

## **The Rise of Clean Beauty in India: Wellness or Just Better Branding?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The following study explores the development of 'Clean Beauty' products over the course of time, alongside a shift of values amongst consumers with respect to the concept of 'beauty'. From a global perspective, it identifies the ambiguity that exists around 'Clean Beauty', while positioning the Indian context as a novelty. The latter presents a market case study where the ambiguity of a specific brand, aligned with a particular cultural perception of 'beauty', transforms into a specific definitional framework of 'beauty as wellness' that can have vast application in the global cosmetic industry. Hence, study underlines that the popularity of 'Clean Beauty' brands in India is the result of the alignment of modern brand strategy with traditional cultural conception of natural beauty as meant for wellness. Herein, the conception of 'wellness' as beyond physical well-being provided a significant vantage point to explore the popularity of 'Clean Beauty' products in India. However, the same has also been identified as delimited in terms of its reach due to a certain socioeconomic bias prevalent amongst the cosmetic industries. The redressal of the same would allow for a diverse population of consumers, leaving no individual devoid of a personal sense of beauty.*

**Keywords:** Clean Beauty, India, Wellness, Values, Branding

### **I. Introduction**

The global cosmetics industry is a leading force of modern consumer culture, valued somewhere more than USD 500 billion, and projected to be an industry worth over USD 758 billion by 2025 or at least 2.6% of the GDP of the United States of America (Shim et al., 2024). However, this growing demand amongst consumers to acquire a well-crafted beauty has changed its tides in terms of the ethical considerations involved in production processes. There has been a significant rise in the demand for a niche type of cosmetic products, namely, the "Clean Beauty" brands. In the current situation, "Clean Beauty," one of the prominent trends in the cosmetics industry, is particularly impacting Millennial and Gen Z consumers. These brands claim efforts to

limit/remove the use of chemical exposure, and have blossomed with a branding strategy that now is positioned in the 2 billion dollar range. More specifically, these brands are making promises that their products are "free from" parabens, sulfates, synthetic fragrances and other so-called "toxic" cosmetics. Moreover, the marketing strategies employed by these brands at the international level consistently underline a different set of values around sustainability and cruelty free sourcing, and support for minimal aesthetics (Shim et al., 2024). Such an amalgamation of health, ethics and aesthetics has reshaped the market and commercial logic of cosmetics, turning ingredient lists into ethical statements and skincare regimes into rituals of virtue. Nevertheless, even with its market power, "Clean Beauty" is still an unregulated term, without a standardized scientific or legal definition (Singh et al, 2025). In markets such as the U.S., because of outdated cosmetic regulation, companies can deploy the label seemingly without restraint, with an existing absence of peer-reviewed safety assessments and established criteria. Such regulatory ambiguity opened the floodgates for "chemophobia marketing" whereby what is left out is valued more than what ingredients have been included; and may even mask product safety, rather than clarify it (Singh et al, 2025).

However, beyond just the label, clean beauty also exists as a powerful cultural metaphor that signifies distinct meanings for young female consumers who traverse an increasingly visual and virtuous online landscape. According to Marta Gonçalves (2023), the clean beauty aesthetic is related to both postfeminist and purity discourses, positioning women's skincare choices as sites in which ethical performance is constructed. Quite many 'Clean Beauty' brands use packaging that represents simplicity, with pastel colors communicating a particular sense of bodily discipline, moral purity, and curated femininity. In this respect, the bathroom mirror becomes a site of "ritualized consumption" in which consumers enact a performance of self-care that negotiates consumerism as well as identity politics (Marta Goncalves 2023). Influencers and micro-celebrities publicize the meaning of "clean" products, promoting them not only as efficacious but also as marks of authenticity, mindfulness, and care for the environment. However, the reality of its performative nature is seldom coupled with institutional transparency. Some industries such as Cosmetics Europe promote voluntary safety assessments and supply chain tracking, and the absence of an agreed-upon international framework means consumers usually remain unable to make informed decisions regarding the truth of marketing language interference, often taking it on faith. (Cosmetics Europe, n.d.). In describing how the motivations behind purchasing decisions have shifted, researchers have also identified the rise of a "credence economy," a marketplace with key examples of a product's truth that cannot be independently verified, wherein trust becomes another kind of science literacy (Shim et al., 2024). While regulatory initiatives like REACH (in the European Union) and modernization initiatives like the U.S. FDA are slowly addressing this gap, 'Clean Beauty' still operates mainly as an affective *brand identity* rather than as a scientifically defined category (Singh et al, 2025). Literature

