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Selling Beauty, Selling Identity: The Business and Psychology Behind the Beauty Industry

COMMENTARY

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CITATION

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Abstract

This commentary explores how the modern beauty industry works at the intersection of psychology and business strategy. While beauty products are marketed based on their functional benefits, this article argues that emotional branding, and identity-based communication play a greater role in influencing consumer behavior. Exposing qualitative insights from interviews with a psychology expert, and a business professional, this article highlights how beauty marketing connects products with consumers' self-perception, aspirations, and social identities. From a psychological point of view, beauty standards are directly linked to self-esteem, cultural expectations, and all the ways individuals evaluate their own worth. From a business perspective, companies strategically segment their audiences by age and lifestyle, using storytelling and branding to create loyalty among consumers. This article examines as well the role of social media in amplifying beauty ideals while also creating a space for movements such as body positivity. Ultimately, this commentary article argues that the success of beauty brands depends not merely on the product's performance but also on their ability to build meaningful

narratives that resonate with consumers.

Introduction

In today's saturated beauty industry, success is not merely determined by product efficacy. While formulas, pigments, and textures are important factors, the real differentiator for modern beauty brands lies in their ability to connect emotionally with their consumers. Beauty products have become more than tools for aesthetics because they now serve as vehicles for self-expression and social belonging (Amalia et al., 2023). The relationship between beauty and identity has been discussed in previous studies that highlight how beauty ideals influence society and consumer behavior (Smith, 2022a). This relationship became even clearer through the interviews conducted for this research, where both a business professional and a psychologist expressed that beauty is rarely only about appearance. Instead, it reflects deeper motivations that are directly related to confidence, identity formation, and the firm desire to belong to a particular social group.

From anti-aging creams that target mature consumers to TikTok advertisements about makeup trends for Gen Z, beauty marketing has evolved into an extremely complex interplay of emotional storytelling (Darmatama & Erdiansyah, 2021). Social media platforms have drastically changed the way beauty brands communicate with their consumers (Nugraha et al., 2024). More and more, advertising strategies rely heavily on celebrity or influencer representations (Herman et al., 2023). Interviews conducted with Susan Mathewson, Business Internship Coordinator at Barton College, and Ashley B. Gardner, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Barton College, also highlighted that the digital platforms have drastically increased the visibility of beauty standards at much younger ages (A. Gardner, S. Mathewson, personal communication, March 2026). This means that individuals are constantly exposed to altered images of appearance, and this constant exposure contributes enormously to shaping how consumers evaluate themselves as a person and the products they choose to purchase and use.

This social shift brings in a new trend: consumers are increasingly looking for products that promise them not only functional benefits, but also emotional resonance (Jie et al., 2025). Studies show that beauty advertising shapes how individuals perceive attractiveness and identity (Muñoz-Muñoz & Martínez-Oña, 2024). Interviews with industry and psychology experts illustrate the dual forces that are shaping this phenomenon. Mathewson emphasized that beauty branding has to strategically align products with consumers' self-image, aspirations, and life stages (S. Mathewson, personal communication, March 2026). She explained that beauty marketing is unique because it is extremely age-specific, meaning that companies have to design completely different strategies depending on whether they are targeting teenagers, young adults, or older consumers. Gardner highlighted that on the other hand, the profound psychological influence that beauty has on self-esteem, identity, and overall decision-making on people. She also explained that from an evolutionary perspective, humans may associate beauty with health, while from a more sociocultural perspective, beauty standards are shaped by gender expectations, culture, and the specific social context is targeted. By combining both of these perspectives, there is a deeper understanding that selling beauty is as much about emotional connections as it is about promoting

physical products (Smith, 2022a).

