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Viewing the COVID-19 Resilient Skincare Market through a Sociohistorical Lens: The Patterning of Conspicuous Consumption Mediated by Marketing

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**Viewing the COVID-19 Resilient Skincare Market
through a Sociohistorical Lens:
The Patterning of Conspicuous Consumption Mediated by Marketing**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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I also want to acknowledge the unprecedented situation that we are all in together – the global pandemic has brought both disruptions and mind-boggling thoughts to individual life. It is the pandemic that has lured me to ponder over discourses that were previously taken for granted, such as the conventional boundary between concepts of “the public” and “the private” and the marketing-mediated connection between consumers and products.

This project is a fruition of my personal experience as an avid online shopper of beauty products prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. I couldn't help but ruminate over the sociological ramifications that come with my own regular consumption of skincare products – what it means to be a female consumer absorbing pre-selected yet limited digital information full of racial, class, and gendered insinuations and constantly practicing beauty routines without further doubts of the system of values that are inscribed in the consumption of beauty products.

I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

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Introduction

As the pandemic brought unrivaled disruptions to the global supply chain, it has occurred to the risk management experts once more that the equilibrium of economy can barely be retrieved by the theoretical maneuvering of supply and demand curves. According to survey data compiled by major financial agents, such as J.P. Morgan and McKinsey, the global beauty industry stands out as an extremely resilient market in comparison to other severely interrupted non-essential products markets. And the Chinese skincare market further distinguishes itself with an inelastic consumer demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. But what is sustaining the resiliency of beauty markets as well as the inelasticity of consumer demands for beauty products in China? The survey data, despite exposing the limitations of the mainstream economic framework that narrowly focuses on utilizing supply and demand detached from a sociological context to analyze economic issues, fails to explain the underlying bond between shifting consumer preferences, consumption patterns, and innovative business responses to the pandemic. The symbolic meanings embodied in the consumption of skincare products are neglected as mainstream economics assumes the consumption of goods is largely dependent upon the exercise of free individual daily choices. In other words, the desire-inducing marketing symbols, which are central to consumer culture, as well as the perpetuation and reproduction of the consumption patterns are simply rationalized as the prerequisites for individual consumer choices without external influences.¹

In order to thoroughly analyze the volatile marketing trends and consumer preferences for high-end skincare products, promoted as a scientific modern good and generally associated with

¹ Douglas B. Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (June 2002).

the ever-evolving technologies, economists should not limit their sights to the surface of big data but dive deeply into the historical roots in which these products were invented, promoted, and identified with corresponding social symbols. Aside from the customary tendency of associating technologies with modernity which distracts public attention away from ruminating over the historical origins of the beauty products, the universal popularity of skincare products naturalized in the trend of globalization conceals the intrinsic politics of the beauty economy. As a result, contemporary thinkers rarely draw the connection between modern beauty products and the traditional practices of aesthetic standards.

Beauty products, alongside the aesthetic standards they diffuse, are never examined within the setting of colonization. The lucrative products and the promising advertisements drag both producers and consumers into the abyss of a beauty industry that echoes the colonial race, gender, and class ideologies, hence barely any questions have been raised in regard to the origination of those skin-lightening products. In essence, the social implications beyond the superficial economic consumption, from the incubation and perpetuation of the consumption of skincare products to the universality and emulation of such a behavior, was never brought up, not to mention questioned. Contemporary consumption of beauty technologies and products is reduced to its superficial boisterous flamboyancy which inexorably sustains the consumption patterns that inherit beauty standards reflecting class, gender, and race creed. Consequently, the beauty industry emerges as the arena where individuals consistently practice and competitively perform conspicuous consumptions.

Specifically, an exceptional popularity of whitening skincare products has emerged in East Asia in disguise of globalization and modernization which expediently justifies East Asian consumers' preferences for whitening skincare products as almost inevitable and indubitable.

However, an oversimplification of the schemes behind the beauty economy is decontextualizing the skincare market from the intricate economic, social, and cultural environment which shapes and, is shaped by, the development of preferences. Namely, mainstream economic theories typically assume that preferences are exogenous and stable, as Friedman claims, ‘economists should take them as given and analyze the implications for economic behaviors.’² Clearly, the orthodox economic framework is isolated from the social context in which, ironically, economics is immersed, and economic activities are constantly molded by social forces such as habit formation, social norms, and cultural values. In orthodox economics, the overall preferences for skincare products are merely an accumulation of individual preferences at micro levels; that is, individual preferences are deemed as miniatures of the aggregate homogenous consumer preference, stimulating a vibrant beauty economy adjusting to the rising individual consumer demands.

Fundamentally, orthodox economists’ analysis of consumer preferences is rooted in a socially disembodied framework in which social forces are utterly overlooked. Rather than a passive conformity to individual preferences, the economic, social, and cultural aspects of individual life are actively and endogenously shaping individual preferences. In a word, the inherent paradox in orthodox economics is that it thoroughly misses the mutually constitutive dynamics between individual preferences and social forces: to argue that individual preferences are exogenously formed is no different than to contend that individuals are capable of avoiding any social influences. The harsh reality that individuals are subjected to intangible social forces and common market mechanisms (i.e. prices and advertisement) is no exception. But how are socially informed consumer preferences generated in relation to these skincare products? In

² Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

other words, how are skincare products introduced, presented, and marketed in the social context in which consumer preferences are nurtured?

In this project, I will employ the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) framework to explore the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistorical frame of globalization and market capitalism of the beauty industry. Through uncovering the interrelation between the market trends, consumer preferences, and marketing strategies within both the colonial and the COVID-19 context, I will illustrate how consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and how the relationship between meaningful ways of life (i.e. leisure and consumption) and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend are mediated through marketing. With the endogenous preferences framework and a sociohistorical lens, this project unfolds the phenomenon of habitual consumption of skincare products and the corresponding emulation facilitated by marketers.

In particular, I will decipher the distinctively resilient Chinese skincare market, juxtaposing the empirical illustration of marketing materials and channels in the 19th century with the statistical and qualitative proof of technology-intensive marketing strategies in COVID-19 conditions. China's case is unique as its prosperity reveals the story of how marketers take advantage of the changes in social conditions to generate business opportunities for skincare products. Through situating the Chinese skincare market in the colonial context, I aim to demonstrate how marketers successfully created brand strategies grounded in Chinese traditions and further repositioned skincare products in the hierarchical colonial skin-color framework. In other words, China's story points to a larger history of how imperialism was formed to open the Chinese story and how globalization was localized within the distinctive Chinese cultural

framework. Similarly, the marketing strategy of reorient products toward local culture and social trends guarantees a robust Chinese skincare market in the pandemic setting.

An inquiry into the Chinese skincare market allows us to ponder over how face is a vital element that not only indicates but also shapes cultural identity. Especially given the exclusive significance of face in Chinese culture, face is maneuvered as a crucial element to develop a vibrant Chinese consumer culture, revolving around luxurious skincare products and beauty services, that drastically contrasts with the thrifty lifestyle during the Mao period. Moreover, the development trajectory of Chinese skincare market also sheds light on a broader transnational issue of female identity. It is true that contemporary consumer culture creates a social sphere where women emerge as active modern girls that consume status goods and craft a modern desirable identity, yet the liberation of women is contingent on their face and desirability. From the post-Meiji Japanese national project of constructing a gendered image of “good wife, wise mother” to the flourishing Chinese post-Mao e-commerce culture, the liberation of women is fundamentally a national project of constructing modernity at the expense of female identities inscribed on their bodies and faces. However, the datapoints themselves neither plead for the cultural factors that fuel the consistent Chinese consumer demand for skincare products nor question the role that marketing agents play in shaping individual tastes and desires. Instead, datapoints on their own only provoke suspicion and contradictions to the earlier Chinese tradition of frugality and gender roles. Therefore, in accordance with COVID-19 consumer survey data, this project probes the elusive facets that stimulate and sustain the inelastic demand for skincare products in China – the marketers behind the flourishing beauty market.

With the comparative analysis, I will explore how social interactions replicating the discourses of race, gender, and class during the European imperialist period set the stage for the

breeding of Chinese racial consciousness, which is at the root of preferences for whitening skincare products. In a nutshell, I will elaborate on how traditional marketing strategies were employed by the western capitalists to resonate Chinese traditions so as to bridle consumer preferences for skincare products. Moreover, beyond the analysis of how preferences for whitening skincare products were formed in China as well as in East Asia, I attempt to use a dynamic and multilateral approach to demonstrate the resonance between contemporary marketing schemes in light of COVID-19 and the ones in the historical context, yet indicate a variation in the intensity and usage of technology in the universal marketing tactic. More importantly, this project aims to incorporate global, cultural, and historical perspectives into the lens of examining economic phenomena, drawing readers' attention to the active role that marketers play in mediating the dynamic relationship between consumers and products so as to assess how the patterning of individual consumption preferences is persistently sustained by marketing strategies. In other words, I will demonstrate how marketers connect consumers to skincare products through reference to the system of social values and traditions that are inscribed in the historical context – the color hierarchy in the colonial period and the reviving emphasis on health and hygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic. Last but not least, I advocate a more socially embedded framework for economic analysis, which surpasses the superficiality of statistics and endows economics with more comprehensive social meanings. Through expounding the momentum between individual consumers' preferences and cultural forces, I will underline the interplay, between consumer preferences and the habitus that products resonate with, regulated by marketers.

Chapter One concerns the coconstitutive, coproductive ways in which consumers forge a self-image with marketer-curated materials. It touches on the gradually cultivated marketplace

cultures, such as the theory of conspicuous consumption and the concept of emulation, and establishes a social magnifier through which economic analyses of the consumption of skincare products should be viewed. Through the lens of innovation theory, it further acknowledges the active role of marketers in forming the connection between consumers and products. The consumption of whitening skincare products should never be simply interpreted as an economic activity, but a noteworthy example of conspicuous consumption that preserves designated values and social meanings through incessant beauty practices. With references to both Veblen and Bourdieu, I will elucidate how desires to consume whitening skincare products by no means derive from an exogenous preference at individual level yet are driven by an aspiration for higher social status in relations to others. Simply put, East Asian female consumption of whitening skincare products cannot be thoroughly understood without taking the class and racial parameters into consideration. With Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital, I demonstrate the paradox, embedded in the consumption of whitening skincare products and the corresponding emulation by East Asian female consumers, between "remaining natural" and "surpassing nature." Beneath the superficial monotonous activity of consuming whitening skincare products, East Asian female consumers are embarking on an endless journey of emulation, with a western aesthetic benchmark in mind, accumulating certain limited cultural capital at a physical cost. Yet little do they know that emulation will never grant them full access to the social and racial status they aspire. Finally, based on Schumpeter's innovation theory, I will point out the critical role marketers play in relating products to local traditions and engaging consumers with a habitus of consuming skincare products.

Chapter Two extends from the theoretical social framework established in Chapter One and appends a historical perspective to illustrate how freshly injected marketing concepts lunge

precisely at the preexisting status paradigm and reinforce the colonial racial hierarchy. In this way, it further unpacks the sociohistoric patterning of the consumption of whitening skincare products by East Asian female consumers. With a comparative analysis of China and Japan, it pinpoints how European imperialism at the turn of 20th century influenced ideologies of race, aesthetics around skin color, and identity in East Asia. These new social discourses, stretching from a renewed racial consciousness to an altered beauty standard, induced state officials to intervene in individual preferences indirectly in the name of beauty brands, diffusing discursive power and promoting gendered national projects. Incipient marketing remarks in the trend of modernity, such as hygiene, technology, health, and beauty routine, were perfectly incorporated in the whitening skincare products. I will set out how whitening skincare products were introduced and accepted into East Asia under two major influences: political purposes among intellectuals and Western marketing strategies. Traditionally, East Asian consumers, remarkably the Chinese, have an almost perfectly inelastic demand as they only believe in long-lasting brands and adopt their older generation's preferences. It is challenging to market an indie brand or product in China as it is difficult to trap the older generation into embracing a novel and unfamiliar concept. However, Chapter Two manifests how Western marketers transformed the elasticity of East Asian consumer demand in the context of European imperialism. Western marketers took advantage of the traditional Chinese belief in proprietary medicine alongside a Western promotion of scientific hygiene and modernity, linking the habitual consumption of skincare products to a scientific basis and encouraging women to participate in the practice of modernity.

Chapter Three concentrates on distinguishing the resilient Chinese consumer demands for skincare products in the turbulent COVID-19 global markets so as to denote the efficacious

marketing strategies that promptly pivot skincare products toward the currents of wellness, health, and hygiene which have a historical origin and thus contribute to upholding the consumption patterns of skincare products despite of a crisis. More importantly, the Chinese example discloses the influence of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies adjourning advanced technologies and e-commerce platforms on shifting consumer preferences and behaviors. On the one hand, various media enable unrivaled channels for the dissemination and perpetuation of conspicuous consumption as well as assorted modalities of image-making. On the other hand, revolutionary technologies (e.g. AI, ER) have been incorporated into beauty brands to construct a digital consumer adventure no different from the in-store experience. As a result, the marketer-curated concepts of wellness and hygiene and the prime technologies altogether assist beauty brands in transitioning into an e-commerce format and surviving the pandemic.

Despite examining different historical moments, Chapter Two and Chapter Three amount to a comparative analysis on the marketing-oriented beauty economy, unpacking its overarching social impacts and inherent cultural meanings. These two chapters juxtapose the Chinese skincare market in the imperial and the pandemic contexts, suggesting the traditional racial, class, and aesthetic frameworks and marketing tactics in East Asia pave a handy way for the marketers to steer consumer preferences in favor of a digital beauty experience during a global crisis later on. At its core, the conspicuous consumption of skincare products delivers an illusionary solution for female consumers to fulfill their racial and class ideals. To some extent, it renders women as self-contradictory agents who are actively crafting their own identity by means of beauty practices contingent on gendered expectations.³ Moreover, both chapters present ways in which western marketers promote the concept of self-image making: the incubation, circulation, and

³ Perry Johansson, "Selling the 'ModernWoman': Consumer Culture and Chinese Gender Politics," in *Images of the "Modern Woman" in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings*, by Shoma Munshi (n.p., 2001), 120.

perpetuation of beauty-related ideas are gradually shifting from physical sites and formats, like beauty salons, department stores, magazines, and posters, to intangible cyber space.

All three chapters invite us to reconsider the relationship between the consumption of skincare products by female consumers and standard economic frameworks. A globalized female consumer preference for skincare products, specifically the ones with whitening functions, roots in the intersection of race, gender, and class ideologies. In contrast to what neoclassical economists assume, that consumer preferences are fixed, stable, and generated at the individual level, the inelastic demand for skincare products during a global crisis conveys that consumer preferences for non-essential skincare products are sustained by external social and historical factors under the deliberate attempt made by strategic market players.

The Chinese story not only underscores the active role marketers play in shaping and preserving consumer response to the market, but also reminds us of the social values invested in consumer products that drive tenable individual desire for conspicuous consumption. More importantly, the outstanding Chinese COVID-19 survey data evokes the necessity for adopting an interdisciplinary lens to scrutinize the complicated social and momentous conditions under which inelastic demands and consumer preferences are formed, reinforced, and altered. In a word, the subject of Economics should incorporate social theories and dive deeply into the underlying political and cultural meanings in the social framework so as to thoroughly analyze contemporary economic phenomena with a historical echo.

Chapter One

Situating Skincare Consumption in a Sociohistorical Framework

I. The Framework of Conspicuous Consumption and Emulation

The question I ask myself, first and foremost, so as to analyze the phenomenon of East Asian consumers' preference for whitening skincare products is how much relative power do consumers really have, comparing to beauty businesses, in each stage of their interaction with these products (i.e. the awareness, consideration, evaluation, and purchase phases). With this being said, economic analysis that simply suggests East Asian consumers are misled to blindly purchase whitening skincare products under the influence of western aesthetics is to unconditionally ignore the existing consumer sovereignty that East Asian consumer inherit from customs. Inversely, arguments claim that producers purport to merely satisfy the emergent consumer demand is at the expense of eradicating the overarching sociological context in which various racial, gender, and class ideologies play into shaping individual consumption behaviors. Therefore, in this chapter, I will begin tackling with the psychology and the inherent social meanings attached to certain consumption behaviors that drive beauty consumption routines in different social classes. Besides the values signified in the consumption of skincare products, I will further interpret the emulation of beauty consumption demeanor which contributes to forging a universal inelastic and consistent female consumer demand for skincare products. These analyses deriving from the framework of conspicuous consumption naturally reflect the intricate dynamics between individual consumption preferences and sociological flows and

incrementally lead us to the critique of the mainstream economic framework of exogenous preferences.

Scholars, such as Veblen, believe that human beings possess an intrinsic desire for conspicuous consumption of luxury goods which is distinguishable from the consumption of other commodities. In Veblen's work *the Theory of the Leisure Class*, he dives into the origin of individual desires and behaviors of possession, contending that the impulse of emulation rooted deeply in ownership multiplies themselves so as to further reinforce the development of institutions which it has given risen and solidify those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches.⁴ Veblen's analysis of human greed for possession and desire for emulation is grounded in a mutually constitutive relationship between different classes. In other words, he galvanizes the public to chew over the nurturing feature of Capitalism – the tendency to incubate individual desires for conspicuous consumption and emulation across social classes. In particular, Veblen dwells on the concept of “institutions,” which refers to ingrained social patterns, and argues that the institutions, though formed out of individual instincts, reinforce and reshape individual desires for possession and emulation. That being said, the privileged groups powered by the existing institutions further take advantage of the status quo, constantly presenting innovative performative activities which publicize and thus solidify their sovereignty and superiority. The pre-existing institutions (i.e. social norms) empower the privileged to preserve their status through consuming symbolic goods. At the same time, the mimicking behavior of the less privileged further solidify the status of the privileged. This existential notion of the intrinsic motive of the privileged – to relentlessly perform conspicuous consumption in public so as to declare a social space and thus preserve the existing privileges attached to their

⁴ Thorstein Veblen and Stuart Chase, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. (New York, New York: Modern library, 1934), 25.

performative consumption and incite the according emulation – is explicitly revealed in Veblen’s argument. In a word, two remarkable social multiplier effects are produced in the conspicuous consumption of status goods, such as whitening skincare products: the repetition and publicity construct social recognition for the privileged conspicuous consumption of whitening skincare products; at the same time, universal awareness of the symbolic meanings (i.e. the superior social status) associated with certain consumption behaviors stimulates emulation and bolsters the superiority of the privileged in return.

