

When Aesthetic Becomes Excess

Beauty and Overconsumption Among Gen Z

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The global beauty industry is driven largely by skincare and makeup, with Gen Z emerging as one of its most powerful consumer segments. But behind the curated selfies and 10-step routines lies an uncomfortable truth: the beauty industry is becoming a major contributor to environmental waste, largely due to overconsumption fueled by trends, influencers, and fast beauty culture.

“This waste is more than just packaging — it reflects a systemic issue in how beauty is marketed and consumed, particularly by a generation that values aesthetics and rapid trend adoption.”

According to industry reports, the beauty sector generates over 120 billion units of packaging annually, much of it non-recyclable plastic that ends up in landfills or the ocean. Only about 14% of beauty packaging is sent for recycling, and just 9% is effectively recycled (Plastic Pollution Coalition, British Beauty Council).

What’s Fueling the Overconsumption

Gen Z’s constant exposure to social media and rapidly changing beauty trends has reshaped the way they shop and express themselves. What were once occasional cosmetic or skincare purchases are increasingly driven by curated content, product reviews, and viral aesthetics. In fact, a 2023 LendingTree study revealed that 64% of Gen Z consumers say social media causes them to spend more on beauty products than they initially plan (LendingTree, 2023). Additionally, a survey by the Skin Health Alliance found that 71% of Gen Z individuals (ages 18–26) make skincare purchases based on influencer recommendations (Skin Health Alliance, 2023). These figures highlight just how profoundly digital influence is shaping their beauty routines and consumer choices.

Gen Z spends a significant portion of their time on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where beauty influencers and celebrities frequently share new product recommendations. Viral beauty “hauls,” GRWM (Get Ready with Me) videos, and skincare routines often create a sense of urgency and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). This type of content encourages consumers to purchase products not out of necessity, but to stay current.

Influenced by social media, trends have also become a major factor driving Gen Z to spend money on beauty products. The fast-beauty model mirrors the fast fashion industry, where brands release limited collections or trend-driven products at a rapid pace, making older items feel outdated. This constant turnover encourages impulse buying. Popular trends such as “glass skin,” the “clean girl aesthetic,” and “latte makeup” come and go quickly, but each demands new products to achieve a specific, often short-lived look.

In addition to social influence, Gen Z is known for its heightened awareness of mental health. Many in this generation view shopping as a form of emotional relief. Buying beauty products has become a way to self-soothe and practice self-care. Compared to previous generations, Gen Z more often connects personal identity with consumption. In fact, they spend over \$2,000 annually on beauty, with skincare making up 41% of that total (DemandSage; BeBold Digital).

Influenced by social media, shifting trends, and influencer culture, Gen Z’s beauty consumption has surged—and so has the environmental fallout. Each year, the industry produces over 120 billion packaging units, and a staggering 95 % of them are discarded without mindful disposal or recycling. The environmental cost of this waste is far deeper than it appears.



What We Can Do: Reducing the Impact of Beauty Overconsumption

Though the beauty industry marketing machine is hard to ignore, Gen Z also holds the power to shift the narrative. Here are ways to reduce the impact without sacrificing self-expression:

1. Practice Conscious Consumption

Before buying, ask: “Do I need this, or do I want it because it’s trending?” Learning to differentiate between needs and impulses helps reduce waste and over-purchasing.