Argument-Perspective

The importance of emotional branding in the beauty industry can be explained by both business practices and psychological dynamics. From a commercial point of view, beauty products are designed to resonate with specific demographics based on age targeted marketing (Jie et al., 2025). Mathewson explained that brands such as Laura Geller and Jones Road are targeting mature consumers by presenting relatable spokespersons, who represent the product's promise. She stated "enhancing natural beauty at one's current stage of life." She emphasized that one of the reasons branding becomes so important is because consumers often look for people who resemble their own age when deciding which product to trust (S. Mathewson, personal communication, March 2026). Older consumers may trust more founders or public figures that are around their life stage. Conversely, younger audiences are more likely to purchase a beauty product if they are influenced by aspirational figures, such as celebrities or social media influencers (Somadi et al., 2022). The goal of beauty brands is to stay consistent across demographics because the consumer is invited to buy into a narrative, not just a moisturizer or a lip liner (Smith, 2022b). Mathewson also said that the beauty industry differs from many others because of the wide variety of points of sale, ranging from drugstores and department stores to online platforms and home shopping networks. She stated that each environment requires different communication strategies and branding approaches.

The psychological point of view reinforces the business perspective. Gardner highlighted that societal emphasis on appearance, particularly for women, links beauty to self-worth (Amalia et al., 2023). Products, therefore, are not simple commodities anymore, they are instruments through which consumers negotiate their own personal identity (Lazar, 2011). During the interview, Gardner explained that from a very early age many women are socialized to associate their value to their appearance, while men are often encouraged to connect their value with financial success. This difference is a clear example that demonstrates how deeply beauty expectations are associated with social and cultural norms. Emotional marketing evokes desire, fear, or aspiration. For example, anti-aging campaigns exploit the universal fear of growing up, while promising restored confidence among women. Gardner noted that fear-based emotions, such as the fear of aging, can be powerful motivators in purchasing decisions because emotional reactions often influence choices more strongly than rational thinking. Social media amplifies this effect by providing a constant visual that matches attractiveness with success (Tarba et al., 2025). However, she also said that social media has allowed for movements such as *body positivity*, creating a contradictory environment to societal beauty standards.

Emotional branding relies heavily on narrative coherence. Consumers are more likely to buy products that align with their personal story or desired self-image (Solomon et al., 1992). Mathewson's recounting of Cindy Crawford's *Meaningful Beauty* campaign illustrates that despite a product failing to deliver on its miraculous promises, the narrative and whoever is representing the image are the ones who create enduring brand loyalty (Somadi et al., 2022). During the course of the interview, Mathewson shared a personal experience of purchasing a product after being convinced by the story behind it, demonstrating that persuasive branding

narratives can be extremely powerful (S. Mathewson, personal communication, March 2026). In a similar way, campaigns that promote inclusivity and body positivity can generate trust by simply demonstrating that their emotional branding does not need to exploit insecurities in order to be effective (de Lenne et al., 2021).

However, ethical implications of beauty marketing should not be overlooked. Gardner stated that companies should avoid strategies that manipulate consumers' fears or promote unrealistic promises that will not happen. Gardner also stated businesses have the responsibility to communicate honestly and ethically, especially when their products directly affect women's self-image and confidence. The psychological factors that make emotional branding persuasive can also be misused by shaping negative self-image or encouraging impossible beauty ideals. For this reason, brands need to start communicating responsibly by combining messaging with honest representations to preserve consumer trust and support in their overall well-being (Prabhakar, 2025).

Conclusion

The modern beauty industry shows how psychology and business work together. Emotional branding helps companies connect with their consumers, and influence how people see themselves (Amalia et al., 2023). Beauty products are no longer just about how they make a consumer look, but about symbols connected to identity, confidence, and personal expression. Companies design their strategies to match consumers' goals, age groups, and social influences, while psychology helps explain why these strategies are so important and effective. Interviews conducted with Mathewson and Gardner highlighted an important idea: selling beauty is about selling a feeling of confidence, identity, and belonging. Both experts demonstrated that understanding consumer emotions and social influences can lead to an understanding of why beauty marketing is so powerful in modern society.

Emotional branding also highlights the ethical responsibilities brands face. Companies should protect consumers from being manipulated through their vulnerable points (Hidayat et al., 2023). Branding exists to inspire people through dreams, yet it must also be trustworthy. As highlighted in both interviews, companies can still promote their products effectively without the need of exaggerating unrealistic outcomes, or transforming insecurities into weapons. Future research needs to combine effective storytelling methods together with honest communication techniques (Herman et al., 2023). Beauty brands can establish better consumer relationships through understanding business and psychology, which can help maintain customer loyalty across extended periods. Beauty industry success requires both exceptional products, and the creation of positive emotional customer experiences (Tarba et al., 2025).

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