Moreover, Veblen elaborates on the psychology behind the obsession with possessing a novel and rare item, such as wealth and luxury. The possession of luxury, embedded with socially recognized values, marks individual social status as it serves as an invidious distinction which confers honor within a community. In his own words, Veblen epitomizes the fundamental pride that upholds the desire for luxury:

The initial phase of ownership, the phase of acquisition by naive seizure and conversion, begins to pass into the subsequent stage of an incipient organization of industry on the basis of private property; the horde develops into a more or less self-sufficing industrial community; possessions then come to be valued not so much as evidence of successful foray, but rather as evidence of the prepotency of the possessor of these goods over other individuals within the community.

Therefore, the fixation with novel items, which are not neutral yet invested with social values, can be seen as individual assertion of a distinctive status in the public space. In essence, following Veblen’s thread of thinking, the desire to not only possess but also consume beauty products is highly symbolic: the sensible ability to possess and consume whitening skincare products manifests a unique presence among the mass and thus highlights a sense of particularity and superiority. Initially, it is not the quality of distinction but the existence of a difference that maintains the exclusive privilege of the upper class. Progressively, the quantity of possessions in comparison to others marks individual unique status on the social spectrum. And as the

possession of skincare products no longer remains exclusive, the type of possessions begins to matter as it significantly differentiates certain consumer groups from the rest. In a nutshell, Veblen provides us with a socially embedded lens to view the beauty economy in East Asia, taking the tensions between different social and racial groups into account.

II. Whitening Skincare Products as Colonial Symbolic Goods

Initially, it was only the wealthy white women in the West, ranging from the ones in the U.S. to those in the Europe as well as European colonies, who started practicing the usage of whitening skincare products on a daily basis. Specifically, throughout the 19th century, pale and light skin was glorified as the ideal beauty among the Anglo-American women in the U.S. They used white powders and bleaching creams to achieve and maintain the “appropriate white look.” As a result, the meaning of “whiteness” was reshaped under the chemical and social effects of these whitening skincare products. On the one hand, a fair complexion symbolized their superiority in a globally hierarchical social structure and moral order that they deliberately constructed. On the other hand, their skincare routine sets their physical appearances as the ideal aesthetic standard and their habit as the mere path toward the achievement of that proper look, marginalizing the rest of individuals as “the others.” Wealthy white women who are already at a privileged spotlight possess and consume whitening products to manifest their social status and distinguish themselves from the non-white. Accordingly, those who are regarded as a less privileged group take the possession of whitening products as the mere criterion of societal recognition and start imitating.

One extraordinary feature of conspicuous consumption is reflected on the element of waste: not only a waste of time and effort but also a waste of goods is extremely highlighted. According to Classical Political Economists, abstention from labor is the conventional evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social.⁵ Skincare products subtly link the upper class as well as their imitators to both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. The routine of applying skincare products is naturalized as a ritual under the regular practice among different classes. In this way, the need for a vibrant beauty industry beyond just skincare products is justified: from beauty technological devices to beauty salons, all these byproducts of skincare lead female consumers to embark on an endless journey of beauty practices. Besides the distance from labor, the consumption of skincare products is hinging on the non-productive consumption of time, an ultimate expression of the privileged status. In essence, the consumption of skincare products is a symbolic performance of beauty and leisure on the one hand and of subservience to a belief in beauty, hygiene, and gender roles on the other. The esteem accorded to demeanors determines the intrinsic worth of the consumption of high-end skincare products. Overall, the consumption, possession, and application of skincare products signifies the “presentable” portion of a woman: the more performative this portion of conspicuous consumption is, the more reputable and desirable she is. And all the vicarious leisure and esteem is only acquired through rendering women in an endless practice of gender norms and beauty standards. Indeed, the conspicuous consumption of luxurious skincare products by prestigious women is centered on a self-appointed authority to distant themselves from the rest of an imagined social and racial hierarchy featured by a distinctive skin condition and an extravagant lifestyle.

⁵ Ibid, 41.

III. The Prerequisite Cultural Capital for Cultivating Habitus

Sarcastically, once the public starts to recognize the social power reflected by the possession and consumption of these exorbitant skincare products and begins emulating, an intrinsic paradox embedded in the white-oriented aesthetics is revealed. For those women who are not born with a fair skin tone, in order to seem “natural” – which means natural fair – they have to evade “nature.” This inherent oxymoron in the consumption of whitening skincare products posits “the others” in a dilemma. For the lower-class and other racial groups, emulation provides them with an illusionary solution to acquire the desirable social status signified by the possession and consumption of whitening skincare products so as to overcome the gap. However, the distinctions will hardly be eliminated as they will never seem as natural as the ones with an innate fair complexion. Their hustle of emulation will by no means seem effortless to the public since the accumulation of cultural capital which one needs for performing conspicuous consumption, including applying whitening products and visiting the beauty salons like an elegant socialite, is contingent on their habitus. The habitus comprises socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions through which individuals perceive and react to the social world around them. Individuals with similar backgrounds, backgrounds (such as social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education and profession) tend to share common dispositions. As the habitus represents the way group culture and personal history shape the body and the mind; as a result, it shapes present social actions of an individual.⁶

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is featured by two significant factors: one is the specific context where one is socialized: one’s individual experience and opportunities constitutes one’s

⁶ Omar Lizardo, "The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu's Habitus," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 34, no. 4 (December 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.2004.00255.x>.

behavior (耳濡目染); the other is the amount of time invested in forming and practicing the habitus, which is sometimes acquired through imitation.⁷ Different from Veblen who believes that the inborn desire for status and emulation drives conspicuous consumption, Bourdieu argues that tastes revealed by conspicuous consumptions are not intrinsic but cultivated and refined over time. To Veblen, the concept of time does not seem significant in the discourse of conspicuous consumption. On the contrary, Bourdieu contends that the cultivated disposition of taste tends to produce an illusion of spontaneity and readiness by presenting itself in the guise of an innate disposition and an easy pick-up for the emulators. According to Bourdieu, the habitus consists of both the *hexis* (the tendency to hold and use one's body in a certain way, such as posture and accent) and more abstract mental habits, schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, feeling, as well as action.⁸ These schemes are not mere habits as they allow individuals to adjust to new social situations without calculated deliberation, based on their collective and socially shape gut feelings and intuitions. These attitudes, mannerisms, tastes, moral intuitions and habits structure individual lifestyles; thus, the reproduction of the social structure results from the habitus of individuals.⁹

On the one hand, the social context in which wealthy upper-class white women grew up grants them with an easy access to the practice of the conspicuous consumption of whitening skincare products given their daily extravagance of fashion, fragrance, and high culture. The cultural capital which the privileged are used to in their daily luxurious lifestyle can be easily transferred and reinvested in the practice of the conspicuous consumption of whitening products (熟能生巧). Despite preferences are not intrinsic, the upper-class self-positioned themselves as

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, reprint. ed., trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, nachdr. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

the role models as their acquaintance with the conspicuous consumption, enabled by the habitus, makes them seem elegant and effortless in engaging with the beauty products. On the other hand, the lag in time is ignored by the emulators who are overwhelmed by the zeal for keeping up with the privileged. Two particular ideas attached to this time lag are underestimated. One is the investment of time and attention in forming the habitus, which is completely ignored by Veblen, reinforces the element of “waste” in conspicuous consumption. In order to participate in the possession, consumption, and application of skincare products, one has to not only take the time from other productive or lucrative social activities but also take the time to learn the whole process before it incorporates as part of the routine. And such an investment of time in the precondition for conspicuous consumption is barely afforded by “the rest” as it means a trade-off for a productive working session. The other is the unsurpassable feature determined by the initial time gap. The privileged will not freeze their time for the rest to catch up. And in fact, the more cultural capital one accumulates overtime, the faster the innovation becomes and the more natural their practice of conspicuous consumption seems. Therefore, the pre-existing time-difference between different classes predicts the victory of the privilege even at the very beginning.

When the rest are all in a fluster trying to catch up, the privileged have already come up with creative distinctions and changed the game rules, retaining the gap and social distance from the mass and preserving the social hierarchies and their reputable status. For example, as more emulators start to achieve a light complexion through various products and media, the privileged white were induced to not only think of new means of practicing whiteness but also altering the game rules to establish a more comprehensive and sophisticated meaning of “whiteness” beyond physical appearance. Therefore, the meaning of whiteness was complicated from the superficial

appearance to a more sophisticated political meaning. The privileged white switched their preference to tanning so as to escalate the discursive power. In this situation, the quality of distinctions subordinates itself to the existence of distinctions. Confining the meaning of “whiteness” merely to skin color is apparently too risky for the existing privileged given the pressure of emergent advanced whitening technologies. Sarcastically, as a result, tanning was embraced by the privileged group starting in the mid 20s. The meaning of white is no longer superficially referring to skin color. Instead, being white is glorified and mystified as a state, a cultural practice, and a social privilege. With the introduction of tanning, the beauty criterion is further accentuated on the notion of “natural” and leaning toward a more flexible notion of whiteness. Since the status of a tanned body is temporary, for those with light skins, it is relatively easy to switch in between a lighter skin color and a darker one as if skin is a seasonally adjusted accessory. While others are still struggling with the endless process of “whitening,” the White are already set out for another adventure, generating new gaps based on an innovative system of symbols. At the same time, darkness is exoticized given the privileged status of whiteness. The transient and temporary feature of tanning is maneuvered by the privileged as if a “racial masquerade” which allows them to perform themselves through a way that involves both putting on and taking off the superficial markers of racial “otherness” made available through the new consumer culture, as a means of securing racial prestige or modernity. The seemingly effortless performance and the flexible adjustment becomes the criterion - naturalness. For the emulators, it is an endless struggle for a social achievement at a physical cost and there is no option to “un-do” the efforts. In a word, the conspicuous consumption of the upper class produces social distinctions, while the emulation of that behavior by the rest only generates cultural appropriation.

IV. Innovation Theory: The Dynamics between Consumers and Products Mediated by Marketers

Influenced by neoclassical economists' ideas about market equilibrium and stability, consumption is conventionally regarded as the destination for economic activities. The supply and demand curves do not tell us how products are connected to consumers. As Appadurai succinctly puts it, 'consumption as a topic has always come equipped with an optical illusion.'¹⁰ Consumption is projected as the delusional step following the production of goods and services, a terminus for their social life, a conclusion to some sort of material cycle. But how are products presented to consumers? In order to answer this question, I employ a socio-cultural model, enlightened by Schumpeter's ideas about endogenous economic development through instability and change, to reexamine the relationship between production and consumption. In this socio-cultural framework of market innovation, another active economic agent – marketer/entrepreneur – is introduced. In the original Schumpeterian phase, innovation was perceived as a highly cyclical process (creative destruction) that had a decidedly supply-side motivation set in motion by the entrepreneur. As pointed out in Schumpeter's *Theory of Creative Destruction*, entrepreneurs play an important role in motivating and actualizing forces through constantly creating new economic value to sustain the dynamics of the capitalist system. However, Schumpeter was only thinking of innovation in the way of recombining production factors and the creation of new forms of enterprise.¹¹ It wasn't until the 1980s that scholars of innovation

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 10th ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 66.

¹¹ Joseph A. Schumpeter and Redvers Opie, *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934).

theory realized the influence that entrepreneurial agents have over the coordination and perpetuation of knowledge and network effects.¹²

More importantly, Stoneman differentiated two kinds of innovation: one is hard innovation, which is the product mainly of engineering inputs; the other is soft innovation, which encompasses the social, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural properties of goods and services.¹³ In the consumer markets, different from Schumpeter's idea that consumption was passive, consumers are actively engaging with the available products in the market through experience and proactive research. But what they usually are not aware of is the symbolic meanings of certain consumption behaviors which Veblen proposed as the confirmation of new social hierarchies. Through consuming status goods, consumers actively solidify social norms that they subject to. On the one hand, marketers come up with newly differentiated products through scientific and technological hard innovation. On the other hand, they assign differentiated meanings to existing products with strategic marketing campaigns. In the ever-evolving dynamics between production and consumption, in some cases, producers and customers collaborate to create goods that go beyond customization. In order to gain a monopolistic competitive advantage in the industry and ultimately sell products, producers remain alerted about and systematically exploit how consumers interact with products in day-to-day life.¹⁴ In order to keep products at the leading edge, maintain sustainable desires for existing products, and anticipate demand for new products as a novel way to distinguish individual social status, marketing strategies through soft innovation are in desperate need.

¹² Teece and Pisano, "The Dynamic"; Chesbrough, *Open Innovation*; Foray, *Economics of Knowledge*; Hekkert et al., "Functions of Innovation"; Sternberg, "Entrepreneurship, Proximity"; Brannback et al., "Challenging the Triple".

¹³ Paul Stoneman, *Soft Innovation: Economics, Product Aesthetics, and the Creative Industries*, pbk. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Eric von Hippel, "Cooperation between Rivals: Informal Know-How Trading," *Industrial Dynamics* 16 (1989), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-1075-1_7; von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

In fact, frequent innovation is required as a response to the changing social context, which nurtures and further transforms individual consumption behaviors. Rather than carry out hard innovation, firms and marketers rely on soft innovation to strategically leverage changes in social norms and endow new meanings to products that otherwise have virtually identical characteristics and functions.¹⁵ Entrepreneurs and marketers have more than enough space to jiggle around the socially accepted symbolic values reflected by certain conspicuous consumption behaviors and easily abuse individual desires and greed for emulation as well as status differentiation. Cowan et al. stressed a more systematic entrepreneurial environment involving coordination of consumers and producers and drew attention to the reflexive nature of supply and demand.¹⁶ They demonstrated how complex social signals can induce consumers to deviate from consumption decisions based on utility and how this behavior can result in waves of consumption stimulated by social feedback. In return, innovation can occur in consumption itself irrespective of any innovations in the product consumed. In this way, soft innovation can be driven spontaneously by individual consideration of social status, aspiration, and so forth, rather than directly by the firms. Especially in the beauty industry where products are granted with cultural and emotional values, new products and service paradigms can be easily created through individual social interaction and networking, in return, producers may capture and exploit.¹⁷ In other words, consumers contribute to the innovation process by increasing the variety and intensity of their relationship with goods.

¹⁵ Gavin Peter Swann, "The Demand for Distinction and the Evolution of the Prestige Car," *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* 11, no. 1 (2001).

¹⁶ Cowan, Cowan, and Peter Swann, "Waves in Consumption"; Cowan, Cowan, and Swann, "A Model".

¹⁷ Hawkins and Vikery, *Re-making the Movies*; Napoli, "Revisiting 'mass,'" Napoli, *Audience Evolution*; Potts et al., "Social Network"; Potts et al., "Consumer Co-creation."

V. Why Skincare Products, among Other Forms of Conspicuous Consumption?

Despite of various choices of conspicuous consumption, I choose to focus on the one of skincare products as it perfectly intertwines with several dichotomies, the one between materials and visual, public and private, the elite and the common, the East and the West, male and female, backwardness and modernity, and the one between partiality and completeness. Face is the most available surface for inscribing resistance, any decoration or accessory is seen as an external and foreign add-on. However, social distinctions, marked by the possession of different skincare products and divergent skin conditions, are particularly powerful as they diffuse biopolitical power which subtly integrates the conceptual externalities of a product – the chemical effect (e.g. whitening or lightening) – as a tangible feature of those who apply it. In other words, skincare consumption enables that foreign add-on to infiltrate the face until it blends as part of the face. This way, skincare consumption embodies the form of social distinction through a physical transformation.

Unlike clothes and accessories which one puts on to immediately accentuate their prestigious social status, a certain complexion achieved through consuming skincare products overtime makes one's social distinction, the natural and appropriate skin condition, seems more intrinsic, legitimate, and permanent. More importantly, the consumption of skincare products demonstrates the symbolic violence lodged in the habitus of women.¹⁸ Female consumers absorb the structures and hierarchies of the social settings in which they consumer skincare products into their habitus.¹⁹ In return, the routine of consuming skincare products consolidates the existing social order, what Bourdieu calls the 'paradox of doxa,' and prompts women to blame

¹⁸ Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson, "Bourdieu and Organizational Analysis," *Theory and Society* 37, no. 1 (2008):5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40211023>.

¹⁹ Alan Swingewood, *A Short History of Sociological Thought*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Red Globe Press, 2009), 214.

themselves for their inferior status in comparison to the more privileged and further emulate.²⁰ The consumption of skincare problematizes the overarching issue of a female identity contingent on face. The interest and commitment that different classes have in self-presentation, the attention they devote to it, their awareness of the profits it gives and the investment of time, effort, sacrifice, and care which they actually put into it are proportionate to the chances of material or symbolic profit, a proper complexion, they can reasonably expect from it.²¹ In other words, the materiality of whitening products is translated into an appropriate visibility – the paleness and whiteness – through repetitive and constant practices. And only through a domestic practice of applying these skincare products, women can present themselves properly in public. The ritual of using skincare products ensures women a social visibility and recognition. As consumers, women craft their own identities through a self-positioned practice of conspicuous consumption, making the choice of cosmetic products, specifically the one of whitening products, not merely out of simple preference, but driven by a desire for claiming a space for the production of potentially oppositional self-identities which are no longer restrained by stereotypes or expectations from the society.

Under the chemical effects of skincare products, face becomes the site where class distinctions are articulated, blurred, and reproduced both visually and symbolically.²² A smudged distinction between different classes does not ensure the middle-class or the lower-class female a stable status either. It is undeniable that, in Veblen's language, since leisure is the conventional means of pecuniary repute, the acquisition of some proficiency in decorum is incumbent on all who aspire to a modicum of pecuniary decency.²³ Both the middle-class and the lower-class

²⁰ Emirbayer and Johnson, "Bourdieu and Organizational," 46.

