



Sephora Kids: What Is at Stake in Algorithm-Powered Consumption?

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Background

Perhaps you have heard about “Sephora kids.” In recent years, much concern about them has been raised on social media and in the news. Let’s interrogate this phenomenon and unpack important questions in targeted marketing on digital devices that change consumer’s behavior.

The Beauty Industry

The global cosmetics market is valued at almost 400 billion USD in 2024, and it is projected to double in value by 2032. The rise of social media and targeted advertising technologies greatly benefitted this industry, which has less stringent regulations than food items or medications. As of 2025, the Ulta retailer holds the largest market share in the USA (almost 30 percent), followed by French-owned Sephora (market share of 13 percent), which operates in many countries (Hess, 2022). These two companies are major competitors, although they do each have unique features. For example, Ulta sells a variety of brands ranging from “drugstore” to “luxury”. Sephora is more selective, selling mid-range to high end products. Both retailers have been in the market for decades, and pioneered the specialty beauty store that combines different brands under one roof and also provides beauty services. Prior to that, department stores would have a beauty counter, or you had to visit a particular brand’s store to buy a product you need. Both retailers have been keeping up with the times and have been investing heavily into digital shopping and marketing technologies.

But the beauty industry is not only a big sector of the consumer economy, it also has a cultural dimension that is worth exploring. People have been applying makeup and undergoing beauty procedures from the early days of human civilization. Beauty standards change with time in an ever evolving cultural landscape. As a cultural statement, widespread wearing of lipstick signified women's liberation and attainment of financial independence during the war periods. Many people who choose to wear makeup today also report increased confidence and outlet for creative expression. The "Self-care" culture that took off during the pandemic starting in 2020 has brought attention to important issues such as prioritizing one's mental and physical health. However, as many feminist scholars point out, commercialization of beauty, especially on a contemporary scale, is something that should be examined more critically (Daphne B., 2021). Some beauty standards in modern societies are linked to strict gender norms, enforce and perpetuate them. They also intentionally uphold an unattainable appearance as an ideal to chase. Much of that happens in the name of profit and involves aggressive marketing through social media and sponsored influencers. And even though recent advertising strategies emphasize inclusivity and diversity in the world of beauty, it is still assumed and implied that some form of augmentation is needed to look and *feel* good. The effect of social media on teenage girls' mental and physical health is well studied and the results are not encouraging (Surgeon General, 2023). However, it is left up to individuals and their parents to decide how much exposure one wants to have.

1. On average, how much do you spend on hygiene, skin care and makeup monthly?
2. Are you following beauty creators on social media? Were you influenced in buying products through these channels?
3. What influences beauty standards? How do historical and social events, like colonialism, war or economic growth play a part in it?
4. Are you familiar with a branch of philosophy called aesthetics? What does it study?
5. What is beauty for you?

Targeted advertising technologies

Much of recent growth in beauty sales is driven by targeted advertising (Marin-Lopez, 2025). Algorithms developed by tech firms track and suggest products for consumption. It is interesting that these algorithms effectively function as social scientists who peruse through massive amounts of data and try to find patterns, such as the discussion on generations in the section

below. But these models are even more nuanced; they sort users by many more parameters, making these models more accurate (Harrell, 2019). Technology has gotten more sophisticated over time and is currently able to predict and manipulate users' emotions and needs. Those invasive strategies strip individuals of free choice, a cornerstone of liberal thinking, in a way that raises a fundamental question about markets and how we approach them.

1. Do you usually shop online or in person?
2. Do you usually opt out of targeting cookies when you visit a new website?
3. Have you ever purchased something from the "suggested for you" page?
4. The free market model assumes that the consumer makes an independent and self-interested decision to buy. Do you think it is still true when we are influenced in buying something? Is an individual's integrity compromised in this case?
5. Have you experienced impulse buying? How do you resist it?
6. What is the role of emotions in shopping?

