the values of modernity, stating that what is new is better. “Publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred” (Berger, 1972, p. 146). Berger is suggesting that the adoration of novelty can never be reached, because as soon as a product is purchased, the novelty disappears. In a globalized market, aesthetic innovation is fundamental for the competitive strategies of brands. The aesthetic dimension of a product is a novelty that gives value. In the field of fashion, the appearance of the products is the value most strongly perceived and is the main novelty. Therefore, the entire fashion industry is based on this. Nowadays, we witness a process of premature obsolescence. In short, what was trendy for a few months becomes outdated with the change of seasons. This results in a multitude of consumer products, piled behind the cupboard and forgotten, only for something new to be presented on the shelves at the next social event. Fashion is considered “the child of capitalism” and “advertising is the engine of the capitalist machinery” (Baba, 2003, p. 205) or as Berger says “publicity is the life of this culture – in so far as without publicity, capitalism could not survive – and at the same time publicity is its dream” (Berger, 1972, p. 154). Fashion also acts as an expression of a certain state of mind, and by being up to date; it manages to establish an inner-connection between society and eras from which we take our “latest inspiration.” Research has shown that individuals, particularly women, seek to identify novelty and try to transform into a better version of themselves. The ability to be liked and desired often provides a feeling of

accomplishment and as a consequence represents an element of happiness. Therefore, a woman may establish a balance between beauty and health in order to avoid the dangers of banality. Every phase of the human culture brought its own concepts about beauty to the table, which has been achieved through cosmetic means.

Recently, the cosmetic industry has returned to the concept of “less is more.” As people are learning to read labels of their skin-care products and cosmetics, they begin to recognize those less friendly substances towards health and the environment, becoming more aware of what to avoid. If a product is labeled “organic,” it means it is made only out of plants and other natural raw materials (leaves, bark of trees, roots). In order to be considered organic, raw materials should also be grown naturally without adding pesticides and synthetic chemicals in the process of growing or gathering them. Similarly, raw resources should not undergo significant chemical processing, including irradiation. Luckily, the attention to such aspects increased, and the products from companies that are converting to organic procedures are growing. Until a few years ago, there were only a few niche products that were difficult to find and also quite expensive; however, today's natural products take up most of the shelves in supermarkets of large retailers. Meanwhile this new accessibility has raised the question of whether or not the displayed cosmetic products are really organic. The truth is that while consumers are attracted by natural products, some companies and cosmetics producers brand their products as “natural” just to sell more. Two examples of this include the brand BioKap, which uses bright green packaging and the word “bio” in the name, and Bio-Oil, which has faced legal action for its misleading name that would make consumers think it was an organic product. Another statement that always attracts those who want to make responsible purchases is the one that stands on countless products: “Not tested on animals.” But in reality, this statement is no need and is added simply to make an impression because cosmetic testing on animals has been banned since 11 March 2013. In fact, all types of cosmetic testing on animals were definitively prohibited; companies in Europe cannot test the finished products or the individual ingredients, and these also cannot be tested outside the European Community and then sold back in Europe. Although it is still possible to have detergents or medicine ingredients tested on animals, ingredients which can then also be used in cosmetics. But testing on animals only for cosmetic purposes is already prohibited. In a nutshell, this claim on the label is not an added value because this is now what the law already established.

Even though the consumer attempts to avoid hazardous chemicals by purchasing cosmetic products labeled “natural” or “organic,” often with natural plant extracts and/or organic ingredients free from synthetic

chemicals, in reality, the organic cosmetics industry has a very complex mechanism for categorizing products as “natural” or “organic.” In the United States, although both of these terms are used on the labels, few brands actually use them. Unfortunately, there is no single entity regulating the use of these labels. So the real issue is that the standards and requirements vary for each country, being derived from how each government considers that products should be labeled. In the United States, the body responsible for this is the Organic Trade Association, which originated from the organic food movement. At an international level, there are different certification bodies, including the Soil Association in the UK, the German BDIH, and the Italy’s ICEA. The French label Ecocert means that one hundred percent of the ingredients are of natural origin, and this label is the only organic certification for color cosmetics (including skin care and make-up products). But that does not mean that only products sold in France carry the Ecocert label; in fact, some products sold in the United States, such as Physicians Formula Organic Wear line, carry this certification as well. The certification requirements for the German label NaTrue are much stricter than others. The Biodynamic Cosmetics are recognized as the best of the certified organic products. This label represents the fact that the companies that are growing organic ingredients used in the products are geared towards the development and the relationship between the soil, plants, and animals as a self-nourishing system without external inputs. Although the ability to control ingredients is limited, very often the Biodynamic products far exceed organic standards of purity and care for the Earth. Despite these requirements for labeling a product as “organic,” it is still possible for any brand to claim that its product is “natural” as long as it does not contain any artificial ingredients or dyes and the product has undergone minimal processing.