²¹ Dorinne K. Kondo, *About Face: Performing 'Race' in Fashion and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), 202.

²² *Ibid*, 110.

²³ Veblen and Chase, *The Theory*, 49.

women admire the leisure class that occupies the top of the social structure in point of reputability. Due to the lack of questioning or challenging, the society takes the upper-class manner of life and their standard of worth as the norm of reputability. And the tacit agreement on these standards, in some degree of approximation, are absorbed by all classes lower in the scale. In contemporary societies where the lines of demarcation between social classes, especially the one between upper-class and middle-class, have grown vague and transient, the norm of supremacy imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence through the social structure to the lowest strata. As a result, the whole society embraces the upper-class ideal of decency as the scheme of life in vogue and bend the energies to live up to that ideal.²⁴ By longing for these skincare products, mixed within precise racial and ethnic parameters, those who are left out of the privileged group expose themselves in a pre-disposition where they aspire to maintain an ideal face, buy a place, and even move along the skin spectrum.

Theoretically lower-class female consumers are prone to believe that through applying these skincare products, they automatically undertake a path toward a better skin condition and, therefore, a higher status on the social spectrum. Little did they know that, they will hardly acquire the actual status associated with the privileged group as cultural capital and temporal capital invested in the cultivation and maintenance of that habituation and status is not easily earned. In reality, despite the lower-class female long for the fancy skincare products, their desires for consumption are under budget constraints. Just like Bourdieu's argument, specific displays of tastes and choices not only determine but also specify class fractions. Female consumers' preferences for products, such as cosmetics, are also restrained by realistic factors, such as budget. The working classes are presumably concerned with practicality, value,

²⁴ Ibid, 84.

durability, and function; conforming to normative fashionable bodies and gendered ideals of attractiveness are of peripheral concern.²⁵

Face is also the site where gender politics are carried out. The East Asian beauty economy, featured by the thriving conspicuous consumption of skincare products, especially the whitening ones, reflects a broader gendered national project in regard to modernity and westernization. As Chapter Two will elaborate, female consumers in East Asia as national subjects play a vital role in the imperial era. On the one hand, as women, they follow such a routine either intentionally or unconsciously contribute to the continuity and legitimacy of what is expected as a socially accepted, hygienic, and appropriate woman. Their gender boundary is reclaimed through further conforming to the preexisting gender stereotypes and expectations. On the other hand, just like termination of foot binding tradition in the Chinese Qing dynasty and the ban of makeup in Meiji Japan, women's active practices of whitening skincare products were harnessed as a symbol of national modernity centered on modern concepts of hygiene and health in East Asia. These acts exert symbolic power against western sovereignty yet unconsciously help to justify the production of the cosmetics products they consume, by a labor of identification and decoding which may constitute the whole of the consumption and gratification of whitening products, and which requires time and dispositions acquired over time.²⁶ In either case, women were burdened with a responsibility to practice their gender role and sacrifice themselves for the national modernity project.

And Chapter 3 will show that though liberated as consumers, in the contemporary context even amid a crisis, women contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a socially ranked consumer market as well as the integration of social images into reality through commodification

²⁵ Kondo, *About Face*, 111.

²⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social*, 100.

of desires. Ironically, with the cultural attribute, skincare products are no longer just property, they are bestowed with a sense of “esteem” scored in the game of ownership and practice accepted between different groups of individuals.²⁷ In a word, the implication of all these problems and questions that the consumption of skincare products raises is that a sociological lens should be applied when viewing economic issues so as to bring about a radical transformation of the social conditions of production and perpetuation of the habitus which causes all the unjust status quo in the consumer culture.

²⁷ Veblen and Chase, *The Theory*, 28.

Chapter Two

Marketing Strategies of Beauty in the Colonial Context

I. Reflecting on the Colonial Root of Marketing Strategies

As a member of the Generation-Z myself, I am used to absorbing information in a digital format: the skincare advertisement that pops up during a short video that I am watching on Youtube is captivating enough for me to click on their website. And I usually find myself landing on the purchasing webpage of a beauty brand where I would never end up otherwise. In fact, these advertisements are in no way randomly generated, yet sophisticatedly calculated based on my browsing history and employed to target individuals like me with similar potential consumer preference. These contemporary ways of distributing and internalizing information (i.e. marketing) depend heavily on technology which was not available to marketers in other historical moments before. Different from traditional forms of marketing which rely on physical materials and space, the stunning feature of technology-intensive marketing is that it facilitates messages to reach consumer groups that would not encounter certain beauty products and brands in the physical space.

From a progressive view, the technology-oriented marketing tactics seem more advanced than traditional marketing strategies regarding its efficiency and effectiveness of reaching a larger pool of prospects. However, in the following chapters, I will illustrate how contemporary marketing messages have to circle back to the colonial marketing emphasis of “health and hygiene” so as to successfully navigate the dynamic between consumer preferences and the potential of beauty brands during a global crisis. In essence, the channels for distributing

marketing messages are diversified and improved by technologies overtime, contemporary marketing strategies are fundamentally rooted in certain colonial ideologies. And in this following Chapter Two, I will lay out the historical context in which marketing strategies were first imposed on East Asian beauty markets during the colonial period. Specifically, I will demonstrate how, from the later 19th century to early 20th century, Western marketers subtly grafted the imperial racial hierarchy onto the traditional Chinese and Japanese aesthetic preference over a light complexion and effectively nurtured a sound consumer demand for skincare products in the East Asian market.

II. Traditional Chinese and Japanese Aesthetics

The vibrant contemporary beauty industry, from dazzling skincare products to sophisticated beauty devices, is conventionally associated with technologies and Western modernity. Studies of the beauty industry tend to attribute the popularity of the skincare products in the East Asian market to the emergence of Modern girl trend in the 1920s which suggests that beauty consumption is a modern phenomenon under Western influences. However, beauty practices are historically grounded in East Asian traditions: as early as the ancient time, herbs, such as Bei Qu, Huang Qi and Goji, were used to radiate skin in China. To examine the history of beauty industry within a limited timeframe of the post-1920 era undermines the traditional East Asian beauty culture and rejects the colonial history which is undoubtedly a controversial yet central piece shaping the evolvement of the beauty industry in East Asia.

Therefore, this chapter unpacks the colonial history of the beauty industry: rather than focus on the brutal aspect of colonization which exploits physical labors, I point out a seemingly

less brutal yet more enduring and elusive facet of colonization – the cultural diffusion. Colonial cultural diffusion is multidirectional and subtle yet powerful as it leaves the demarcation between the preexisting cultural paradigm and newly injected ideals undistinguishable. Despite China was luckier than Japan to evade colonial occupation, Chinese interaction with the Europeans during the Western imperialism era inevitably precipitated pre-existing Chinese racial consciousness and reshaped the meaning of traditional Chinese aesthetic preference for a light complexion.

The court culture in ancient China and Japan laid the foundation for a flourishing obsession with skincare. Traditional Japanese aesthetics, *yukionna* (snow woman), values opacity and whiteness. Similarly, since ancient times, Chinese had already regarded the fairness of skin that approaches “whiteness” as typifying physical beauty, refinement, and intelligence. The Qin emperor who started the first imperial dynasty of China can be attributed to starting the evolution of skincare in China as he believed in the importance of cleanliness, herbal medicine, nutrition and good circulation. To have a proper complexion became a marker of social class ever since. Traditional Chinese aesthetics is exceedingly seen in early Chinese literature. A poem in the first Chinese anthology *the Book of Poetry or Odes or Songs [Shijing]*, appraises the noblewoman Zhuang Jiang, daughter of the Lord of Qi for her ‘hands white as rush down, skin like lard, neck long and white as the tree-grub...The lovely eyes so black and white.’²⁸ Metaphors, such as white jade, were utilized to enunciate a light complexion of skin, not only symbolizing the ideal feminine beauty but also revealing normative expectation for men. At court, male nobles often used powder to whiten their faces. As Wang Yan, the last prime

²⁸ Don J. Wyatt, "A Certain Whiteness of Being: Chinese Perceptions of Self by the Beginning of European Contact," in *Brill's Series on Modern East Asia in a Global Historical Perspective*, ed. Rotem Kowners and Walter Demel, vol. 1, *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia*, Race and Racism in Modern East Asia (n.p.: Brill, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004237414_013.

minister of the Western Jin dynasty (265-316 AD), was famed for his grace, in particular for the ‘jade-like’ whiteness of his hands.²⁹ In *Shishuoxinyu* (a new account of tales of the word), compiled under the aegis of Liu Yiqing, ‘jade tree’ signifies fair-skinned and dashing young man.³⁰ These metaphors of jade in ancient Chinese literature enable us to extrapolate beyond a capacity to intuit that though jade connotes a light complexion, fairness or paleness of complexion is not the mere determinant of the ideal feminine attractiveness. Different from the western monotonous meaning of “whiteness,” Chinese pursuit of “whiteness” was never limited to “paleness” yet emphasizes a balance of light, even skin tone and rosy cheeks. On the ancient Chinese aesthetic palette, *huibai* (ash-white), which they use to describe the Europeans, is not a desirable or healthy state.³¹

III. The Traditional Meaning of Whiteness in China

In fact, the meaning of “whiteness” remained unique in domestic China before its contact with the European imperialists in the late 19th century. Different from the European racial dichotomy in the late 18th century which pits “whiteness” against “blackness,” Confucianism perceives whiteness as the center of the universe and darkness (as a relative to non-white) as its periphery. In Chinese classics, *tianxia* (the world) is perceived as a homogenous unity named *datong* (great community). The homogenous culture in the symbolic universe of Confucianism inevitably induced the elites to assume their cultural superiority as the Han: those who did not follow “Chinese ways” were considered as barbarians. Rather than a dichotomy, an atom is the perfect representation of the relationship between “whiteness” and “blackness” in traditional

²⁹ Frank Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 1994), 10.

³⁰ Liu, *Shishuoxinyu*, 403-404.

³¹ Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*.

Chinese racial framework: “whiteness” symbolizing the Confucian universe is the atomic center, nucleus, orbited by the electrons, which associates with “blackness” and the outside world. In other words, “black” was not necessarily treated as the absolute opposite to “white,” yet simply representing the most remote and unexplored part of the geographically known world. Based on traditional Chinese aesthetic preference for a fair and white complexion and the exemplification of “white” as the center of the civilized world, the most populous ethnic Han majority particularly perceived themselves as a “white” people.

In such a racial framework, with white at the center and black at the periphery, the option of moving closer to the white, the civilized, and the origin is accessible as long as one submits to the Confucian symbolic universe and assimilates into the Han culture. Sometimes the Han dynasty initiated the “whitening” project to spread Han culture and assimilate the non-Han through dispatching one of the princesses as the “gift” to a non-Han race. Clearly, atomic-like relationship between “white” and “black” was based on the assumption that the Han is the superior ruler of China. However, such a racial consciousness was drastically shifted among the Chinese elites as a result of foreign rule. As seen in the Yuan dynasty, Chinese officials were summoned to serve the Mongol administration, which disrupts the coherent emphasis on the institution of the *zu* (lineage) as a system of social regulation.³² Foreign rules radically challenged the homogeneity of Confucian universe and the self-proclaimed Han superiority. Thus, the black-white atomic-like relationship was transformed into a polarity in which a strict dichotomy was drawn between Han and non-Han. As the racial consciousness was intensified among Chinese official, the Chinese started to come up with new racial vocabulary to refer to the non-Han and distinguish them from the “white” Han. As Wyatt pointed out in his book, the Chinese ‘universally and indiscriminately assign Kunlun as a way of labeling a succession of

³² Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 23.

peoples that they considered non-Han.’³³ However, one noteworthy nuance respecting the way Chinese refer to the non-Han is that, contrasting with the Western racial hierarchy in which the white mainly demonstrate the superior of the white and avoid the mentioning of the rest, the Chinese emphasized on the darker skin of those non-Han, who in return unavoidably reinforced Chinese own entrenched sense of their whiteness. In the context of pre-imperial China, despite the Chinese were merely utilizing their self-perceived identity as “the white” to distinguish themselves from the non-Han, their vocabulary of racial reference exerted more social power than it intended. The discursive power of demonstrating non-Han’s dark skin by the Han stimulates the racial consciousness of the non-Han, legitimizing the “whiteness” of the Han.

Moreover, traditional Han racial framework is anchored on a class differentiator which is also dichotomized by “black” and “white.” In other words, besides the Han and non-Han dichotomy, polarized concepts of “black” and “white” refer to class distinction. In fact, though the Han perceived themselves as a “white” people, not all Chinese had the privilege of a light complexion. Specifically, laborers and peasants, whose skins are burned swarthy by the sun were called “black-headed people.” The black-white dichotomy was transplanted from the racial reference to an interlacing graph with race on one axis and class on the other. The class axis was established as not simply a symbolic but a visible physical difference between the peasants and the landlord class. The dark complexion of the lower class was extremely accentuated. For example, as Dikotter wrote in his book, slaves were called *renli* under the Zhou. *Li* referred to a large cooking utensil stained by smoke and blackened by fire, thus served as a metaphor for the dark faces of the slaves who labored under the sun.³⁴ Despite the foreign rule contoured the white-black dichotomy as both a symbolic and tangible manifestation of one’s cultural and status

³³ Wyatt, "A Certain," 315.

³⁴ Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 11.

distance from the center of the symbolic universe in antiquity, the racial consciousness based on distinction did not fully challenge the authoritative symbolic universe of Confucianism due to the relative physical similarity of the Mongols and Manchus to the Han. In ancient Chinese racial consciousness, with the physical proximity, “white” as the symbol of non-labor Han was prone to stress the cultural gap more than the difference in skin color. In other words, the “non-whiteness” was the result of the unfamiliarity with or amateur grasp of the Han Confucianism. Therefore, the boundary between “black” and “white” remained relatively fluid, leaving the possibility for the amateur and the outsiders to convert to the Han culture and move along the social class spectrum through constant learning.

IV. The Impact of Colonial Contact on Chinese Aesthetics

The arrival of the Europeans in the nineteenth century spurred a complex synergy of domestic and foreign influences in China and thus disintegrated the Confucian universe.³⁵ The Opium War (1839-42) superimposed upon preexisting pattern of internal decline, featured by population growth, social dislocation, peasant rebellions, administrative fragmentation and political crises and dissolved the homogenous Chinese identity previously bonded by a collective belief in Confucianism. The interactions with the European aggravated the existing widespread discontent with the imperial Confucianism orthodoxy among the Qing literati. Through contacting with the Westerners, Chinese intellectuals realized the limitations of Confucian universalism and strove to find an alternative. Western passion for science, driven by the pressure of Industrial Revolution, seemed appealing to the Chinese intellectuals. As a result, they utilized Western ideologies that emphasized *kaozhengxue* (evidential research), not necessarily

³⁵ Ibid, 30.

because it is more logical, but only as a political means against the obsessive philosophical speculation in neo-Confucianism. These Chinese intellectuals, usually educated in the West, advocated emulation of the West and accelerated the deliquescence of the Confucian symbolic universe as a whole.³⁶

However, what Chinese intellectuals failed to realize was that, a pursuit of evidential research at the cost of philosophical speculation meant more than just a break from the neo-Confucianism: it deconstructed the traditional Chinese ideologies for the sake of accepting Western influence through emulation. With the appearance of foreign Europeans, the status of “the foreign” was drastically reversed in China: the presence of foreign in China no longer dwelled on daunting uncivilized blackness yet replaced the previous Confucian universe center as the real “white.” The demolition of pre-imperial Chinese perception of the foreign rooted in Confucian symbolic universe resulted in a transformation of Chinese racial consciousness. On the western-infused polarity between “black” and “white,” three additional colors, brown, yellow, and red, were interpolated along the dissemination of the ‘five-race theory.’³⁷As a result, the possibility of transforming from the “black” to the “white” was rendered slim: the demarcation between the “black” and “white” is no longer cut-clear yet faded in subcategories like “brown,” “yellow,” and “red” which could seem infinitely close to the “whiteness.” After encountering the European who self-positioned themselves as the white based on their lighter complexion, the Chinese were given a more sophisticated palette to refer to complexion and no longer able to consider themselves as the “white” people due to both shifts in the relative complexion and in the distance from the civilized center. Europeans, not the Chinese, were considered as both the physically and culturally “whitest.” On the new complexion palette, five colors were placed in

³⁶ Ibid, 31.

³⁷ Jiang Sun, "Blumenbach in East Asia: The Dissemination of the 'Five-Race Theory' in East Asia and a Textual Comparison," *Oriens Extremus* 51 (2012): 188, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24047788.118>.

contested categories with a specific hierarchical order. Chinese were rendered as the secondary group, somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between “white” and “black,” as the “yellow” race. The new meaning of color yellow again contrasted with the exclusive implication of color yellow glorified in traditional Chinese culture: the Han Chinese perceived themselves as the descendants of the mythical Yellow Emperor. However, the European imperialists did not share the same understanding of “yellow”: yellow no longer means nobility or imperial lineage but an inferior status submissive to the authoritative superior White. The secondary status as the yellow race resulted in revolt against imperialism, yet the self-identification as the “yellow” race in return solidified the Western racial hierarchy in return and ever since.