Generation Alpha

In a toolkit of social science, there are different concepts that try to capture different groups within society. For example, concept as class, a foundational notion in sociology tries to analyze society as a collection of different socio-economic groups or classes. German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) pioneered that vision. Another way to see emerging patterns in society is to look at stratification by gender, race, age, occupation, income, marital status, etc. These may serve as "markers" of certain trends. For example, demographers and marketers noticed some differences in values, attitudes, life milestones and consumer behavior based on a person's birth date. Here are the approximate stratifications based on US populations: Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials/Gen Y (1981-1996), Gen Z (1997-2010) and Alpha (2011-2025). The accuracy of these periods and such divisions can be argued, but many agree that the framing captures the essence of these cohorts. It is worth noting that it is very specific to the historical and economic processes in the USA and the world. Other countries with a different pattern of development may not follow this nomenclature.

We are particularly interested in Generation Alpha for this case study. Even though they are called "Sephora kids", Generation Alpha shops in various beauty stores, online and in physical locations. On one hand, there is nothing strange about that. Companies like Claire's have

traditionally sold some beauty products to tweens (9-12 y.o.) and to early teenagers (13-14 y.o.). So called “kids’ makeup” fills shelves of your local Walmart and Target, even in the toys’ section, and is marketed for kids starting as early as 4 years old. So, what is so unusual about Sephora kids? The primary reason is that they might not fully understand the dangers of harsh ingredients in skincare and makeup products. Those dangers are still true for adult users, however, the assumption is that adults are capable of due diligence and accept the risk. It is trickier with kids, who still can’t make legal decisions of their own. Another argument is that the early adolescent body is still growing and that chemicals in beauty products may negatively impact it. Physical effects commentators also mention psychological and cultural consequences of this behavior. Some note that excessive skincare that is promoted to kids online signals and encourages some form of neurosis that should be monitored from a mental health viewpoint. A change in behavior early in life may stay with a person for years—habits you develop as a kid are often still with you. Cultural critics argue that through excessive attention to beauty procedures, kids inadvertently accept and comply with existing gender norms. They also say that the beauty culture so obsessed with appearance makes kids superficial. Others point out good effects of these trends, such as attention to hygiene and self-care. Parents also play an important role in this trend, because they are the primary sponsors of these beauty hauls. And although the public discussion on parents’ involvement in their childrens’ embodiment has not been as heated as in the case of transgender youth, the questions that are raised are similar. *What authority do parents have over children? Where are the boundaries? Who knows better what a child needs? Can a child make a truly informed consent? Does the public have a right to interfere in a parent-child relationship? To what extent?*

Processing Questions

1. To which generation do you belong?
2. Does the general description match you and your values?
3. How to practice informed consumption? How information on benefits and dangers of certain technologies, products should be disseminated?
4. Do you think it is a consumer’s responsibility to research risks associated with a product?
5. What are the responsibilities of manufacturers?
6. Have you ever consulted consumer reports, reviews before buying a product?

7. Do you know any consumer protection laws or regulations? Do you consult consumer information, such as return windows, refund policies before buying?

Regulation

As advertising technologies get more invasive, manipulating our thoughts and needs, and making purchases impulsive and possible at the tip of our fingers, how can we ensure that overconsumption and harms associated with it are mitigated? Recent reports indicate rising cancer rates among young Americans. How can we prevent Sephora kids from becoming one of them? The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is a federal agency that regulates cosmetic products. In 2022, they updated their regulation of these items through the Modernization of Cosmetics Regulation Act (MoCRA) that expanded their authority. Now, firms are required to register their facilities, provide access to safety information, and report adverse effects. The FDA has also secured recall authority. Time will show the effectiveness of these regulations, but as of now, consumers are mostly responsible for regulating their consumption. Hopefully, raising media literacy and consumer safety information may help us in making better choices. As of February 2025, the state of California passed a bill that will ban the sale of anti-aging products to individuals under 18 years of age (NYT, 2025).

1. Do you think federal regulation is the only solution?
2. What are other ways to address the “Sephora kids” issue?
3. When do you think a “legal age” for shopping beauty products is? Should it be based on science, public opinion or something else?
4. How does information on recalls reach you? Have you ever returned a product because it was recalled?

General Questions

1. What do you think about “Sephora kids”?
2. How many self-care, hygiene, makeup products do you use daily?
3. How many of them were you “influenced” in buying?
4. Do you check their ingredients?
5. How do you check the safety of products?
6. What are some sources and websites on this topic? Do you think they report accurately and impartially, or do they have a vested interest?

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