suggests that consumers, globally, are not necessarily looking for complex technical literature—they need an honest, accountable framework that allows them to match their consuming habits with their own values. The far-reaching presence of ‘Clean Beauty’ as a cultural mark, despite its ambivalence, draws attention therein towards the factors which drive consumer choices, and how consumer values also determine novel marketing strategies. The same would make for a pertinent exploration when considering contexts that were once derivatives of the West, but have now produced their socioculturally specific conception of ethics, sustainability, and beauty.

## **II. Background**

Product branding influences consumer trends by employing a supposed ‘meaning’ and associated promises in their brand strategy. Keller and Lehmann (2006) have argued that brand strategy works in a systematic manner to simplify decision-making for consumers, promise quality on the choice, guarantee reduced risks, and thereby build trust for a pool of customers to convert them into regular consumers and maintain a sustained channel of communication with them. Beyond tangible attributes, brands also create intangible associations through the use of imagery, narrative techniques, affective components, and heritage to differentiate their respective products/services in the market viz-a-viz their competitors (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). A typical brand strategy eventually adopts a certain personality trait through reiteration and repetitions, becoming an extended self for its consumers. Acar et al (2024) have elaborated on this, showing that people often *purchase identities* rather than products: in other words, brands become a ritualistic act, having a cultural symbol, for consumers to express their personality traits and values through their lifestyle choices. It is precisely so that companies like Apple and Pentagonia have been reported to align their market to become consumer signatures in the market (Acar et al, 2024).

In terms of the consumer response to such an elaborate system, studies have reported that consumers, too, have an active role to play in determining the branding strategies. In their study of healthy food brands, García-Salirrosas et al. (2024) have shown that perceived financial value and quality directly enhance brand image and loyalty, while the social capital procured by using a brand equally determines the choices that consumers make in their purchase decisions. Hence, branding needs to communicate comprehensively the economic and social value that they can extend to their consumers. In the context of ‘green’ consumption, this phenomenon has been reported to be more predominant. Keneddy et al (2024) demonstrated in their study that green product consumption has a direct relationship with the orientation towards ‘green’ perspective that can be the effect of strong social influence. However, they contend that this collective influence does not have to do with individual green literacy, and that the latter has no significant impact on ‘green’ purchasing behavior. Singh et al (2025), in a similar vein, posited that the knowledge of a product, in terms of its production processes and ingredients, indeed raises

environmental awareness—however, it does not strongly determine the purchase behavior amongst consumers. Rather, they too report social norms and influence as a strong factor that comes to influence purchase intention. Together, these studies suggest that values, lifestyle orientation and social influence—not individual knowledge alone—drive consumer behaviour. Effective branding, therefore, combines functional promises with symbolic meanings to align products with identities, lifestyles and social networks.

In the context of India, wherein strong collective influence is often reported, research about perceived ‘wellness’ has again underlined social values as a determining factor. Tengli and Srinivasan (2022) reported that the collective fear of consumers; of the harmful effects that synthetic cosmetics have on health and the natural environment have motivated individuals to seek out alternative brands. Finding this less an influence of subjective norms, and more of a collective influence, scholars have marked the shift that consumers have reported from chemical based products to nature-based products in especially the male grooming market. When integrated into the discussion that how ‘Clean Beauty’ brands are making an influence in the sociocultural context of India, it seems that the influence is more a product of a cultural perception of the environmental harm rather than the individual knowledge of the consumer. In other words, the sense of identity that is empowered by the use of such brands, seems to be the product of a collective social value that comes to determine the purchase decision for Indian consumers. However, a historical discussion merits mention here to understand how ‘Clean Beauty’ branding has influenced this shift towards nature-based products. Moreover, the question stands herein how ‘Clean Beauty’ brands have been integrating economic and quality factors with a community-centric market strategy to align with Indian consumers, and if it has its environmental undertones. This also follows the question about the reach of these products in terms of socioeconomic diversity.