The self-perception of the Chinese did not switch from the “prestigious white” to the “secondary yellow” overnight. Given the context of European imperialism, skin-color was harnessed by the Chinese intellectuals as more than a political means to overthrow the symbolic universe of neo-Confucianism: they maneuvered both axes of the Western racial framework to achieve the singular goal of withstanding the imperial power, emphasizing the domestic class distinction in the danger of racial extinction and promoting perpetual peace and harmony with the assertion of a united “yellow” race against the imperial power. On the one hand, the overflow of the Manchu dynasty and the foundation of the Republic in 1911 prompted social thinkers to reject the idea of a united Han and instead focused upon differences within the race under the fear of racial extinction. Social distinction was considerably underscored: intellectuals were designated as the superior, the lower classes as the inferior. On the other hand, the prior racial hierarchy within East Asia was intentionally blurred driven by a desire to unite East Asia against the colonial power. For example, in 1895, Li Hongzhang attempted to unite China and Japan,

stating ‘our Asiatic yellow race will not be encroached upon by the white race of Europe.’³⁸ Clearly, with the apparition of European imperialists, China was placed in a dilemma between two mutually exclusive goals: the need for a strong ingroup identity and the urge for adapting to a self-awarded superior outgroup. As a result, China underpinned the class distinction within its domestic context yet blurred its previous racial hierarchy between the Han and the non-Han groups, such as the Japanese. An asymmetrical racial awareness between the domestic context and the transnational dynamic was established: Chinese intellectuals inflated their superior status in relation to the lower-class Chinese through placing an emphasis on class distinction over the previous racial discourse.

Furthermore, in an exuberant domestic environment of social class distinction, the discourse of eugenics sprang up among the privileged Chinese elites. In the name of national revival and a search for group identity under the danger of racial extinction, Chinese elites expanded the traditional hierarchy between educated scholars and uneducated peasants and thus facilitated the adoption of pseudo-science as the legitimate method of understanding racial framework during the 1920s and 30s.³⁹ At the same time, the elitist belief in eugenics inadvertently paved the way for the future acceptance of skincare products as a way of transformation and emulation in China. Eugenics was seen as not only a method of perpetuating the class distinction between the Chinese intellectuals and the commoner but also a solution for the elite to make national progress toward the ideal whiteness.

Up till 1915, Chinese discussion of racial matters was confined mainly to the political arena. Under trends of eugenics and internal social changes, race was spread into the public sphere as a popular discourse. In the context of a more demonstrated class distinction, the New

³⁸ Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 57.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 189.

Culture Movement of intellectual renewal, an essentially urban-based campaign, answered the needs of new social classes whose emergence accelerated the disintegration of traditional social structure and facilitated the reconstruction of a national identity.⁴⁰ Specifically, additional individuals identified themselves with the distinctive social class during the era of the First World War. Chinese economy surprisingly benefited from the war from two perspectives: both the replacement of the imperial dynasty by a Republic and the decline of European trade amount to a prosperous golden age of economic expansion. Coastal treaty ports and political centers, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Canton, became the outposts of modernization, growing into large metropolises that nurtured new social classes. In these metropolitans, a more boisterous discourse of race as well as a robust racial consciousness was fostered by the daily interaction between the elite and the commoners and between the Chinese and the non-Chinese.

At the same time, the awareness of social and racial distinction kindled the desire for emulation. Racial consciousness remained no longer as a concern exclusive to the elite class yet expanded as a universal existential dread in China. The commoner longed for moving along the social ladder to achieve a higher social status, yet the elite, often growing up immersed in Western thoughts or Japanese education, were determined to integrate foreign science and culture into Chinese society, prioritizing the West as the ultimate norm and the proximity to the West as the benchmark for national development. Within the context of a deconstructed Confucian universe and the decapitation of Western imperial esteem, “Western thoughts” substituted the domestic traditional ideologies as a legitimate and rational solution for China. Guided by the Western racial framework, the Chinese were divided into two general groups and posited in a hierarchical relationship below the white race with divergent concerns. Since the Chinese elitists were still able to leverage certain level of supremacy based on their superior

⁴⁰ Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 126.

status in relation to the commoner, they prioritized their concern for emulating the White as the Chinese national interest.

As Dikotter points out, the first advocate for emulating the Western concern with race appeared in the reputable journal *New Education* in 1919.⁴¹ Once the slogan for emulating the West was publicly presented and spread, the Chinese racial consciousness as well as the meanings it proliferated no longer aligned with the traditional Confucianism ideas that preserve cultural assimilation as a potential way of transforming from “black” to “white,” from “non-Han” to “Han,” and from “barbarian” to “civilian.” Instead, the primary interest was reversed from moving closer to the Han culture to moving away from it. In substance, the adoption of Western influences (i.e. the Western development framework as well as the Western racial hierarchy) implies a more modern and progressive national development trajectory yet simultaneously means giving up the identity of a proud, privileged, and civilized nation in exchange for a mediocre and secondary follower. The degradation from a self-proclaimed “white” race to an inferior “yellow” race implied endless emulation, in regard to both a cultural and a physical gap.

V. Western Marketing Tactics Hinged on Traditions

Western capitalists sensed both the Chinese and Japanese promptitude for emulation and utilized their desperation as the entry point of their marketing strategy, revolving about their interest in eugenics and racial superiority to nurture their consumption preference. Whitening skincare products were strategically marketed in the East Asian markets to meet the needs of desperate Chinese and Japanese who were actively seeking a solution for their racial inferiority

⁴¹ Ibid, 170.

in the hierarchical Western racial framework. The tempting effect of “whitening and lightening skin color” appeared so promising and desirable to the Chinese consumers as it catered for their both needs for a cultural and physical proximity to the West in one convenient compact product. However, the debut and acquiescence of whitening skincare products in China, in comparison to Japan, was not as smooth as it was theoretically imagined.

From the exclusively predominant position of Confucian ideologies throughout the pre-colonial Chinese history, it is apparent that it takes an inconceivable amount of efforts to execute new ideas in China especially if they are at odds with the ingrained traditions. However, Western capitalists strategically implemented various marketing tactics to alter the elasticity of Chinese female customers’ demand. Even though the use of beauty products can be dated as early as the ancient times, marketing strategies along with the globalization trend in the 19th century truly transformed the accessibility of beauty, complicating the social meanings attached to beauty practices. Despite of differences in Chinese and Japanese racial and aesthetic awareness, colonial marketing strategies implemented by the western beauty brands were predicated on one remarkable baseline – a resonance with the traditional indigenous culture. Eventually, the introduction and construction of a western modernity is built upon certain level of traditional local culture in Japan and China as modernity itself would be too foreign and intolerable without anything to launch into.

VI. Traditional Chinese Belief in Proprietary Medicine

The Chinese have a traditional belief in brands that are trusted by older generations. Thus, the demand elasticity of Chinese consumers is almost perfectly inelastic as they are so reluctant

to abandon old brands for emergent innovations.⁴² The challenge of marketing a new product, such as whitening skincare, was doubled: the new product has to be innovative enough to distinguish itself from the existing options offered by traditional brands; however, at the same time, it has to resonate with the preexisting concepts and ideologies so that people are lured to believe they can cling onto the familiar senses and further develop faith and trust in the new product. The marketing of whitening skincare products in China deliberately dwelled on the traditional Chinese belief in proprietary medicine. Chinese belief in and preference for proprietary medicine was not confined to the poor and the ignorant: the Chinese tended to entrust themselves to the ministrations of some old man of the neighborhood who is famed for his skill in taking care of the sick.⁴³

While the whitening skincare products provide the Chinese with not only a cure for pursuing modernity but also a remedy for the class and racial distinction, promised by the marketers. On the one hand, the whitening skincare products were marketed with a link to the modern concept of hygienic practice promoted in the twentieth century. As Jones points out that the need to be “clean” appeared to be a universal social norm across social classes in all developed countries.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the whitening skincare products arose in China as the remedy for the social and political struggle toward a superior racial identity defined by a lighter complexion. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western soap bands confidently associated cleanliness with “whiteness,” equalizing beauty with white. The Western marketers of soap regularly claimed that using their soap would whiten the skin of people of color, thereby

⁴² Carl Crow, *Four Hundred Million Customers: The Experiences, Some Happy, Some Sad, of an American in China, and What They Taught Him*, illus. G. Sapojnikoff (New York, NY: Halycon House, 1939), 210.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 206.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Jones, "Globalization and Beauty: A Historical and Firm Perspective," *Euramerica* 41, no. 4 (December 2011): 900, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782548188.00009>.

‘civilizing them.’⁴⁵ The kind of products and the frequency of using the product differ widely in different social classes and designating them not only to specific tiers of consumer profile, but also to different level of hygiene and modernity. The tie to the practice of Chinese medicine solidified the legitimate status of whitening skincare products with a scientific basis and marked a closure on the traditional apprenticeship system.

It wasn’t until 1858 that in the eyes of the law all varieties of medical practice stand on an equal footing in China but in all public health services, Western medical practice is adopted as something foreign and new to China.⁴⁶ As a result, selling whitening skincare products at the domestic level with a scientific assertion automatically linked China to the concept of modernity in the international realm. Whitening skincare products presented themselves as the ultimate solution to bridge the gap between the Chinese pride and their inferior physical appearance determined by the colonial power. In other words, the marketing strategists did not plainly force a new product into China, yet subtly build the connection between the consumption of skincare products and the modern hygienic practices, explicitly demonstrated by the West. This linkage provided skincare products with a scientific cause and an indication for modernity and ‘whiteness’, subsequently nurturing Chinese consumer preference for whitening skincare products, an alluring remedy for all their existential concerns.

VII. The Significance of Face in Chinese Culture

Besides traditional Chinese belief in proprietary medicine, witty Western capitalists maneuvered the conventional Chinese emphasis on “face” as the breakthrough of attracting

⁴⁵ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 207-231; Sivulka, *Stronger than*, 98-106.

⁴⁶ Crow, *Four Hundred*, 209.

especially the Chinese elite group. Face has already developed a social meaning in Chinese culture. In Chinese idioms, to “lose face” means to be humiliated. And to “save a person’s face” means to spare someone from open shame. These brief expressions hint the significance of face in all affairs of life in China. It not only embodies a social code which individuals follow as an obligation to help their fellowmen to maintain self-respect and pride in public but reveals the tacit agreement among different social classes to maintain a hierarchical interpersonal relationship.

Carl Crow, as a foreign marketing expert extremely familiar with Chinese customs and markets, shared his unique perception of the Chinese obsession with the social meaning of “face” as a code of toleration and forbearance. And it is this unquestioned social code that retains the social order and enables Chinese to live harmoniously together under crowded and highly competitive conditions with a minimum of friction.⁴⁷ As Crow claims, the social meaning of ‘face,’ which is treasured as one’s dignity and self-respect can never be underestimated in China. He contended that no foreign businessman had ever accomplished anything in dealing with Chinese if he failed to take this factor into account.⁴⁸ Taking the social significance of face into consideration, Crow as well as many other marketing agents strategically employed the Chinese emphasis on face, nourishing a prosperous Chinese market for beauty products.

Advertisements of skincare products grasped the core concern of the Chinese, maneuvering the physical and social meanings of “face” in their marketing scheme and linking the intangible social meaning of face to the visible presentation of it. In order to appropriately present one’s identity of a designated social class, one has to primarily maintain a proper face accordingly. And it is through the blossom of beauty market that the eminence of face is doubled

⁴⁷ Ibid, 236.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 237.

in the Chinese customs. Vice versa, the Chinese tradition in emphasizing face sustains a thriving beauty economy featured by whitening skincare products in China. As a result, whitening skincare products were especially appealing to the elite class who constantly attempted to distinguish themselves from the peasant class towards the white. To the Chinese upper class, the consumption of whitening skincare products is killing two birds with one stone: it provides them with a two-in-one solution for minimizing the gap with the West through aligning themselves with a modern lifestyle and simultaneously further distancing themselves from the lower class in the domestic context.

VIII. Japanese Biganjutsu: The Hygienic Facial Culture

Contrasting with China whose embracement of modernity was hindered by multiple internal factors, Japan's determination to break up with the past and adopt modernity seemed more decisive and pioneering among East Asian countries. Since the 1880s, Japan embarked on an endless journey to appease the Western power. As Evans noted, during the Meiji period in Japan, 'a small number of high-ranking women were thrust into a more public role' in order to impress the Western guests.⁴⁹ Subsequently, women as the representation of Japanese national image triggered the anxiety of Japanese elites since the traditional Japanese makeup that accentuates a pale skin was interpreted by Western visitors as "unnatural." Foreigners' reference to Japanese women as "living dolls" deeply embarrassed Japanese leaders and prompted them to reform the traditional Japanese aesthetics and enact a universal beauty standard aligning with developed nations. Therefore, Japanese reformers urged citizens to eschew the traditional use of

⁴⁹ Evans, "Facing Modernity," 9.

heavy white makeup in favor of a naturalized beauty.⁵⁰ Beyond the whitening skincare products, in comparison to China, Japan developed a systematic beauty practice, *Biganjutsu*, for the middle-class and upper-class Japanese women as early as the period from 1905 to the late 1920s.

Biganjutsu, the art or technique of the beautiful face, is closely associated with the emergence of Western “hygienic facial culture.” Though originally denoting a method of facial massage performed with electro-vibratory machines, the term *biganjutsu* eventually came to include various beauty practices, ranging from the daily application of skincare products to sophisticated plastic surgeries, all for the sake of a hygienic facial culture. Japanese early involvement with *biganjutsu* showcases its avant-garde participation in an international beauty dialogue and symbolizes its synthesis with modernity. Similar to how whitening skincare products were launched in China, Japanese *biganjutsu* evolved around the physiological discourse of modern biomedicine.⁵¹ Health and hygiene as a public discourse thrived in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century: frequent and appropriate cleansing of the skin was promoted as a ritual that not only removes dirt and grime from the pores that treat blemishes but also improves the skin condition and thus individual resistance to infectious disease.

Parallel to Chinese emphasis on face, marketers of *biganjutsu* in Japan methodically spread the knowledge of skin condition and its relation to health and hygiene, encouraging citizens to prioritize their skin as the most important organs of the human body.⁵² The practice of *biganjutsu* multiplies social implications in Japan: it evolves as an alternative, rational, and appropriate cosmetic practice that perfectly combines aesthetics, medicine, and hygiene, resting on the basic and regular maintenance of the skin and simultaneously transforms clear skin into a

⁵⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid, 3.

⁵² Michi Ōta, *Biganjutsu narabi ni mōhatsu ni kansuru shohō (Regulations Relating to Facials and Hair)* (Tokyo: Dainihon bihatsu kai, 1907), 3.

signifier of a healthy body.⁵³ Clear skin which signifies a healthy body was utilized as a political tool to construct the domestic Japanese national project of “good wife, wise mother” and an international leverage against Western powers.

In the Meiji period, the improvement of citizens’ bodies was formalized as a gendered nation-wide policy.⁵⁴ “Attractiveness” was imposed on women as a civic duty: women were expected to clean their skin and apply skincare products in order to become an appropriate woman. Women were reminded that the adoption of new beauty practices and maintenance of a proper skin condition not only signified wealth but also underscored their cooperation with and commitment to the national modernizing mission.⁵⁵ On the contrary, unattractiveness indicates a failure to cooperate with the civilizing mission of the modern nation state. An attractive face became a legible marker of a woman’s social class, her commitment to the nation, and her physical fitness. In other words, *biganjutsu* as a beauty practice served to combine health with moral values as a measurement of a woman’s worth.

Since Western interpretation of “whiteness” focused on a new standard of naturalness which automatically rendered traditional Japanese aesthetics as backward and toxic, the meaning of white skin became synonymous with clean and healthy skin. Yet women who clung to the traditional makeup were considered not just unattractive, dirty, or blemished skin but selfish and immoral. Clearly, the symbolization of female face and body constituted a great part of Japanese efforts to modernize and westernize and detach themselves from the “unattractiveness” which signifies both illness and social deviance. In the broader context, the transformation of Japanese women’s faces through *biganjutsu* expressed Japan’s desire to portray a distinctly modern and

⁵³ Evans, “Facing Modernity,” 5.

⁵⁴ Susan L. Burns, “Constructing the National Body: Public Health and the Nation in Meiji Japan.,” *Nation Work: Asian Elites and National Identities* (2000).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

cutting-edge national image. Specifically, the application of electrotherapeutic devices involved in the practice of *biganjutsu* resonated with the Japanese firm belief in technological advancement as a vital symbol and foundation of modernity. Thus, marketing *biganjutsu* as a type of medical therapy involving cutting-edge scientific practice facilities the conceptualization of hygienic facials as an emblem of Japanese modernity. In a word, *biganjutsu*, as a primary Japanese hygienic facial culture illuminates the close connection between skin and identity in the early twentieth century – the skin provided avenues for the acquisition of social and cultural capital, and health and happiness, ultimately identifying Japan with modernity.

At the same time, a new aesthetic standard around *biganjutsu* injected fresh vocabulary in the discourse of race in Japan. As Hiroshi Wagatsuma noted in his essay *The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan*, despite white skin has been historically treasured in Japanese culture, similar to the traditional Chinese racial framework, “black” and “white” existed as the only categories on the color palette. The vocabulary remained absent to describe the medium between white and black skin. However, as soon as the Japanese began to adopt Western ideologies extensively in the Meiji period and compare their own complexion with the one of the Westerners, the meaning of term *shiro* (white) shifted abruptly. While “white” remained as the ideal, its previous singularity as the opposition to “black” was altered by the emergence of novel terms to depict different complexions. As a result, white was complicated as an aggregate of a broader range of complexions; in return, a new hierarchy within the category of white was engendered. As Hiramatsu elaborates, *rennen no bi*, the inception of an ideal natural beauty later deemed *kenkobi* (a healthy beauty) marked a distinct shift from the traditional Japanese *yukionna* (snow woman) aesthetic.⁵⁶ Rather than a plain whiteness, which could be indicative of disease,

⁵⁶ Ryūen Hiramatsu, *Keishō ni miru nihon bunka (Japanese Culture through Makeup)* (Tokyo: Suiyōsha, 2009), 128-132.

the new aesthetics combined with hygienic and healthy factors, favors a in favor of a fleshier beauty captured by the term *nikutaibi* (corporeal beauty). The new aesthetics accents the concept of “naturalness,” endorsing a rosy complexion that implied health and attractiveness.

