

GLOSSY

Mass and indie brands are hopping aboard the genderless beauty movement

By JESSICA SCHIFFER | DEC 19, 2017



The beauty industry is embracing the genderless movement — for now, at least.

Following in the footsteps of fashion brands from Gucci to Asos, which have designed clothing to be worn across gendered lines, cosmetics and skincare companies are increasingly promoting the use of their products by all people, whether they're male, female, transgender, or gender-nonconforming. Unlike with "boy beauty," this movement is targeting men with varied needs (those into skincare, but not makeup, for example), as well as those who don't identify with either gender.

Covergirl was the first major brand to embrace the idea in 2016, when it selected the 17-year-old YouTube star James Charles to front its "So Lashy" mascara campaign. Maybelline followed suit last January when it chose openly gay online beauty influencer Manny Gutierrez to star in its "Big Shot Mascara by Colossal" campaign.

MAC Cosmetics took things a step further, debuting genderless makeup lines with the likes of Caitlyn Jenner in 2016 and Instagram-famous makeup artist Patrick Starr this year. Independent brands including Milk Makeup and Make Beauty are positioning themselves as genderless, too. One new brand, Jecca, is targeting specific beauty concerns of transgender people (like the desire to cover up beard stubble while in transition).

This phenomenon has been driven largely by social media, said Victoria Buchanan, a trend researcher at The Future Laboratory. "Platforms like Instagram have broken many of the stereotypes around gender," she said. "There's a diversity of people out there sharing their beauty looks and investigating and experimenting with their individuality."

Social media has propelled the careers of Charles and Starr, who boast 2.7 million and 3.8 million followers on Instagram, respectively. "They've helped genderless beauty go mainstream," said Jennifer Davidson, the editor-in-chief of The Fashion Spot, which releases annual diversity reports for the fashion and beauty industries.

There's also been a societal shift towards greater acceptance of gender nonconformity, said Davidson, which many attribute to the progressive attitudes of Gen Z.

According to a 2016 report by the trend forecasting agency J. Walter Thompson, only 48 percent of people aged 13 to 20 identify as strictly heterosexual, compared to 65 percent of millennials aged 21 to 34 who do. Over a third of them strongly agreed that gender does not define a person as much as it used to, compared to 43 percent of their older contemporaries. Mintel has also found that beauty is no longer the province of young girls. Sixty-nine percent of boys aged 9 to 17 use beauty products, while 44 percent and 42 percent of boys aged 12 to 17 use facial cleansing products and perfume or cologne, respectively.

"This fluid outlook on gender is driving a rejection of rigid categorizations," said Buchanan, adding that the beauty industry is reflecting this shift by offering products with a more neutral aesthetic.

Indeed, for all the noise surrounding "boy beauty" — which is largely cosmetics-driven and involves heavily made-up faces — there's a quieter shift happening in skincare that may appeal to a wider subset of people.

In November, the former COO of MeUndies, Terry Lee, launched the gender-neutral K-beauty skincare line, Panacea. The line of three products, in neutral gray and white packaging, is a shortened version of K-beauty's famous 10-step process, targeting what Lee calls "gender agnostic" concerns, including dehydration and breakouts. They spoke to people across the gender spectrum to identify what to focus on or avoid. Men, for instance, tend to stay away from anything too sticky.

"We wanted to create a brand that reflects where we are as a culture," said Lee. So far, however, 65 percent of the brand's customers are female, as are the majority of its models.

"Skincare for so long has been rooted in this antiquated mindset of being either for men — usually in blue packaging with a musky scent — or for women — in pink packaging with a floral scent," he said.

But Lee and his friends — who were increasingly interested in skincare regardless of their gender or sexuality — often found themselves looking for, and struggling to find, products outside of those realms.

Earlier this month, men's beauty site Very Good Light launched the Lightning Awards to honor the best beauty and grooming products for all genders, spanning the face, body, facial hair, hair and makeup categories. The idea, according to founder David Yi, was to offer a more inclusive version of Allure's Best of Beauty awards.

"The industry is changing," he said. "Consumers no longer look at products as gendered — they don't care who something is marketed towards."

As such, Yi and fellow judges such as the Allure beauty editor Liz Denton and former GQ style writer Max Berlinger attempted to judge each product without regard for its marketing.

"So, if this product wasn't blue or pink, or marketed towards a certain gender, would it still be key for everyone?" he said of the criteria. The winners included brands like Glossier, **Nudestix** and Tweezerman.

Very Good Light's readership is 60 percent Gen Zers and 33 percent millennials, while 7 percent of them are over 50. Altogether, the audience is 65 percent male and comes mostly from the coastal cities, which are known to be more progressive.

Yi, however, believes the phenomenon will begin to take over.

"I don't think this is a trend, it's a real identity — but it requires a lot of education," he said.

He was quick to note that traditional beauty brands like Maybelline and Covergirl should be careful getting stuck on only the loudest versions of genderless beauty.

"By only utilizing guys who beat their faces with makeup, you're not encouraging other guys to start embracing makeup [or convincing them that it's okay]," he said. "That advertising is still mostly skewed towards women — they're the ones who want to replicate those done-up faces most."

Gesina Gudehus-Wittern, engagement manager at the consulting firm Vivaldi, agreed: "Not everyone is already as comfortable in their skin as these predominant beauty influencers." Brands, in effect, need to realize that the desire for genderless products goes deeper than advertising, she said.

"They need to start with an acute understanding of their customer and his or her needs, pain points, and behaviors in order to know how to serve them right," she said.

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