

‘Clean’ beauty has taken over the cosmetics industry, but that’s about all anyone agrees on

By **Dina ElBoghdady**

March 11, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

Many skin-care products and other cosmetics claiming to be natural, organic, green or some combination thereof have come and gone on store shelves and websites without leaving much of a mark. But it wasn’t until products started calling themselves “clean” that a critical mass of customers started poring over ingredient lists with the diligence of parents checking their children’s hair for lice. The result has been a revolution that is reshaping the beauty industry. But why has the clean label — for which there is no regulatory definition — so captured the public’s devotion? Why are dermatologists so disdainful of the concept? And what does it mean?

The term popped up in the 1970s with CoverGirl’s “Clean Make-up” campaign, a reference to the fresh-faced, no-makeup look. Fast forward to the 2000s, and the word took on new meaning with the launch of skin-care lines such as the British brand Ren — the Swedish word for clean. Ren was inspired by the wife of the co-founder, who suffered skin irritation

from conventional products while pregnant and disliked the all-natural alternatives because of their undesirable texture and lackluster performance. The line was created to be “clean of harmful ingredients,” said Arnaud Meyselle, Ren’s chief executive. The clean movement has been evolving since then and “accelerated within the past three or four years,” Meyselle said.

Today, there’s consensus in the industry that clean refers to products that favor natural ingredients yet often incorporate synthetics that have been deemed safe for people and the planet. In other words, clean does not necessarily mean chemical-free, which is what sets it apart from brands that claim to be “natural.” Natural can be clean, but clean is not always natural; it’s just free of certain hot-button, man-made ingredients — such as parabens and formaldehyde-releasing agents. In Ren’s case, 95 percent of its ingredients are naturally derived, and the rest are safe synthetics, Meyselle said. But brands and retailers don’t always agree about which ingredients are problematic.

AD

All of this is made more complicated by the fact that not only does the Food and Drug Administration not have a definition for “clean” or other cosmetics terms, it is also not required to test or preapprove cosmetics and their ingredients, with the exception of color additives.

The demand for clean dovetailed with the rise of the broader wellness movement, specifically the “clean-eating” lifestyle that embraces unrefined and minimally processed foods. It has also been fueled by growing awareness of the tougher regulations that govern cosmetics in other parts of the world. The European Union, for instance, has banned approximately 1,300 chemicals in cosmetics, a category that covers makeup, lotions, hair dyes, deodorant, nail polish, shaving cream and other beauty products. By contrast, the United States — where the average woman uses 12 such products containing 168 chemicals on her body each day — bans and restricts only 11, according to the Environmental Working Group, a health advocacy group that has helped spearhead the clean beauty movement along with the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

Scott Faber, senior vice president at EWG, claims that although many chemicals in cosmetics probably pose little risk on their own, repeat exposure to some of those chemicals has been associated with serious health problems. In written testimony to a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, Faber said that 617 cosmetics makers have reported using 93 chemicals that have been linked to cancer, birth defects or reproductive harm in more than 81,000 products, citing data from California Safe Cosmetics Program, which is part of the state’s Department of Public Health.

And so demand for clean beauty products keeps mounting. Within the \$19 billion “prestige beauty” market, skin-care labels that positioned themselves as natural grew 14 percent year-over-year in 2019, while clean brands jumped 39 percent, said Larissa Jensen, beauty analyst at the NPD Group, a market research firm. Today, the clean skin-care category makes up 13 percent of high-end skin-care sales, more than double the size from four years earlier.

First came small indie brands — think Tatcha, Drunk Elephant and Indie Lee — that developed a loyal following but individually could not make a dent in the overall cosmetics market, Jensen said. “These brands proliferated, and now they’re a force,” she said. “Collectively, they’re eroding the dollar share of legacy prestige brands.”

Initially, their messaging centered on terms such as nontoxic, pure, safe or safer before coalescing around the clean label, said Nicole Acevedo, an environmental health scientist who works with clean cosmetic brands and retailers. The “magic of the Internet” makes it tough to track exactly when the marketing switch occurred, Acevedo said.

But once the number of brands reached a tipping point, clean-only beauty retailers such as Follain, Credo and the Detox Market emerged to showcase them. Beautycounter broke into the market with its own line, sold primarily by independent consultants. Each retailer pledged not to sell any products that include ingredients on their no-no lists.

“These [clean-only] retailers upped the ante in terms of clean,” said Elizabeth Kopelman, owner of Frisson Beauty, an international beauty strategy consultancy. “They made it so nobody could hide behind clean and natural anymore without being specific about what it was.”