Yet the Japanese were caught up in a dilemma with the new meaning of white brought by *biganjutsu*. Japanese women were originally indoctrinated to abandon harmful heavy whitening makeup and later turn to *biganjutsu*, ranging from regular cleansing procedure to the routine of applying skincare products, so as to bring out their inner beauty – the natural complexion. Ironically, on the one hand, the new aesthetics highlighting “naturalness” takes a stance somewhere between the tanned skin of rural classes and the stark white of consumptives and thus disrupts the original beauty standard which used to preserve the class distinction among Japanese women. And on the other hand, by formulating Japanese skin as naturally white – only in need of polishing – the message spread by proponents and practitioners of hygienic facial culture was deeply racial. As the practice of *biganjutsu* emphasized uncovering a woman’s natural beauty, improving the quality of her skin instead of concealing with makeup, whiteness became the natural state of Japanese skin — it simply needed to be enhanced through proper regimens that included the use of lotions and massage.⁵⁷

Biganjutsu offered the promise that with a small investment of time and sometimes a significant investment of money, a woman inevitably uncovers her natural whiteness. Although the idealization of a naturally pale complexion emerged alongside the adoption of Western style and fashion, it came to be understood as innately Japanese. While white skin continues to be conflated with “Japanese skin,” the ideal of Japanese beauty is constituted through a contest with

⁵⁷ Evans, “Facing Modernity,” 11.

the images of western women and the relationship to universal beauty.⁵⁸ The practice of *biganjutsu* which promises Japanese women the achievement of a universal beauty is fundamentally reframed with the standard of “naturalness” which only further solidifies the natural whiteness that Western women possess and reminds the Japanese that they are a natural “yellow” race whose real complexion could only be revealed by under a sophisticated process of *biganjutsu*.

IX. The Relationship between Media and Marketing: The Politics of Public Space

In both China and Japan, the highly mediated public space is extremely critical in the process of nurturing consumer preferences. During the late nineteenth century, in the trend of urbanization, *gong* (public space) emerged as a conceptual category, represented in opposition to *si* (private sphere of activity), specific to the new literate elites alongside the rise of commercial press in China.⁵⁹ No longer as presented in the traditional notion of personal and exclusive reference to the property of the state bureaucracy, *gong* was increasingly associated with the collective, public, and popular culture. In other words, as much as the elite class wanted to keep the conspicuous consumption of whitening skincare products as an exclusive privilege, the vibrant public space ineluctably extended the beauty practice to a larger audience.

Public space illuminated by various media permits the public to constitute an imagined and subjective modernity. From traditional posters to the more contemporary forms of media, which will be further unpacked in Chapter Three, these media foster a public space, a socially imagined world, in which individuals are allowed to construct their ideal self-identities. From

⁵⁸ Mikiko Ashikari, "Cultivating Japanese Whiteness," *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 1 (March 2005): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183505050095>.

⁵⁹ Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 63.

cigarette packages and posters to department stores and beauty salons, images of beauty ideals are proliferated in various forms in the colonial era. Some emerge in the deliberately designed posters with charming female idols, others in the subtleness of the latest celebrity gossips featured in the news. Nevertheless, these forms of advertisement immediately assimilate the beauty products as well as specific aesthetic standards into public discourses. Through their tendency to interrogate, subvert, and transform other contextual literacies, these marketing channels effortlessly associate women with glamour and modernity and cosmopolitanism. Women are liberated to imagine an alternate identity through aligning with the glamorous lifestyle of the celebrities overflowing the posters and advertisements. At the same time, they are guided by an ideal aesthetics to self-direct their gender role in pursuit of a modern femininity centered on skin hygiene.



Figure 1. Shiseido's Poster Advertising Cold Cream and Vanishing Cream: A Dual System of Cleaning and Protection. Cited from Maeda Mitsugu, *sh01_1932_c023_poster*, image, MIT Visualizing Cultures: Selling Shiseido III, accessed December 6, 2020, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/shiseido_03/sh_gal_01_thumb.html.

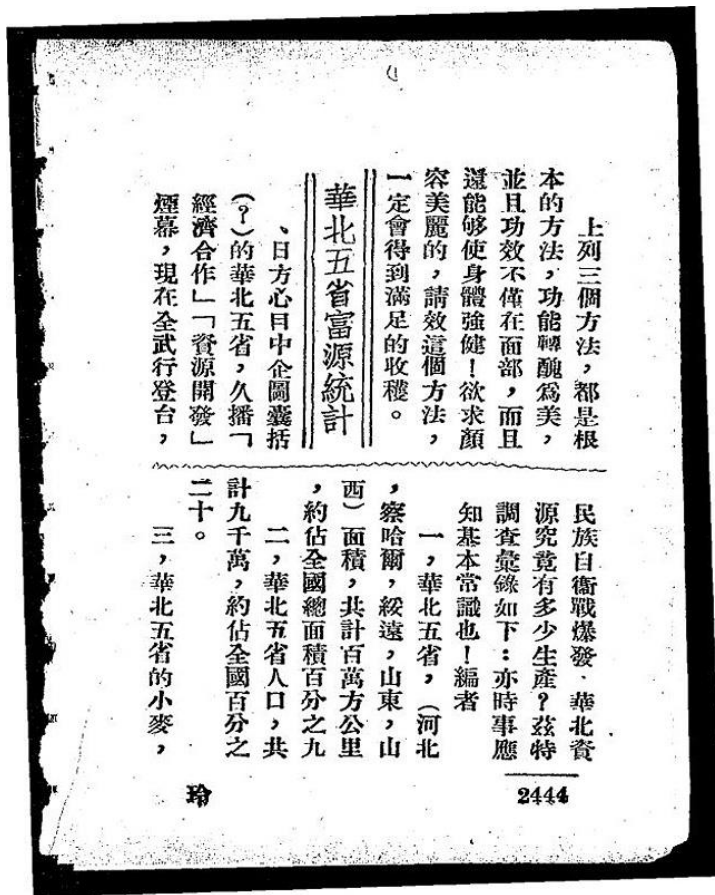


Figure 2. A Chinese Article about Beauty Care for Turning Ugliness to Prettiness (轉媼為妍的美容法). Cited from 玲瓏 *Linglong (Elegance/La Petite)*, August 12, 1937, accessed December 6, 2020.

Early style books and female magazines are one of the marketing modalities that marketers employ to condition public taste for aesthetics and promote whitening skincare products. Chinese calendar posters, as a traditional form of pictorial advertisements, were extremely different from the Western advertisement practices which prioritize publicity as their original objective. However, it didn't take long for China to adopt the western advertisement strategies as soon as China opened up its market for western skincare products. In China, calendar posters started to depict mainly beautiful women rendered in close approximation of Western realistic representational style, significantly different from the earlier traditional

calendar themes and pictorial techniques.⁶⁰ These images of beautiful women visualize an elitist beauty ideal which draws public attention and thus renders the associated skincare products genteel. In other words, the circulation of iconic images awakens the desire of self-recognition and links the emulator with modernity. As Appadurai puts it, women's frequent interaction with beauty images through various media forges 'self-imagining' as an everyday social project.⁶¹ The occupation of public space, such as the leading newspaper and magazines, ensures advertising a publicity which transforms the beauty products from a mystery to an ideal. In Crow's own words, 'the net result of all this publicity on the subject of beauty was to change the attitude and, to a certain extent the psychology, of the Chinese women.'⁶²

Department stores and beauty parlors are also significant public spaces that cultivate habits of beauty consumption and a modern lifestyle.⁶³ Hygienic facial culture practiced in an urban salon as a public space served to forward the aims of civilization and enlightenment as it established a new standard of beauty that made healthiness attractive. However, beauty parlors are significantly discriminative as they not only nurture only certain aesthetics but also delineate a space in which only middle-class and upper-class women actively engaged with medical science, foreign culture, and mass consumption with ease.⁶⁴ For instance, Japanese *biganjutsu* parlors became places that mediated the experience of class and gender in prewar Japan and, like department stores, they provided privileged women with their own public space in the city, in

⁶⁰ Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 29.

⁶¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 3.

⁶² Crow, *Four Hundred*, 37.

⁶³ Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 134.

⁶⁴ Evans, "Facing Modernity," 10.

effect a type of emergent women's public sphere.⁶⁵ Visits to a facialist and the consumption of expensive beauty products to enhance the appearance of the skin became an important perhaps oppressive ritual for performing femininity.⁶⁶ The impoverished could barely afford to purchase facial soap or toothpaste, let alone the expensive creams and lotions imported from abroad.⁶⁷ However, it is believed that the emphasis on natural beauty that began in the late Meiji period supplied relative social mobility to those blessed with congenital good looks while simultaneously creating an antagonism between the educated and wealthy urbanities and the lower classes. Nevertheless, social mobility for women was contingent on their physical appearance regardless of class.

The daily social project of self-imagining, reinforced by various media and public spaces like department stores and beauty parlors, ultimately leads to an illusional solution of emulation. With imagination, women are induced to believe in the possibility of transformations, from the non-white to white, from a nobody to a celebrity, from an amateur to a professional. Marketing professionals usually designate celebrities to advertise the skincare products, presenting it both as ultra-modern and questionably extravagant.⁶⁸ In 1928, Lever Brothers launched a successful advertising campaign of their perfume Lux bar toilet soap asserting that nearly 100 percent of Hollywood screen stars used their product.⁶⁹ At the same time, improvements in printing technologies and the popularity of style books empowered the media to capture and circulate photographs of gorgeous women faster than ever before, inviting female readers to compare

⁶⁵ Tomoko Tamari, "Rise of the Department Store and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life in Early 20th Century Japan," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 15, no. 1 (November 2006): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6781.2006.00088.x>.

⁶⁶ Evans, "Facing Modernity," 13.

⁶⁷ Gennifer Weisenfeld, "From Baby's First Bath: Kao Soap and Modern Japanese Commercial Design," *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 3 (September 2004): 576, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4134447>.

⁶⁸ Evans, "Facing Modernity," 8.

⁶⁹ Jones, "Globalization and Beauty," 894.

themselves to these idealized beauties and fanning nationalist sentiments.⁷⁰ The thriving film industry further diffuses new lifestyles and creates a new celebrity culture around stars that shaped perceptions of beauty, especially female beauty.⁷¹ As Carl Crow explains, ‘We induced all the Chinese moving-picture stars to use the toilet soap we advertised, and they write us discreet but convincing testimonials which form the principle part of our advertising copy. It happens to be the same soap that is used by all the Hollywood stars, so, in our newspaper advertising, we picture one Hollywood and one Chinese star together, but we devote more space to the Chinese star.’⁷²

In interwar China in particular, Western beauty firms relied on heavy use of local celebrities in their advertising images when selling mass brands such as Pond’s Nivea and Lux, even though Hollywood celebrities were well-known in these markets.⁷³ The link drawn between audience and Hollywood stars, lubricates the imagining of a universal beauty ideal. And the inclusion of the image of local Chinese stars denotes the possibility of a transition through emulation for the commoners. In the fabricated public space linked by products and media, female consumers are invited to participate in the daily self-imagining to refigure their social lives, detached from their real-life struggles and concerns, and aspire a luxurious lifestyle through emulation. However, these expressions through emulation and assimilation do not deform the social norms in ordinary life yet only temporarily allow ordinary people to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives, deepening the existing social norms.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁷¹ Louis W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 283.

⁷² Crow, *Four Hundred*, 33.

⁷³ Jones, "Globalization and Beauty," 898.

⁷⁴ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 5.

X: The Active Role of Marketers

Beauty companies and marketers are not the creators of the ethnic and cultural assumptions in the consumption of beauty products, but the interpreters of existing values associated with consumption behaviors. At the high point of Western imperialism, white skin was considered superior, along with everything else in Western civilization. However, adroit marketers diffused and reinforced these beauty ideals with their branding strategies. To condition public tastes and sell skincare products, Western marketers taught potential consumers the proper repetitive uses of the new skincare products and stressed the significance of daily routine to breed the continuity and sustainability of consumer demand. The emphasis on repetition contributes to restructuring femininity as well as linking habituation of manners to modern obsession of discipline and social status, ingratiating a way of seeing as if scientifically and objectively. This socially constructed routine plays a major role in making the present scattered demand universal.⁷⁵ For example, the famous American advertiser Carl Crow strategically combined cosmetics with soap advertising and accelerated the number of soap ads in all the leading newspaper and magazines to create repetitive instructional copy and link cosmetics with scientific hygiene.⁷⁶ Beauty brands and marketers yield discursive power over the promotion of a universal homogenous beauty ideal and present their products as the archetype of attractiveness and desirability.

More importantly, the cosmopolitan characteristic featured in the propaganda of skincare products spotlights the modern aspect of the beauty practices and thus make these products universally desirable. The modernizing Meiji government actively sought to change the cultural

⁷⁵ Crow, *Four Hundred*, 302.

⁷⁶ *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 294.

face of the Japanese people by banning traditional practices such as tooth blackening, eyebrow shaving, male use of cosmetics.⁷⁷ Similarly, China broke off part of the tradition that was considered barbaric and backward through cutting off the queues.⁷⁸ For countries like China and Japan that were desperately seeking a visible and symbolic embrace of the modern advancement as well as a detachment from the traditional past, practices of modern beauty products bring about physical changes that seem more tangible and thus more powerful than any other cultural transformation. In parallel, marketing campaigns accentuate the cosmopolitanism feature of the product, usually phrased as “premium and luxury,” associating the consumers in East Asia with Paris, New York, and all other western global cities. In other words, these skincare products maneuvered the indigenous East Asian customers’ preferences at the intersection of global racial hierarchy and white supremacy, revering a white-centered aesthetics in the name of cosmopolitanism. Through combining a diverse range of racial markers, including blond hair, brown skin, and stylized eyes, the export-oriented cosmetic advertisers in the U.S. in the 1920s, based on an imagined belief of converging lifestyles and looks from around the world as part of an international business logic, successfully promoted a “cosmopolitan aesthetic,” as if any woman participating in it would be globally recognized as a cosmopolitan transcending all the existing racial, social, and class hurdles. The alluring idea of cosmopolitanism which incorporates local cultural traditions, despite of its white-oriented essence, seems to pacify those anti-foreign patriots who eventually embrace the new global aesthetics with an aspiration for a globally recognized identity.

⁷⁷ Mikiko Ashikari, "The Memory of the Women's White Faces: Japaneseness and the Ideal Image of Women," *Japan Forum* 15, no. 1 (January 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955580032000077739>.

⁷⁸ Michael R. Godley, "The End of the Queue: Hair as Symbol in Chinese History," *East Asian History*, no. 8 (December 1994).

This mobile and unforeseeable relationship between consumers and the flowing symbolic commodities was mediated by marketers: the imagination alongside the consumption of skincare products is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.⁷⁹ However, consumers fail to realize the link between their practices of their own identity and modernity are contingent on a highly regulated and globalized aesthetics by marketing experts. As Carl Crow, the famous advertiser who operated the Pond's account in Shanghai in the 1920s, confessed, 'We always *redraw* the pictures in China.'⁸⁰ At the same time, the new fantasy of a universal beauty standard that beauty marketers advocate stir up domestic tensions between local traditions and the global aesthetics. The cosmopolitan aesthetics threatens the privileged group's desire to constantly distinguish themselves from the rest. Thus, the mutually contradicting ideas of triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular determines that the local indie aesthetics have to compromise. In essence, an imagined universal aesthetics is centered on whiteness and paleness which caters for only the superior white and inevitably leads to references to racial phantoms through racializing of the other and of themselves. As Geoffrey Jones summarizes, despite the aesthetics is universally shared, one of the peculiarities of the emergent global economy was that 'country, or city, of origin always assumed an ever-greater importance as an indication of quality and prestige.'⁸¹

⁷⁹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 4.

⁸⁰ *The Modern*, 293.

⁸¹ Jones, "Globalization and Beauty," 891.

Chapter Three

Mediated Skincare Consumption in the COVID-19 Context and Beyond

I. Consumption as a Mediated Social Practice in the COVID-19 Context

The rapidly changing conditions of COVID-19 compel us to contemplate the unprecedented ways skincare products are being presented, marketed, and sold to consumers. One way of thinking about it is through the lens of Innovation Theory illustrated at the end of Chapter One and what Joseph Schumpeter called creative destructions.⁸² Yet this chapter pushes beyond the framework of Innovation Theory, articulating the active role of entrepreneurs in driving innovations in not only producing but marketing products. Premised on an analysis of the COVID-19 survey data, this chapter sheds light on technology-oriented tactics that entrepreneurs use to reshape and reinforce consumers' response to the pandemic and the preexisting trend of a convenient economy. Specifically, I will not only synopsise the skincare consumption behaviors in relation to the larger global beauty market trends in light of the pandemic, but also unpack the unique Chinese story through comparing the Chinese COVID-19 market data to empirical evidence illustrated in Chapter Two. In other words, through singling out the Chinese story from the rest of the globe, this chapter identifies new roles and strategies that global marketers enact in the ever-evolving dynamic between consumers and the COVID-19 context in which they reside in, but further demonstrates the influence of preexisting colonial ideologies maneuvered by entrepreneurs in nurturing and maintaining consumers' elasticity of demand for culturally symbolic products.

⁸² Schumpeter, *The Theory*.

Contrasting colonial marketing strategies of constructing a public consumption space, this chapter highlights how technologies empower the entrepreneurs to reach consumers in their personal space (i.e. home) and further maneuver consumers' connection to beauty products: consumers are constantly absorbing new ways of constructing an imaginative self-identity through the screens of technological devices. In other words, strategic players in the beauty industry fully leverage technologies to provide consumers with an interactive and immersive experience where beauty ideas are presented, diffused, and reproduced. With China's distinctive inelastic demand for skincare products amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I aim to demonstrate how the consumption pattern of skincare products is sustained under colonial ideologies revived in the beauty marketing campaigns. Given the advent of media and new social norms defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, I will illustrate how marketers further take advantage of the emergent e-commerce trend, which consumers didn't systematically respond to it until the COVID-19 period, to reinforce marketing strategies that integrate AI (Artificial Intelligence) and echo the resurgent colonial ideologies regarding hygiene and health. In this way, marketers benefit from the COVID-19 context, just like how they implanted concepts of 'health and hygiene' into traditional East Asian traditions during the colonial period, accelerating the transition into a digital world, catalyzing the maturity of e-commerce, and thus constructing a bond between consumers and skincare products amid the global pandemic. In other words, in-time marketing strategies diffused in digital channels perfectly accommodate the ascending trend of e-commerce and endow existing products with new social values that speak to consumers.