### **III. Discussion**

The emergence of ‘Clean Beauty’ in India is an interplay between the region’s traditional beauty practices, strategic marketing therein, and the rising consumer consciousness that has come up in recent years after COVID-19. Previously, the beauty practices of Indians had roots in the Ayurvedic traditions, embedding a cultural inclination to clean beauty regimens. Ingredients such as turmeric, neem, coconut oil, and sandalwood were highlighted by the then marketers to create a narrative that resonated with the Indian consumer. (Ravishankar & Dhekle, 2021). This precedent allowed for a cultural readiness for Clean Beauty adoption in India; helping present day brands to repackage the historical wisdom with persuasive marketing language. However, important to note here is that despite the existence of rich constituents in its beauty tradition, Indian consumers showed slow growth towards accommodating modern beauty products. Even after the wave of liberalization in India, the cosmetics industry reported a tension between the

respectability of traditions and consumption patterns. Pathak and Nichter (2018) underline that Indian women resist conventional makeup owing to its connection with the concept of *sringar*, which is self-adornment, and this created a contingent difference affecting the consumption for the longest time. The industry, in return, had strategically reframed the products through ‘wellness’ and ‘purity’ narratives and changed the outlook towards aesthetics. By simply marketing the products as natural and herbal, and emphasizing their role in addressing health concerns like hair fall and skin damage from pollution, the strategy eventually shifted consumption from vanity-driven purchases to wellness-oriented decisions.

The transition to ‘Clean’ has also been a result of seeking home-based beauty treatments without the expense of preparation time, enabling the birth of brands like Forrest Essentials, Kama Ayurveda, and Khadi Naturals, who have positioned themselves as bridges between traditional knowledge and modern convenience, while commanding a premium price. In the Indian markets, the message of ‘grandmother’s recipe’ also resonates closely, parallel to the abhorrence of synthetic beauty products. These brands have demonstrated exceptional market penetration within India’s beauty and personal care market, which is estimated at 25 billion dollars and ranks fourth in the world currently (Ipsos, 2024). Forest Essentials commands the highest brand recognition, with 52.9 percent consumer usage rates and 64.7 percent Instagram followership, establishing itself as the premium segment leader. Kama Ayurveda follows up with a 23.5 percent user rate and over 41 percent social media engagement, illustrating the loyalty of its consumer base (Ravishankar & Dhekle, 2021). Within this expansive market, price sensitivity remains a constraint for middle-income consumers. This has created an opportunity for mass-market brands to develop product lines with accessible price points. Nevertheless, they often compromise on the ingredient authenticity and concentration. According to the Brand Xcel Report 2024, brands like Lotus Herbals, Patanjali, and Dabur have successfully integrated ‘Clean Beauty’ positioning into their mass-market offerings (*Personal Care and Beauty Trends 2024*, 2024). Aside from the established FMCG players in the offline markets, Instagram has also emerged as a dominant mediator for the clean beauty marketing, facilitating a democratization of beauty education. One initial barrier in the consumption of the cosmetic and beauty industry was the lack of knowledge about product usage, such as mascara and foundation, making it elusive to the majority population (Nichter and Pathak 2021). Now with access to ingredient information, application techniques, and product reviews from both brands and influencers, a whopping 94 percent of consumer demand for an Indian organic beauty product comes from these platforms. Digitalisation has also enabled the rise of direct-to-consumer (D2C) platforms that bypass traditional retail channels to build direct relationships with customers. Nykaa has leveraged real-time feedback, rating systems, and customized product options to select products from multiple brands, proving to be an effective medium for consumers to access a transparent and convenient buying experience. Mamaearth’s trajectory is a perfect illustration of the digital-first disruption

model. Following the marketing paradigm given by Nichter and Pathak, Mamaearth positioned itself as a "goodness inside" brand that prioritizes safety over traditional beauty aspirations, creating non-toxic personal care products specifically for mothers and pregnant women (V. & Aithal, 2022). They also became the trailblazer for integrating wellness in the beauty industry as their core philosophy, making it a maternal responsibility and a moral virtue for women to take care of themselves, rather than a ritualistic cleansing. This appealed to the modern Indian woman's dual roles as caregivers and consumers while staying rooted in cultural respectability.