2. Choose Sustainable Brands and Packaging

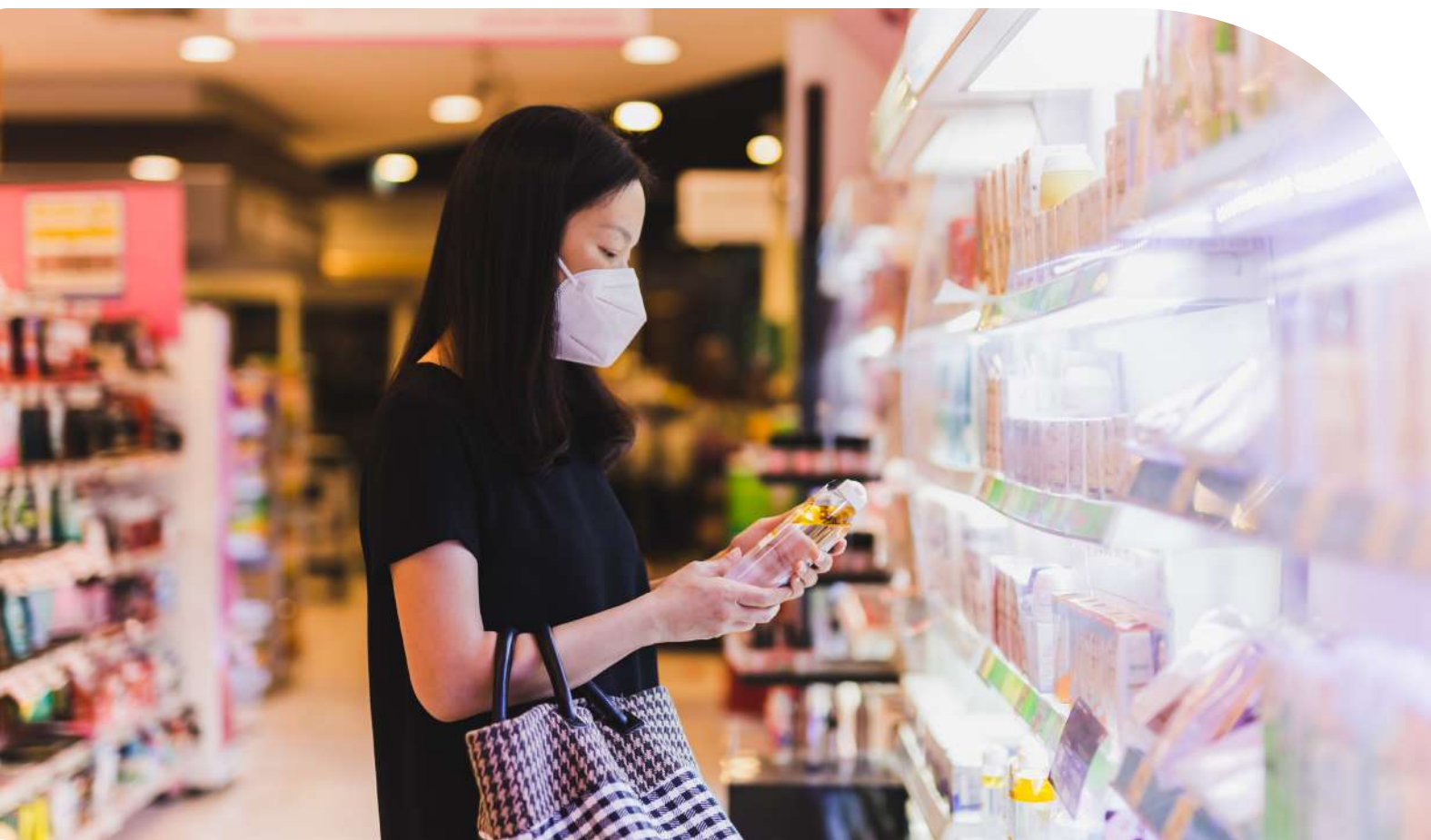
Support brands offering refillable, recyclable, or biodegradable packaging. Many companies now prioritize eco-friendly solutions, not just for environmental reasons, but because Gen Z demands it (CleanHub).

3. Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose

Many beauty containers can be reused for travel, DIY products, or storage. Some brands (e.g., MAC, L’Occitane) offer take-back programs or rewards for returning used packaging.

4. Shift Habits and Build Balance

Instead of shopping as a form of entertainment, explore new hobbies like journaling, painting, or baking. Creative expression can offer the same emotional satisfaction without consumption.





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Source: Plastic Pollution Coalition, British Beauty Council

Conclusion

The beauty industry has long promised empowerment, identity, and self-expression. For Generation Z, these promises continue to hold significance, yet they come with an increasing environmental cost. Consumers often overlook the impact of their purchasing decisions, acquiring excessive amounts of beauty products without fully considering the consequences. This issue extends beyond individual responsibility; brands must also adopt a more conscientious approach to the development and distribution of their products.

One practical step brands can take is to tailor PR packages sent to influencers based on their skin tone or specific needs. Sending all product shades or variants indiscriminately not only conveys an inappropriate message but also fosters excessive consumption. Furthermore, this practice contributes to unnecessary waste, exacerbating environmental harm. By embracing more mindful consumption habits and demanding greater transparency from brands, Generation Z can help redefine beauty as an ethical, sustainable, and thoughtful pursuit. After all, maintaining one's appearance should not come at the expense of the planet.

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