The impalpable yet trendy concepts of "health and hygiene" are reinjected into skincare products and accentuated by marketing campaigns, guiding consumers to further embrace wellness-centered products on e-commerce platforms as a response to the newly defined

digitized shopping reality. Correspondingly, consumers internalize the symbolic values embedded in these skincare products through their interactive and iterative daily online experience, adopting consumption behaviors and cultivating new consumption preferences fostered by advanced digital media and, inevitably, threatening the traditional marketing channels, such as physical stores, theaters, and posters. Prospecting beyond the COVID-19 context, this project invites readers to ponder over the post-pandemic global consumption phenomena as well as the ways strategic market players utilize to maintain certain desirable consumption patterns, which cannot be explained by the limited exogenous preferences framework adopted by mainstream economics. Thus, this project presents itself as an example of illustrating the importance of applying a sociological lens when viewing economic issues.

II. The Digital Marketing Culture among New Generations of Consumers

In the context of a convenient digital and automated economy, cutting-edge technological devices and trendy social platforms engage consumers to research, explore, and consume beauty ideals and symbolic goods in both public places and private settings. And COVID-19 provides the digital marketing culture with two edges. First, the lockdown policy during the pandemic increases the time individuals spend on their screens. As figure 3 shows, mobile time increased significantly overall during the outbreak with China as an outstanding example. For instance, as seen in figure 4, Chinese individuals spent much more time on Tik Tok as COVID-19 lock-down policies were executed. More importantly, COVID-19 validates the reliability of digital marketing sources, such as social media influencers, through eliminating other marketing channels that were available to consumers prior to the pandemic. Market research shows that 85

percent of Generation Z learns about new products on social media.⁸³ Based on Accenture's consumer survey, Instagram is the most popular app for brand discovery, with 45 percent of teens using it to find cool new products, followed by Facebook, which comes in at 40 percent. Before making a purchase, Gen Zers are two times more likely than Millennials to turn to YouTube.⁸⁴ YouTube is also the platform of preference when it comes to shopping recommendations, ranking first among Generation Z with 24 percent, followed by Instagram at 17 percent and Facebook at 16 percent.⁸⁵ All in all, marketers come up with soft innovation in ways of engaging consumers and forming a continuous and systemic dialectic between consumers and desirable status goods.

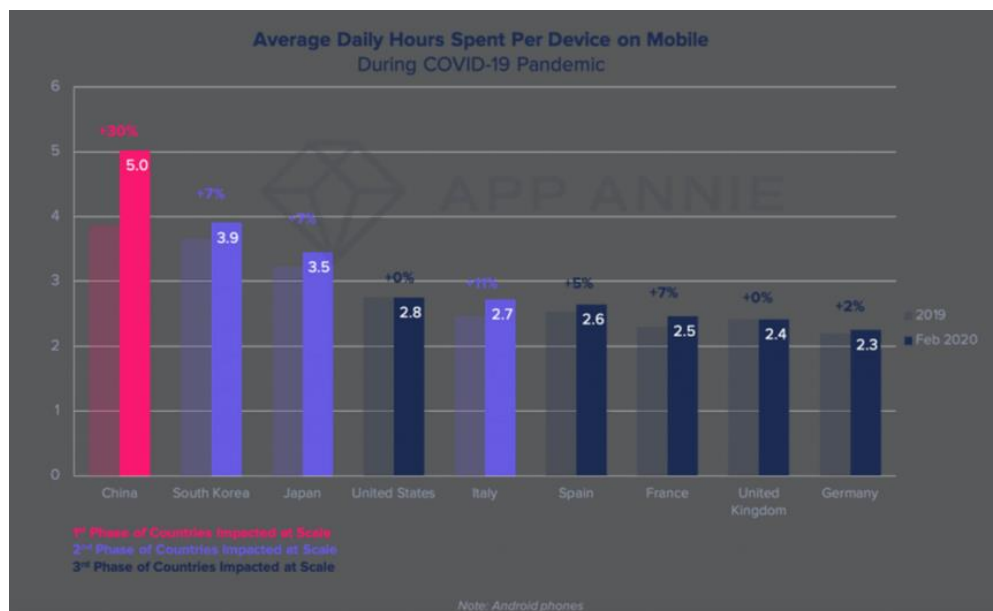


Figure 3. Average Daily Hours Spent per Device During COVID-19 Pandemic. Lexi Sydow, "Market Data: The Impact of Coronavirus on the Mobile Economy," App Annie, March 17, 2020.

⁸³ 85% of Gen Z Uses Social to Learn about New Products, But..., "Marketing Charts, last modified November 16, 2016, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.marketingcharts.com/digital-72442>.

⁸⁴ Accenture, "Gen Z and Millennials Leaving Older Shoppers and Many Retailers in Their Digital Dust," *Accenture Retail*, 2017, 3.

⁸⁵ Emma Bazilian, "Infographic: 50% of Gen Z 'Can't Live without YouTube' and Other Stats That Will Make You Feel Old," *Adweek*, May 22, 2017, accessed November 30, 2020.

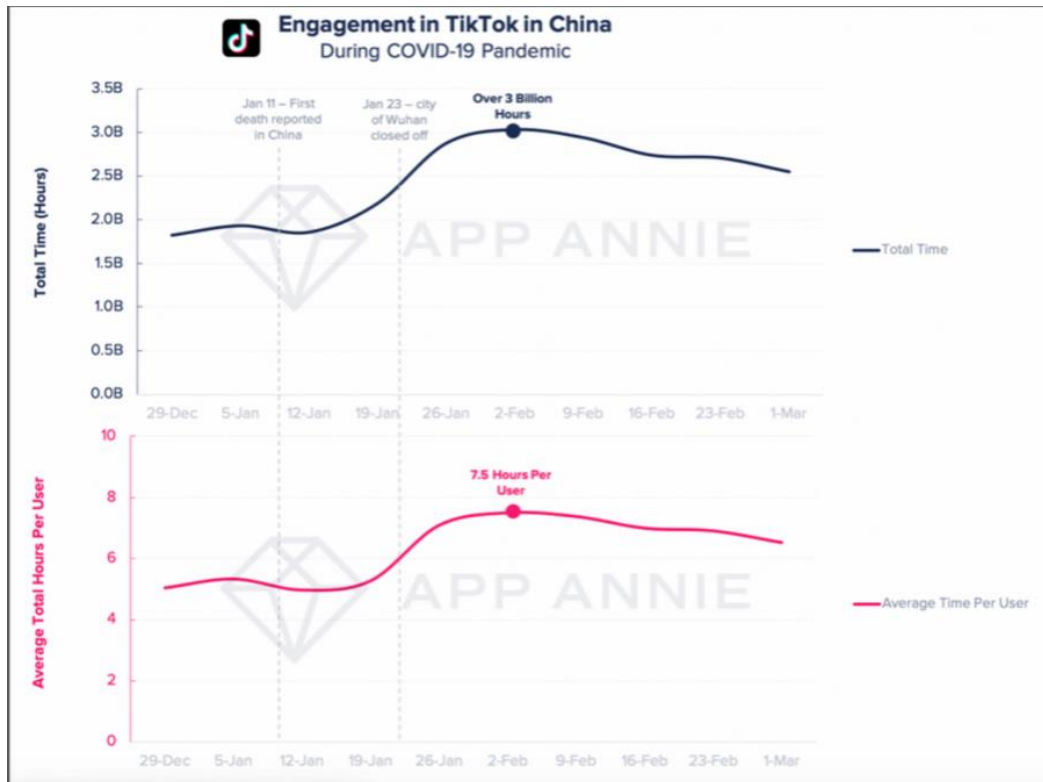


Figure 4. Average/Total Time Spent on Tik Tok in China During COVID-19 Pandemic. Cited from Sydow, "Market Data."

Furthermore, marketers and firms repackage their products to grip on existing cultural ideologies as a way to nurture and maintain the inelastic demands for their products. As seen in the Chapter Two, the market for whitening skincare products in the imperial context is interlacing with colonial consumerism, western ideas of racial hierarchy, gender politics, and class distinction. And later in this chapter, we will see how marketers take decisive leads in navigating social and cultural signals amid the COVID-19 pandemic to revive ideas of health and hygiene in the presentation and promotion of skincare products.⁸⁶ Besides the inherited colonial ideologies of health and hygiene, marketers rebrand beauty enterprises around consumer enthusiasm for ESG (environmental, social, governmental) issues drastically ignited at the

⁸⁶ Casson and Wadeson, "The Discovery"; McMullen, Plummer, and Acs, "What Is an Entrepreneurial"; Sarasvathy, *Effectuation: Elements*.

intersection of a global pandemic and existing social conflicts. Based on a Facebook survey, 61 percent of Gen Z also says they would pay more for products or services that are produced in an ethical and sustainable way.⁸⁷ A 2019 Morgan Stanley Institute for Sustainable Investing survey of high net worth investors found that 95 percent of millennials were interested in sustainable investing. In order to capture the interests of young consumers and especially female consumers, more and more brands present an ESG story to draw consumers' attention. For instance, as shown in figure 5, Chagrín Valley Soap & Salve Company claims to make their own sustainable packages, uses only organic ingredients, and prioritizes environment before products.



Figure 5. 'Greatest Hits Skin Care Sampler' from Chagrín Valley Soap & Salve Company. Cited from "Skin Care Gifts: Greatest Hits Skin Care Sampler," Chagrín Valley Soap & Salve Company, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.chagrinvalleysoapandsalve.com/p/gift-natural-skin-care-sampler-a/>.

⁸⁷ Facebook, "Gen Z: Getting to Know the 'Me Is We' Generation," *Facebook for Business*, October 22, 2019, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/generation-z/>.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need dive into the consumer market and ruminate over the revived ideologies beneath the surface of consumption as an economic phenomenon. A strong and resilient beauty market is fueled by both technological innovations of ways that brands approach consumers and digitize consumer experience and soft innovations of marketing messages that relate consumers to products. Within a highly digitized and heavily mediated marketplace, we should be aware of how new value chain is redefined through innovations yet reconstructed upon certain colonial ideologies. These new consumption possibilities serve beyond the fulfillment of consumers' utilitarian needs or simple desire for the acquisition and use of products yet produce new ways to reengage consumers with status goods.

III. The COVID-19 Skincare Industry and the Chinese Story

The global beauty industry stands out as a distinctive market as it shows an interesting resiliency. As observed in figure 6 and figure 7, the overall beauty industry has been resilient in the past, even during the 2008 financial crisis, with different types of products manifesting differentiated growth rates. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the skincare segment and personal care products have been leading as the primary drivers for the beauty industry with a strong base and fast growth. As the pandemic hit, despite sales of skincare products for the first quarter of 2020 remained weak as a result of the widespread store closures and bankruptcies, the overall beauty industry responded quickly and positively to the crisis as soon as brands switched their manufacturing to produce hand sanitizers and cleaning agents which follow the trendy emphasis on health and hygiene.

The global beauty-industry market has been consistently resilient.

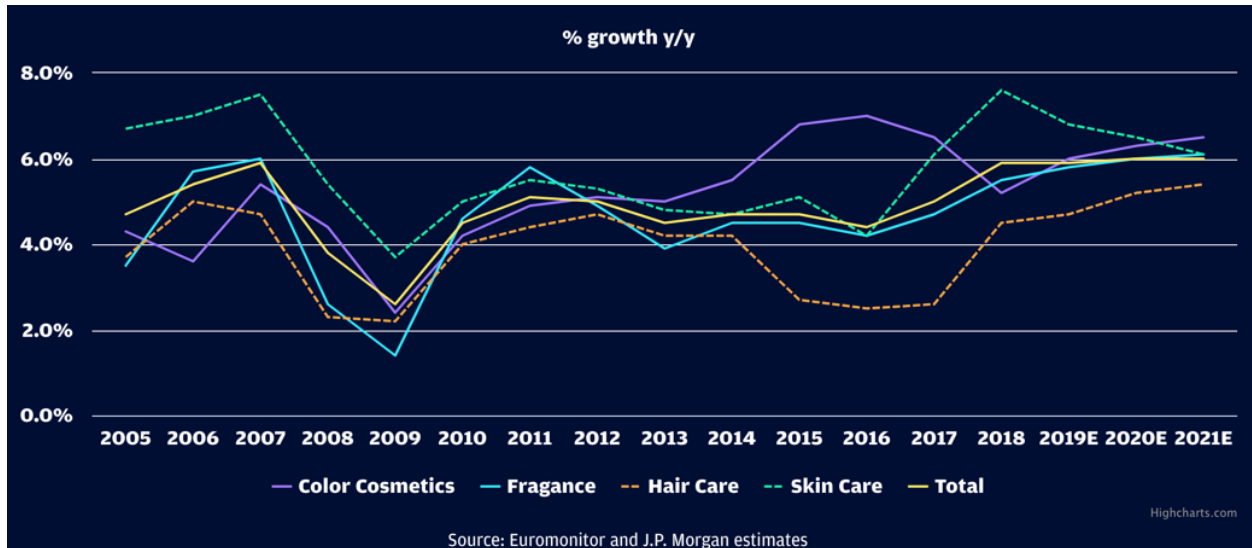
Global beauty-industry retail sales, \$ billion



Note: Figures may not sum to listed totals, because of rounding.
¹Includes bath, hair-care, men's shaving, oral-care, shower, and adults' sun-care products; deodorants; and depilatories.
 Source: Euromonitor

McKinsey & Company

Figure 6. The Global Beauty Industry Retail Sales by Category Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Cited from Emily Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19 Is Changing the World of Beauty," *McKinsey & Company Consumer Packaged Goods Insights*, May 5, 2020.



Source: Euromonitor and J.P. Morgan estimates

Figure 7. The (Estimated) Percentage Growth of the Global Beauty Industry. Cited from J.P. Morgan, "How Technology is Giving the Beauty Industry a Makeover," *J.P. Morgan Insights*, October 8, 2019.

In general, global consumers intend to spend less on beauty products, but other categories could fare even worse. However, skincare industry is performing better than other industries in the pandemic context thanks to skin-care products and personal care products which are quickly pivoted to reverberate the ubiquitous accentuation of concepts like wellness, hygiene, and care. For instance, soap is the superstar among skincare products which marries the care products perfectly with the concept of hygiene. Some beauty makers like Avon are donating soap to help countries around the world limit the spread of COVID-19 and increase its global presence, after CDC appoints handwashing as its top recommendation for people to protect themselves from COVID-19. Others like P&G are wallowing in the increased global attention as they just launched a new disinfectant brand, Microban 24, to kill cold and flu viruses.⁸⁸

The advancement of skincare market illustrated in figure 8, as one of the fastest growing categories in not only the beauty but the overall consumer goods industry, is constantly driven by an undergoing digital transformation of brand-consumer communication. In the pre-pandemic era, the emerging influencer marketing digital culture has been dominating the popular social platforms, from YouTube where influencers with millions of followers present an “unboxing” experience and try on new skincare products to Instagram where influencers and bloggers share their daily skincare routines and tag certain sponsored products and brands. Nowhere is this e-commerce push more evident than in China. Historically a dominant skin care market, China is now the second largest beauty player in the world, expanding to 14 percent of the overall global market in 2018 from 12 percent in 2013; the top players in luxury skincare in China are L'Oréal

⁸⁸ Barrett J. Brunsmann, "P&G Launches Brand That Kills Some Coronaviruses, Other Germs," *The Business Journals: Cincinnati Business Courier*, February 27, 2020, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2020/02/27/p-g-launches-brand-that-kills-coronavirus-other.html>.

with 17 percent share, followed by Estée Lauder with 13 percent and Shiseido with 6 percent.⁸⁹

With no doubt, e-commerce has played a significant role in driving this growth, with online sales now representing a quarter of the market, as brands have been able to reach customers outside the most developed Chinese cities through multiple digital channels.

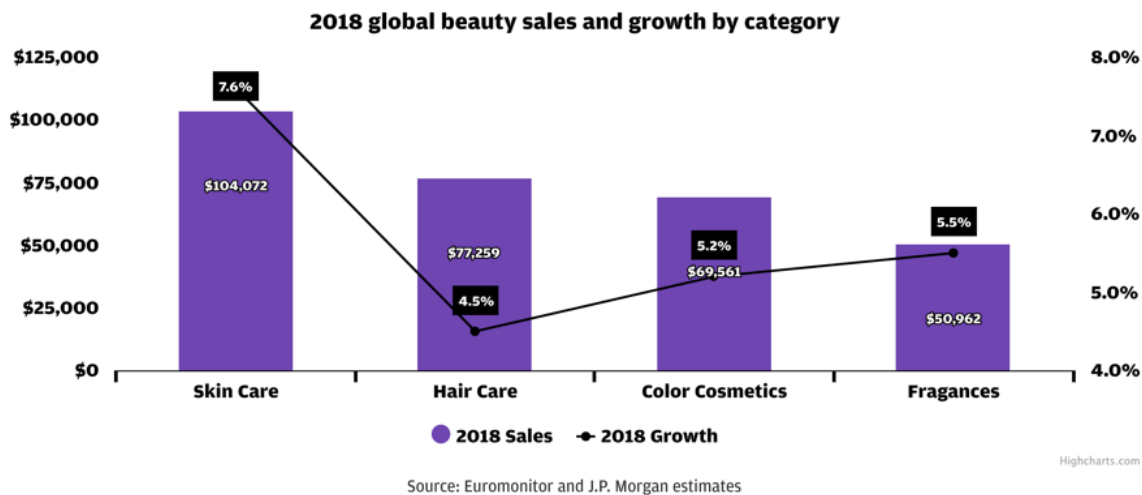


Figure 8. Skincare Category Leading the Growing Global Beauty Industry in 2018. Cited from J.P. Morgan, "How Technology," J.P. Morgan Insights.

