



No one knows how old they are supposed to be anymore

Kristen Bateman | March 6, 2024



Illustration Louise Grosjean

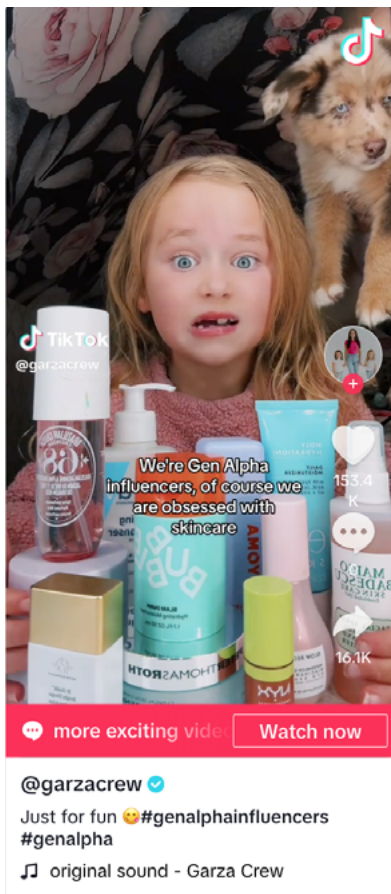
In terms of beauty culture, we're in the midst of one of the most interesting dichotomies we've ever seen. 10-year-olds are obsessed with Sephora and Drunk Elephant. Meanwhile, the girlhood and coquette trend is still very much going strong. Even Prada presented girlish pink bows for its AW24 show. And yet, the intense fear of ageing seems to collectively persist. It's not a new concept, but it is more visible than it's ever been, thanks to social media.

Scrolling through TikTok yields videos with millions of views about how girls as young as 10 are shopping for Drunk Elephant. "I'm 11 and I think I know more about Drunk Elephant than you do," says one video. Others show imitated scenes of 10-year-olds looking for the brand's retinol. The videos came to a head over the holiday season, when parents were reporting their kids asking for expensive skin care as their top gift choices and retailer workers were posting about it online. On the other side of TikTok, girlhood is the trend (or lifestyle) we can't escape. Brands that take inspiration from girl culture – like Sandy Liang, Simone Rocha and Selkie – are at their peak. Taylor Swift, Olivia Rodrigo and Billie Eilish, all artists who play with the proverbial idea of girlhood, ruled the 2024 Grammys.

The juxtaposition between girls who want to grow up and women who want to stay young is stronger than ever, and a lot of it is being driven by the beauty industry. Gen Alpha, the Sephora tweens who are absorbing this trend, are the first generation to fully grow up with the internet. “TikTok is the TV for this generation,” says Lindsay Amper, a licensed psychologist specialising in adolescent psychology. “They are exposed to media related to skincare and Sephora, and though this is likely intended for an older audience, they are viewing it regularly.” With the algorithm doling out content based on what you interact with, it’s easy for a younger audience to become all-consumed with skincare and beauty-focused videos. We know that the desire to fit in has never been greater, and when there’s a big trend happening, it can feel even more ubiquitous.

Though Gen Alpha may still be too young for beauty procedures, **Kimberly Lee**, director of Beverly Hills Facial Plastic Surgery Center, has seen a big increase in requests from 18 to 25-year-olds for preventative procedures such as Botox, fillers, non-invasive procedures, and dimple creation. “Factors influencing this trend include social media, preventative measures to avoid signs of ageing, increased acceptance of plastic surgery enhancements, and increased accessibility,” she says.

One thing is clear: as this striking dynamic of girlhood and growing up quickly comes as a shock, history repeats itself. Young people have always idolised what’s being sold to them through glossy ads, the media, and the celebrities whom they admire. What’s different now, though, is that pre-teen and teen girl culture today is almost non-existent, as writer Felicity Martin explored in a piece for Dazed last year. There are far fewer teen stores or magazines (remember *Rookie and Limited Too?*), which means the generational lines are starting to blur together.



The culture of coquette is appealing to Gen Z and millennial women because it's a way of reclaiming the girlhood we lost. Likewise, younger kids are being increasingly exposed to adult beauty pressures, and can't wait to transition from playing with real life dolls to becoming the dolls themselves, all decorated with luxury skincare, prestige make-up and designer clothes. "Gen Alpha, like generations before them, is doing what children do: learning how to be a grown-up from trusted adults," adds Franssen. "The difference is that instead of mimicking family members with their dolls, play kitchens and plastic tool sets, Gen Alphas are playing with make-up and skincare routines as they mimic videos they've seen."

Also, more generally, beauty culture has shifted. And that's why we're seeing the younger generation obsess over skincare rather than make-up or hot rollers. "Beauty has moved to a place that's more clean and preventative, especially in these age groups where the elders before them depended on routines that were way harsh," says the trend forecaster Jessica Richards. This is true for almost every generation that came before us: think of the Victorians, who used deadly arsenic to achieve bright eyes and a clear complexion, or the Georgian-era beauty rituals that involved lead-based make-up. Even in the 80s, countless layers of harsh hairspray ended up destroying the ozone layer because they were so strong. In the early 2000s, we had concealer lips, matte foundations and heavy crease cuts. "Now consider their social media presence and awareness; [young people] now gravitate towards no filter and being real," adds Richards. "Skincare is key."



Perhaps all of this also has to do with hyper-accessibility. After all, younger generations may have had to beg their parents or older sisters to take them to a physical Sephora, but now it's all a click away with websites, apps and TikTok shops. And we're being fed content constantly, therefore digesting trends like girlhood and coquette culture at a more rapid pace. You can order your mini bow hair clips and your retinol with the click of a single button.

The one common theme? We don't know what age we're supposed to be, but we'll be criticised regardless. The other day, I cringed when an industry legend hairstylist told me he thought Sarah Jessica Parker's giant bow worn at the New York City Ballet 2023 Fall Fashion Gala "wasn't appropriate for a grown woman". Yet at the same time, there are countless headlines about retinol and Vitamin C not being appropriate for younger girls. Discourse is important and worthy of these topics, but we don't quite see the same attention and criticisms put on young men and how they present as they age. Ultimately, we're dynamic beings, and bows and retinol represent two of the many facets of our current beauty culture – which, increasingly, is turning into one big living meme.

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/article/62093/1/sephora-10-year-olds-coquette-girlhood-and-the-death-of-tween-culture>