The repositioning of beauty as 'wellness' has fundamentally reconceptualized the consumption and transformed the aesthetic care into an imperative obligation when considering the Indian scenario. This also exploits the cultural tension of '*sringar*' or adornment and makes 'Clean Beauty' appear as a health investment (Khan, 2013). Indian women have subsequently reconstructed their self-image through clean beauty consumption as a form of aspirational authenticity, where the product choices become a mirror for their sophisticated knowledge about ingredient safety while maintaining a connection to their social status. The identity construction here primarily operates from an internal validation mechanism. Khan's research reveals that women purchase skincare products significantly more to "improve self-image" than to "improve the image others have". This self-directed wellness approach intensified during the pandemic, with millennials embracing the DIY beauty practices and organic formulations as expressions of informed consciousness (Banu et al. 2022). This also meant evolution from instant beauty glow up to embracing a scientifically validated approach that focuses on long-term beautification. The contemporary 'healthy beauty' model connects physical appearance to measurable health indicators, altering the beauty efficacy. Taking care of the skin no longer means ritualistic concealing of imperfections, but emphasizing systemic health improvements, such as maintaining gut microbiome balance. Similarly, taking care of hair vitality has surpassed product-based enrichment and focuses on nutrition biomarkers like biotin and zinc levels (Ipsos, 2024). Nevertheless, literature highlights that even though the evidence-based wellness framework has catalyzed the demand and popularity of clean beauty products in India, the market is not all inclusive. Most brands continue to focus their messaging and product lines on urban, middle, and upper-class customers, prioritizing lighter skin tones and idealised aesthetics in the marketing campaigns. (Ipsos, 2024). Attempts to diversify narratives and reach the rural economy remain limited, as do efforts to offer products at lower price points. This urban bias is both a challenge and an opportunity for the core market segment, which can deepen its hold on the Indian market by adapting to the values, preferences, and aspirations of the heterogeneous population.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In tracing the trajectory of ‘Clean Beauty’ products in India, thus, it can be emphasized that branding strategy has to converge with traditional cultural practices for its authenticity in a context distinctly different from that of the West. While there persists a lack of a scientific or legal definition for ‘Clean Beauty’ and it continues to operate as an unregulated term globally, its success in India stems from its strategic alignment with pre-existing cultural frameworks rather than rejection of synthetic formulations. Hence, to understand this positive marketing strategy, the discussion here analysed the success of the ‘Clean Beauty’ product line as a result of the deliberate repackaging of ancestral wisdom that resonates with Indian consumers' cultural predispositions towards natural ingredients and personal wellness (Ravishankar & Dhekle, 2021). This cultural alignment is the life force behind brands like Forest Essentials and Kama Ayurveda, which have altered the commercial logic of beauty consumption.

Relevance of social influence and collective values over individual knowledge or green literacy is also highlighted through consumer behavior research (Kennedy et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2025). This is further clarified by the research that has established that Indian women’s engagement with clean beauty functions as a form of aspirational authenticity, where product choices are *identity constructions* reconciling with traditional values as well as serving as a medium to display their prowess of being both a home maker and a breadwinner. Khan’s findings illuminate the internal validation mechanism along with pandemic compounding self-directed wellness approaches connecting physical appearance to measurable health outcomes (Banu et al., 2022). However, the study also identified the market inclusivity caused by the premium positioning of ‘Clean Beauty’ brands and their prices being exclusive of middle and lower income consumers, despite the latter sharing the same cultural affinity for natural products. Here, a paradox is created where the authentic wellness position conflicts with accessibility and its potential to reach a wider demographic. The industry's bias further exacerbates the constraint and limits its reach through the marketing campaign. Future developments must address the gap between cultural authenticity and socioeconomic inclusivity while maintaining the credibility of ‘the Clean’ standard, particularly as regulatory frameworks evolve to address definitional ambiguity surrounding the clean beauty claims.

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