Specifically, shown in figure 9, Chinese consumer demand for skincare products in the COVID-19 context remains extremely inelastic comparing to other countries. Observed in figures 10 and figure 11, Chinese consumption of discretionary goods is recovering at an astonishing pace: Chinese consumers are spending more on skincare and makeup products even during a global pandemic while other countries are drastically reducing the amount spent on these non-essential products. Besides the effective governmental policies regarding COVID-19 pandemic, the rest of this chapter reads the current phenomenon in the Chinese skincare industry with a connection to the colonial past and post-Mao e-commerce consumer culture mediated by

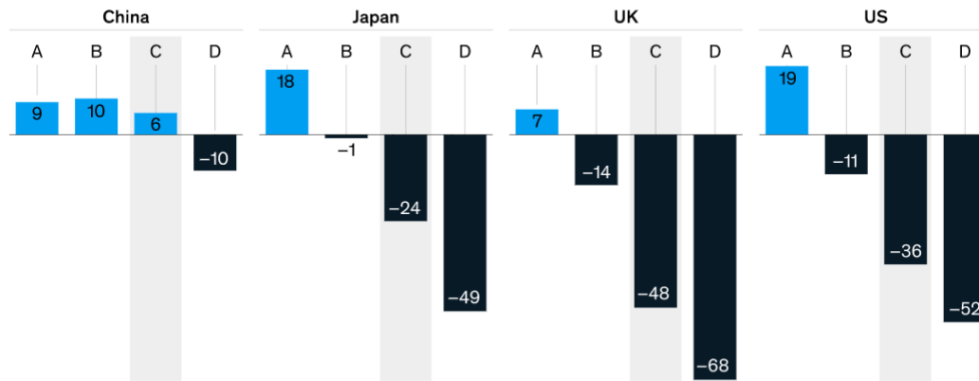
⁸⁹ J.P. Morgan, "How Technology is Giving the Beauty Industry a Makeover," J.P. Morgan Insights, last modified October 8, 2019, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.jpmorgan.com/insights/research/beauty-industry>.

marketing strategies. Chinese consumer culture is constituted, sustained, transformed, and shaped by broader historical forces and grounded in socioeconomic consumption space. Thus, the Chinese story reminds us to investigate the neglected experiential, social, and cultural dimensions of consumption in context.⁹⁰

Global consumers intend to spend less on beauty products, but other categories could fare even worse.

Expected spend per category over next 2 weeks compared with usual, net intent¹

A Groceries B Personal-care products C Skin-care products/makeup D Apparel



¹Net intent calculated by subtracting % of respondents stating they expect to decrease spend from % of respondents stating they expect to increase spend. Question: Over the next 2 weeks, do you expect that you will spend more, about the same, or less money on these categories than usual? Source: McKinsey COVID-19 Consumer Pulse Surveys, results sampled and weighted to match general population aged ≥18 years: Apr 15–19, 2020, in China (including Hubei province) (n = 1,896); Apr 17–19, 2020, in Japan (n = 600); Apr 18–19, 2020, in UK (n = 1,005); Apr 20–26, 2020, in US (n = 1,484)

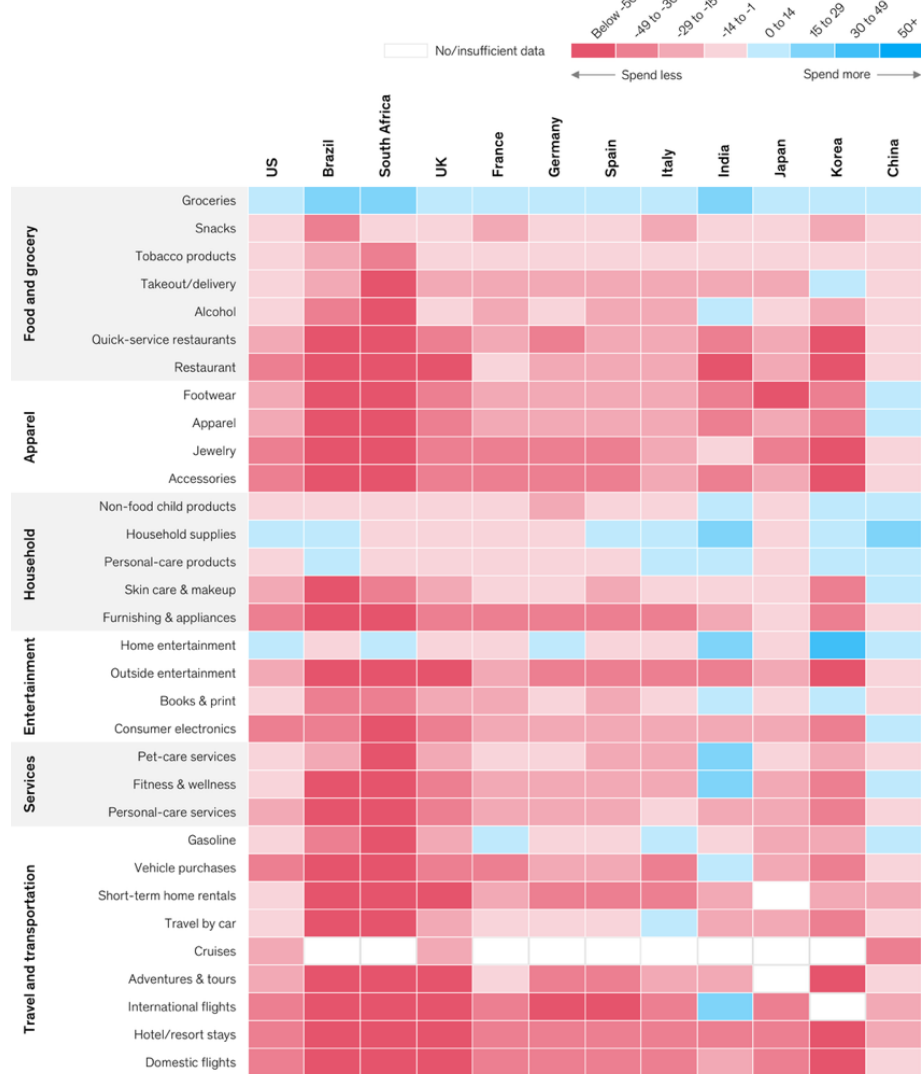
McKinsey & Company

Figure 9. Expected Global Spending on Beauty Products in Comparison to Other (Non-)Essential Products. Cited from Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19."

⁹⁰ Belk, "A Modest"; Belk, "Presidential Address"; Holbrook and Hirschman, "The Experiential."

Global consumers anticipate pulling back on spending across categories.

Expected spending per category over the next two weeks compared to usual¹
 Net intent %²



¹Q: "Over the next two weeks, do you expect that you will spend more, about the same, or less money on these categories than usual?"
²Net intent is calculated by subtracting the percent of respondents stating they expect to decrease spending from the percent of respondents stating they expect to increase spending.
 Source: McKinsey & Company COVID-19 Consumer Pulse surveys, conducted globally between March 15 and June 21, 2020. Source of data for South Africa and Brazil was from McKinsey & Company, COVID-19 Consumer Pulse surveys, conducted between May 15 and May 25, 2020.



Figure 10. Expected Global Spending by Category During COVID-19 Pandemic. Cited from Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19."



Consumer intent to spend is returning for some discretionary categories such as apparel, skin care, and consumer electronics

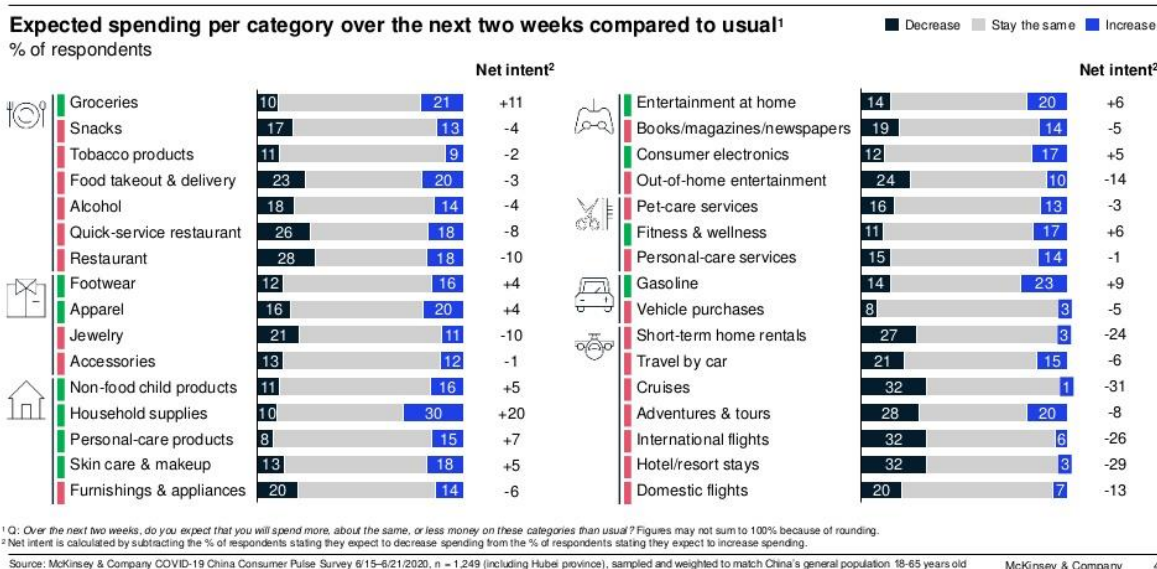


Figure 11. Chinese Consumer Spending by Category During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Cited from Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19."

The resilient consumption pattern as well as the inelastic consumer demands for skincare products are molded under the influence of several factors. On the one hand, even before the onset of COVID-19, China was a global front-runner in terms of the digital economy. As shown in figure 12, Chinese mobile payment penetration is triple that of the United States, while e-commerce accounted for 24 percent of total retail sales in 2019, compared with 9 percent in Germany, and 11 percent in the U.S. Indeed, China is the world's largest e-commerce market, accounting for about 45 percent of global retail e-commerce transaction value in 2018.⁹¹ At the same time, the adoption of social media and selfie culture in China from 2012 onwards has really favored the development of high-end beauty brands by creating a new point of distribution, well ahead of any developments seen in department stores. In the pre-pandemic period, luxury beauty

⁹¹ McKinsey & Company, "Understanding Chinese Consumers: Growth Engine of the World," *China Consumer Report 2021*, November 2020, 16.

players, such as Estée Lauder, have been the major beneficiaries of this e-commerce boom in China. The prestige cosmetics company grew over 40 percent in China in the 12 months to June 2019, on top of the 67 percent growth seen in the previous 12 months.⁹² The vibrant Chinese consumer culture in the beauty industry is a result of the superimposition of the preexisting consumer preferences inherited from the colonial context and the newly emergent needs in a digitized marketplace catalyzed by the web 3.0. By all means, consumer preferences and social forces are mutually constitutive. Chinese female consumers have been exposed to a social context where the need for social distinction is intensified to an extent that drives companies to respond to unprecedented needs for specific groups at a shocking pace and frequency. Traditional marketing strategies which root in concepts, such as the foothold on science, and traditions are still in circulation yet needed to incorporate new elements to better accommodate the changing consumer preferences. While the global pandemic, which broke out in the beginning of 2020, further blasted the already-capricious consumption behaviors as it accelerated social changes at a destructive momentum, eliminating the previous boundaries between gendered, polarized concepts, such as “private” and “public.”

⁹² J.P. Morgan, "How Technology," J.P. Morgan Insights.

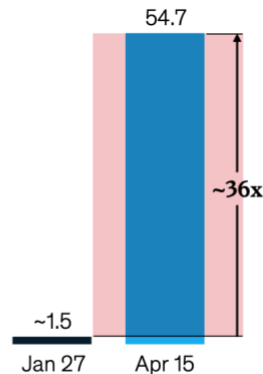
Digitization

China has long been a global leader in the digital economy

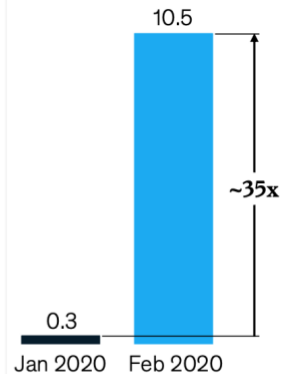


Consumers and businesses have accelerated their use of digital since COVID-19

Online medical consultations,
WeDoctor number of registered doctors on their free consultation platform (in K)



Virtual property "showrooms",
Beike VR virtual property showing sessions between agents and prospective buyers (in Mn)



Source: iResearch and MOFCOM for China; eMarketer for other countries; literature search; McKinsey analysis

Figure 12. Chinese advancement in e-commerce enabled businesses a smooth transition to COVID-19 pandemic. Cited from McKinsey & Company, "Understanding Chinese."

On the other hand, a growing middle class has also led to a rise in demand and consumer spending on status goods. In great contrast to a more monotonous beauty market profile in the early 20th century, a vibrant Chinese skin care industry is featured by the booming of mid and high-end skincare market accelerated by Chinese generation with new consumer backgrounds. Chinese female consumers aged from 26 to 45 years old are the primary consumers who stimulate the growth for the mid and high-end skincare market in China.⁹³ And especially what sets the Chinese market apart is the young customers with real spending power, ‘often subsidized by their parents and grandparents,’ said Celine Pannuti, head of European Consumer Goods

⁹³ McKinsey & Company, "The Many Faces of the Chinese Consumer," *Greater China Consumer & Retail Practice*, December 2019, China Consumer Report 2020.

Research at J.P. Morgan.⁹⁴ And mature e-commerce platforms, such as Alibaba and JD.com, have accelerated this process, particularly for luxury cosmetics and now represent more than 30 percent of premium cosmetics sales in China, according to Andrea Teixeira, head of North America Beverage, Household and Personal Care Research at J.P. Morgan.⁹⁵ As predicted in previous figures, the skincare segment is witnessed to grow faster than color cosmetics as the selfie generation grow up. Younger Chinese consumers, both millennials and gen-Zs, play a significant role in differentiating the Chinese beauty market from the rest of the world in the recent years as they are not only more affluent, but are using skin care much earlier than their older generation. This new generation of younger Chinese consumers are also different from earlier ones whose preference rooted in a traditional Chinese brand loyalty. Young Chinese consumers' preference for a customized product and brand is positively stimulating more research and development especially in the realm of skincare.

IV. Technology-Based Marketing as the Future of Beauty

To keep new generations of consumers engaged in a highly competitive market and nurture brand loyalty, skin-care brands are using new forms of technology to cater to diverse consumer profiles and personalize their products and services. Marketers found out that Generation Z is not only eager for more personalized products but also willing to pay a premium for products that highlight their individuality.⁹⁶ In fact, 58 percent of those surveyed said they are willing to pay more for products and services that highlight their individual personalities.⁹⁷ And,

⁹⁴ J.P. Morgan, "How Technology," J.P. Morgan Insights.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ McKinsey & Company, "The Many."

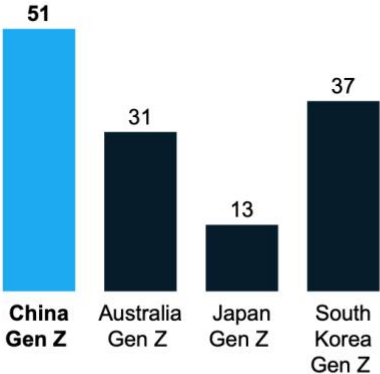
⁹⁷ Ibid.

as seen in figure 13, the consumer preference for uniqueness is much more pronounced in China in comparison to other countries. Moreover, contemporary consumer preferences formed on social distinction are fed by the flourishing e-commerce and social media and, in return, propelling brands to innovate. While technology is not enabling beauty brands to simply meet consumers' preferences yet to make consumption decisions for them through providing both customized advice and recommended products. From tutorials to targeted content, augmented reality, or even personalization of products, technology and digitalization equip brands with a solid advantage to leverage during the global pandemic.

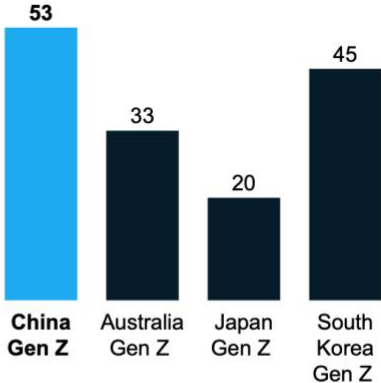
Gen Z across markets increasingly demand personalization of products and services

% who strongly agree or agree

I prefer brands that can customize their products for me, % who strongly agree or agree



I prefer brands that offer tailored services, % who strongly agree or agree



Source: 2019 Gen-Z Survey (N = 2,947 in China, N = 3,311 in Australia, N = 2,966 in Japan, and N = 2,482 in South Korea)

Figure 13. Desire for ‘unique’ products and services among Gen-Z. Cited from McKinsey & Company, "Understanding Chinese."

Digital and technology are at the heart of beauty approach, from research to production and from distribution to communication with consumers. Strategic beauty tycoons, such as

L'Oréal and Lancôme, are implementing cutting-edge technologies to tap into the growing consumer demand for a more personalized experience. L'Oréal claims to assist customers with looking for the perfect foundation shade to match their skin tone with through an interactive experience powered by artificial intelligence (AI). L'Oréal's luxury subsidiary brand, Lancôme, uses a custom-made machine (Opens Overlay) to scan the skin to find the right color match.⁹⁸ Customers at Lancôme beauty counters can then have their foundation mixed in-store, with a proprietary algorithm choosing the right shade from thousands of variations.

A technology-focused brand strategy helped this French beauty giant smoothly adapt to the pandemic. As early as in 2019, L'Oréal adopted Alibaba Cloud Technology to create an augmented reality (AR) game for Chinese consumers.⁹⁹ The game, alongside a Lancôme pop-up store in Harbour City, Hong Kong, enable customers to engage with an online and offline brand experience on their mobile devices. Those who find and capture augmented reality images of Lancôme's signature beauty product Génifique on their smartphone will be invited to send their seasonal wishes for a chance to win a selection of prizes. Additionally, the smart store also has other interactive elements to engage consumers. For instance, shown in figure 14, the Génifique Game Table in one of the pop-up stores in South Korea, offers new digital beauty experiences supported by contactless payment methods and enhanced levels of personalization, such as the name engraving services.