Yet, another issue seems to be the way the consumer is informed. Organic or not, the cosmetic product is not a medicine and the cosmetic nature of the product must be clear from the very beginning: a cosmetic cannot be assimilated or compared – either explicitly or indirectly – to a drug or cosmetic surgery. Although the main information about a product comes from the advertisement, this must be regulated by governmental associations and authorities that guarantee the equitability on the market (EU policies on fair trade). The cosmetic product cannot be labeled in any way that indicates it has curative or therapeutic properties that are able to intervene in a decisive and definitive way on the causes of imperfections. Also it is very important to pay attention to the results the product promises, the praise of specific and timely effectiveness – expressed in absolute or percentage terms, with an indication of tight deadlines and / or with a kit of particularly evocative images – based on a true and targeted scientific support and

adequate testing. The effectiveness of a component does not support by itself the effectiveness of the product. If they are clearly referred to in an advertisement, clinical trials must be relevant and directly related to the effectiveness attributed to the product. In the message, compatibly with the available space, the company must specify the methodology, the measurements and parameters that were used. The scientific studies mentioned in advertising to support the performance of the cosmetic product must be adequately accessible – in full or comprehensive summary explanation – through referral to the web pages of the company website. In addition to this, a product has not presented reliable proof of effectiveness if the maximum value achieved in the trials is not the same as the efficacy of the product. However, James Curran (1998) stated in his article “Crisis of public communication: a reappraisal” that “all advertising-funded markets are imperfect. They operate through the sale of viewers’ attention, producing a bias against quality and variety. The advertising system favors high ratings rather than highly rated programs. It also favors majority rather than minority programs because advertising is insensitive to intensities of demand (unlike, in principle, a direct consumer payments system where people can opt to pay more for what they especially like)”(p.89).

On the other hand, Gillian Dyer states in the chapter, Semiotics and Ideology, the systematic function of advertisements in a very broad sense, saying that they are means of representation and meaning building ideology in themselves through the use of the external codes found in society “the ad will use images, notions, concepts, myths, etc. already available in the culture. An ad does not simply reflect ideology; it reworks it, thus producing new meanings. It uses objects which are signifiers of ideological systems and thought that already exist and then makes them signifiers of another structure (the ad). It’s connotations process depends on our knowledge of the forms of ideology that advertisements employ”. (Dyer 1982, p. 102). She goes on to argue that “texts resulted from the dynamic interplay of various semiotic, aesthetic, social and ideological processes within them which also operate in the culture outside them. The audience member is involved in the work of the text and the production of its meaning; his or her own knowledge, social position and ideological perspective is brought to bear on the process of the construction of meaning” (Dyer 1982, p. 92). In support of what was said, Dyer cites Judith Williamson, the latter explaining the allegorical character of the advertisements, not only that they underline the qualities of products they are trying to sell, but above this, they intend to create for us an emotional connection with these properties: “Advertisements are selling us something besides consumer goods; in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves” (Dyer 1982, p. 92).

Conclusion

The current cosmetic industry assists to a new change, a new direction of the market towards the use of organic and natural ingredients. But the issue is still debatable, as there is both praise and also criticism around this trend, because some natural ingredients can be harmful as well. In this industry, the term “natural” can be relative, and can be translated as simply derived from nature. It may also be true that some natural ingredients could be harmful; but the organic certification labels cannot possibly contain such ingredients. Moreover, although each cosmetic may contain some natural or even organic ingredients, it still could be harmful (like aggressive shampoos, full of chemicals, which also contain a small amount of Argan oil). But products that receive the label of organic certification should contain the most truly organic ingredients. As a fact stated above, nowadays society tends to take the good parts of beauty (in fashion, cosmetics) from history, and also advertising must adjust to their requirements (for example, the vintage trend).

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