Eager to snatch a share of this increasingly lucrative market, big-name players followed suit. Within the past two years, Sephora and Target created icons to distinguish their “clean” products, based on their own lists of forbidden ingredients. Walmart and Amazon debuted their clean skin-care lines last year. And in January, Revlon unveiled a clean skin primer, its first product to meet EWG’s standards. Other industry behemoths snapped up buzzy brands. Last year, Shiseido announced it would acquire Drunk Elephant for \$845 million, and Unilever, which now owns Ren, said it would buy Tatcha for a reported \$500 million.

AD

With so many ingredient manufacturers and raw material suppliers involved and with advances in green chemistry, there are now clean formulas and textures that rival traditional brands, said Tara Foley, Follain's founder. "That's another reason people are switching."

Skeptics say clean beauty is nothing more than a marketing ploy that unnecessarily demonizes a host of safe and effective chemicals. But the reality is that "these days, if your products or your ingredients are not perceived as clean and safe, it will be harder and harder to get traction," said Richard Gersten, a partner at Tengram Capital Partners, a private equity firm in New York that invests in luxury beauty brands. "Clean has become the price of admission."

But it still lacks a regulatory definition. Legislation winding its way through Congress would beef up the FDA's oversight of the \$60 billion cosmetics industry for the first time in more than 80 years and require the agency to evaluate at least five ingredients of concern each year, which might clear up some confusion about safety claims.

AD

For now, it's difficult for consumers to evaluate what they're getting. Credo's "dirty list" (with 2,700 ingredients) does not neatly overlap with the lists maintained by Beautycounter, Follain and others. Some products with the "Clean at Sephora" icon get mediocre ratings on EWG's Skin Deep database or the Think Dirty app, both of which churn out hazard scores for cosmetics. And some brands, such as Tatcha and Drunk Elephant, have the Sephora's clean seal but contain ingredients that are restricted on Credo's and Follain's lists.

"There's a lot of disagreements in this space, even among ingredient experts," said Cindy Deily, Sephora's vice president of skin-care merchandising, adding that the Sephora program is not static and continues to evolve.

On the sidelines, some scientists are saying enough already. There's a disconnect between

the information widely circulated by clean beauty enthusiasts and scientific facts, said Curtis Klaassen, a toxicologist and a member of the [Cosmetic Ingredient Review](#), an industry-funded committee of independent scientists set up in 1976 with FDA support.

AD

When assessing the safety of a chemical, it's important to consider the dose, Klaassen said. Although some chemicals can be dangerous in very high concentrations, the low doses found in cosmetics do no harm — in the same way that hurricane winds can kill, but a breeze will not, he said. Furthermore, there's no scientific evidence to support claims that the cumulative effect of exposure to many chemicals daily can be toxic.

“The margin of safety is so high that even using five or six products with the same chemicals daily is not going to cause a problem,” Klaassen said. “The margin of safety is usually 100, meaning that to get any effect whatsoever, a person would have to use more than 100 times the amount that an average person uses.”

In an [editorial](#) for JAMA Dermatology, Courtney Blair Rubin and Bruce Brod of the University of Pennsylvania wrote that “clean beauty evangelists” seem to be haphazardly

denouncing ingredients to lure shoppers. Their embrace of botanicals and their intolerance of parabens and other preservatives has been associated “with a new epidemic of contact dermatitis,” an itchy and potentially debilitating skin rash that can lead to massive medical bills, time away from work and a diminished quality of life, they wrote.

AD

According to Brod, the industry began shunning all parabens after the E.U. banned five of them, none of which were commonly used in cosmetics. The remainder were deemed safe by U.S. and E.U. regulators. But because of consumer backlash, he said, the industry turned to alternatives, such as methylisothiazolinone, a synthetic the brands consider safer, which have led to severe allergic reactions.

That chemical is still in use, “but the industry is starting to pull back,” said Brod, a clinical professor of dermatology at the university’s medical school. “Surprise, surprise: They’re switching back to parabens.”

The Personal Care Products Council, the industry’s trade association, contends that the oft-cited comparison between U.S. and E.U. regulatory standards does not mean much, because 80 percent of the chemicals on the E.U.’s forbidden list have not been used in

cosmetics and never would be, according to Jay Ansell, a chemist and toxicologist who serves as vice president of the organization's cosmetics program.

AD

Still, this industry is “a consumer-facing business,” as Ansell puts it. “So, in the vein of consumer choice, different manufacturers have drawn different lines as to what they will and won't use.”

And consumers must do their own due diligence to make sense of it.

Dina ElBoghdady

Dina ElBoghdady worked for The Washington Post's financial desk. ElBoghdady left The Post in August 2015.