⁹⁸ J.P. Morgan, "How Technology," J.P. Morgan Insights.

⁹⁹ "Lancôme Uses Alibaba Cloud Technology for Chinese New Year Promotion," *Retail News Asia*, January 31, 2019, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.retailnews.asia/lancome-uses-alibaba-cloud-technology-for-chinese-new-year-promotion/>.



Figure 14. Lancôme's Génifique Game Table. Cited from Luke Barras-hill, "Lancôme Takes Centre Stage with Smart Store at Lotte Duty Free Myeongdong," *TR Business*, October 12, 2020.

The advanced technologies featured in the popup store provide L'Oréal with competitive advantages of contactless elements, such as digital payment methods, electronic price tags, personalized QR codes and personal mobile shopping carts, which promise consumers a complete digital contactless journey without compromising their safety. For example, Lancôme implemented the AR-enabled ModiFace make-up try-on service, shown in figure 15, known as Dream Face Smart Store, in travel retail. ModiFace, developed by dermatologists, offers augmented reality applications that include Skin AI, an anti-aging and skin care simulation application for the beauty and medical industries, including makeup, hair, and skincare. It also helps measure the precise state of skin and observe any potential skin changes in live videos. The app's technology is able to detect changes such as dark spots, discoloration, dryness, uneven skin and rosacea. It can even visualize the changes before and after the use of any beauty product,

helping to recommend and ultimately sell products for customers' specific skin care needs. After capturing customers' images, the software can simulate positive changes to the user's skin in a video. The company claims that seeing these predictive results immediately could encourage users to stick to their skin care regimens more strictly. Users first open the app, which captures the user's face through the user's camera on their phone; the software then measures the severity of the user's skin conditions and predicts the impact of a product on the consumer's skin after several applications of the product. The user's phone screen splits into a before and after video, showing the user how much a product could improve their skin condition.



Figure 15. ModiFace. Barras-hill, "Lancôme Takes."

While Estee Lauder is attempting to take customization to the masses with its Clinique-iD serum-infused moisturizers, leading Japanese beauty brand, Shiseido, is fully moving into delivering beauty as a service. Its preemptive innovation of Optune, launched on July 1st, 2019, takes the overall beauty industry to an unprecedented level. Optune is an IoT (Internet of Things), a machine that eliminates the need to select skincare products at all as it is a personalized

skincare system that offers 80,000 skincare patterns matched with individual user's daily skin conditions and living environments which change day to day.¹⁰⁰ It includes a dedicated application that uses an original algorithm to sense, analyze the daily skin condition data and environmental data as well as sleep data to detect biological rhythm disruption. Then the results of analysis are sent to a dedicated machine which provides optimal skincare fitting one's current conditions and personalizes the best mix of skin care cartridges for the machine, which dispenses just the right amount of product. It is also known as Shiseido's first subscription service, with a monthly charge of 10,000 yen (approximately \$100 USD). When the cartridges are nearly empty, replacements are ordered automatically. The group also recently acquired a startup specializing in artificial skin or "Second Skin" technology. This is not yet available to customers, but the brand is developing a technology that physically corrects the condition of the skin, using a product that contains a reactive polymer layer.

Technology supports beauty tycoons to swiftly adjust to the new normal amid the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, it enables brands to enhance the customer experience and ensure their safety when delivering a seamlessly integrated physical and digital "retail-tainment" experience. On the other hand, technology empowers beauty startups to complement the products and revolutionize their role in the beauty industry. Rather than focus on the products, indie beauty brands focus on how they can engage their consumers better. Within an already saturated beauty industry, brands have to remain extremely alerted about not only the drastic changes in how consumers experience shopping today but also a transition of consumption power to a new generation who hold new consumption principles: they don't just buy, but only purchase products of brands that resonate with their values. At the same time, interactive

¹⁰⁰ "L'Oréal Unveils Perso, an AI-Powered At-Home System for Skincare and Cosmetics," L'Oréal, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.loreal.com/en/usa/articles/research-and-innovation/loreal-unveils-perso/>.

technology bridges the brand engagement with consumers. Skincare brand Olay has partnered with Shopee for a new digital campaign targeted at the millennial consumer demographic as part of its strategic e-commerce growth plans for South East Asia. With the pandemic driving more consumers to shop online, the Proctor & Gamble-owned brand has focused its strategy towards e-commerce. ‘Our strategy is to connect with millennials with e-commerce and social commerce which reflects the shift of media consumption and consumer spending habits today,’ said Lucy Moran, Olay and personal care senior e-commerce director of the EMEA region.¹⁰¹ According to Shopee’s consumer insights, digital-savvy millennials and Gen Zs are heavily influenced by online brand videos and content when choosing brands and products. Shopee’s consumer survey on over 16,000 consumers across Asia-Pacific revealed that 58 percent of millennial consumers are more influenced by online brand videos when choosing brands, including decisions about beauty and skin care needs.¹⁰²

V. COVID-19 as an Advantageous Context for the Beauty Industry

On the brighter note, for businesses and entrepreneurs, COVID-19 provides advantageous conditions in which these existing buds of consumer preferences are further nurtured and exploited by marketers in the name of hygiene at the intersection of racial and social aspirations. In comparison to the marketing strategies of skincare products in East Asia in the early twentieth century, which rested on traditional Chinese belief in proprietary medicine and brand history, marketers at the turn of 21st century utilize consumers’ emotional empathy to make them easily

¹⁰¹ Amanda Lim, "Ramping up Momentum: Olay Targets Millennials with New Digital Campaign in Bid to Drive SEA E-commerce Growth," *Cosmetics Design-Asia*, last modified October 20, 2020, accessed December 4, 2020.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

resonate with brand stories. With more advanced technologies, beauty brands claim to extract ingredients from nature that guarantees consumer an achievement of natural and light complexion. Brands position themselves in proximity to nature, blending modern biotechnology with Chinese tradition in proprietary medicine. For example, Chinese brand *Herborist* (佰草集) focuses on the synergy of technology and ancient Chinese herbal medicine to gradually bring about an ideal state of "nature and balance" according to Chinese culture.¹⁰³ Similarly, Australian brand *Jurlique* is famous for its commitment for sustainability and 'the most natural products,' extracting from the golden wattle from Australia.¹⁰⁴ And Japanese brand *Pola* is known for its cutting-edge technology in anti-aging and whitening extricated from dermis: it successfully developed the quasi-medical ingredient Rucinol® after 10 years of research and put forward a new theory focusing on the skin's ability to self-clear.¹⁰⁵ *Pola* has also defined *Skin Vitals* – the true power of the skin to become more beautiful – to be a quantitative beauty indicator.

Departing from earlier marketing concepts which cling onto a universal embracement of science, technology, and modernity, beauty brands further embellish fascinating brand stories and concepts for target customers and conveniently remarries the significance of hygiene and health to skincare products in light of COVID-19. In other words, while the majority of the world gasping in horror at the sight of a global pandemic, skincare businesses transplant the colonial roots of ideas related to individuals' sense of well-being to the contemporary emphasis of hygiene and health, legitimizing the skincare routine and ensuring a sustainable demand for their products.

¹⁰³ "Herborist," Jahwa, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.jahwa.com.cn/en/herborist>.

¹⁰⁴ Sustainability: Our Deep Connection," Jurlique, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.jurlique.com/us/csr-sustainability.html>.

¹⁰⁵ "Science. Bringing Innovation through Spirit of Scientific Inquiry and Challenge," Pola, last modified January 2020, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.pola.com/polastory/science/index.html>.

The global pandemic is shaking neither the deeply grounded sociological ideas of conspicuous consumption (i.e. status consumption through products), the unstoppable rise of a global middle class alongside the leisure culture, nor the fully-fledged digital platforms on the edge of a convenience economy. As explained in Chapter One, leisure has symbolized the class demarcation as early as in the colonial period. Parallel to a digital-oriented lifestyle enabled by the maturity of Web 3.0, an expanded group of middle and upper-class has emerged: consumers who long for leisure and fancy a social identity achieved through the consumption of status goods, such as skin care products, cigarettes, and alcohol. The consistent need to consume conspicuous goods to differentiate their class, race, and gender identities prompts companies to not only launch new products but also improve customer experience to nurture an inelastic demand. However, in the new digital world, traditional advertisement strategies used to target consumers in physical public space, such as theaters, posters, department stores, and beauty salons, cannot stand alone without the support of a systematic e-commerce channel and high-end marketing technologies incorporating AI, especially given the disruptions caused by COVID-19 as well as the rising needs for personalized products and services. Though offline channel has a strong base in the pre-COVID context, physical store transformation is gradually losing its significance in the face of a drastically transforming digital-oriented social lifestyle among young Chinese consumers. This new type of consumer behaviors deriving from mobilization and socialization among young Chinese consumers is gaining popularity along decision journey of consumption. As a result, offline channels are required to supplement the primary online channels which have the most significant growth rate driven by more fragmented time spent on digital devices and a more diversified consumer demography.

What COVID-19 transforms isn't necessarily the pattern of consumer behavior, given consumers' heavy dependence on digital platforms to gather information of products and brands even in the pre-pandemic period, but the intensity and frequency of consumers' engagement with brands. In the early planning stage, beauty brands reposition their fancy concepts and design different product diversification roadmaps, launching sub-brands to target distinctive consumers with sophisticated and diversified needs and predicting growing need from potential consumers. Since more consumers gain product information through social media in the awareness phase, ranging from WeChat to influencer messages, marketers tend to multiply the influencer marketing effect through composing fascinating stories or hot topics, conducting social media-focus marketing initiatives, and inviting celebrities as spokespersons. For example, with an increasing popularity of Japanese and Korean content such as TV shows, emerging beauty brands sponsor idols in the TV shows to improve market penetration so as to exert power over consumer decision journey. Altogether, promising marketing messages from beauty brands and influencers lead consumers to the ultimate stage of marketing funnel – the purchasing phase.

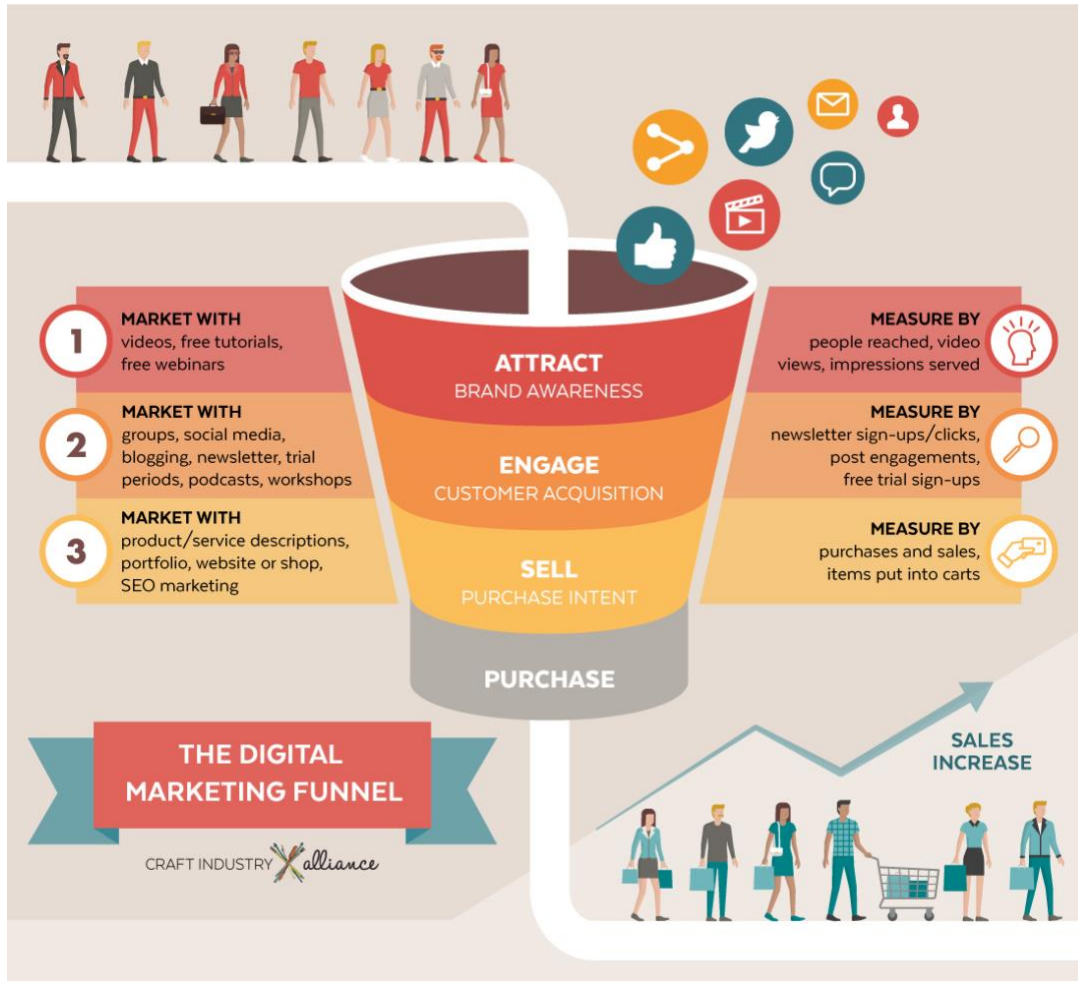


Figure 16. The Digital Marketing Funnel. Cited from Melanie O'Brien, How to Put the Marketing Funnel to Work for Your Creative Business, illustration, Craft Industry Alliance, August 27, 2018, accessed December 6, 2020, <https://craftindustryalliance.org/how-to-put-the-marketing-funnel-to-work-for-your-creative-business/>.

More importantly, zooming out from the Chinese story to the universal environment of a new working or learning routine, individuals around the globe are dedicating more time on digital devices on a daily basis. Beauty businesses take full advantage of the pandemic to deliver marketing ideas through screens and thus increase the frequency and intensity of prospective consumers' engagement with their products, especially in the planning and awareness phases. On the one hand, as lockdowns began and most businesses transfer to a digital operational mode,

greater penetration of e-commerce and increased screen-time of consumers stimulate impulsive shopping out of frequent encounter with mobile advertisement and shopping. Brand strategists optimized consumers' digital purchasing experience through various ways. One method is to design customized pages respectively targeting both young and older consumers and fully leveraging big data to recommend a personalized product for them. Besides an innovative AI skincare system, various shopping websites have established customer persona formulation by machine learning. For instance, Proven Skincare, in figure 17, is a consumer app that uses machine learning to create individual skincare regimens based on a customer's unique skin type.¹⁰⁶ The company states that the recommended regimen is based on their Beauty Genome Project, a database of more than 8 million customer product reviews, 100,000 skincare products, and 20,000 ingredients, as well as information from scientific or peer-reviewed journal articles about skin and ingredients. Without any demo videos that explain the application, customers can start using the web-based application by first taking a quiz that asks about their skin condition, including dryness, pigmentation, acne, and elasticity. The app also asks about factors that could affect skin condition, such as age, sun exposure, race, diet, sleep habit, and activities such as work and fitness regimen. The data collected is analyzed and compared with the application's database. Then, machine learning algorithms match the customer's unique skin profile and suggest a skin care regimen.

¹⁰⁶ Ayn de Jesus, "Artificial Intelligence for Beauty and Cosmetics – Current Applications," Emerj, last modified March 4, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://emerj.com/ai-sector-overviews/artificial-intelligence-for-beauty-and-cosmetics-current-applications/>.



Figure 17. Proven Skincare App. Cited from Jesus, "Artificial Intelligence," Emerj.

Another mobile-end marketing strategy linking modern concepts, such as the urban concept of convenience and contemporary topics related to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Government), is strengthened to promote emotional and impulsive consumer behaviors. Nevertheless, themes that speak to contemporary young consumers are highlighted in the packaging and production of products as well as in the brand history or mission. Additionally, marketing strategists designed easy order placement on social media to stimulate impulsive consumption and generate orders. In order to make up the lost interactive experience of trying on a new product which used to happen only in the offline concept stores, some e-commerce platforms, such as Sephora and Ulta Beauty, lure beauty shoppers with fancy discounts, free samples, and free shippings; others, such as Smashbox and Drunk Elephant, reinvented the traditional formats, allowing customers to buy samples directly from their websites.¹⁰⁷ In fact,

¹⁰⁷ Rachel Brown, "Ulta Beauty and Sephora Take Different Approaches to Raising Their Clean Beauty Profiles," *Beauty Independent Retail Report*, June 23, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.beautyindependent.com/ulta-beauty-sephora-raising-clean-beauty-profiles/>.

beauty samples are the third-largest driver to purchase for full-size products.¹⁰⁸ More importantly, some beauty brands rely on conversion data to know what to continue sampling in the future. For example, Smashbox ran a stocking stuffer program and allowed shoppers to curate and collect three samples. And, in return, the customer data enabled Smashbox to fine-tune their approach and deepen customer loyalty, while endlessly differentiating themselves in an increasingly crowded beauty market. While others come up with subscription-based strategies and mark the first month of products for free. For instance, Curology is an American skincare brand that claims to match subscribers with a real, live, licensed medical provider for an online consultation.¹⁰⁹ Based on a questionnaire and selfies uploaded, the personal dermatology provider will evaluate consumers' skin and provide a prescription. Through subscribing to the prescription, customers will get the first month for free.

On the other hand, in-person experience was a crucial part of beauty consumption despite of a rising popularity with e-commerce along the trend of a convenient urban lifestyle. During the pre-pandemic times, marketing professionals strove to optimize consumers' in-person experience of the products through providing designated services in regard to their level of expectation. Customer services, such as luxury facial care, massage, SPA, offered in "concept stores" and "experience stores" cater to middle and high-end consumer desire for experience consumption and a sense of personal and value identification. These counter and exclusive (conceptual) shops are a vital supplement to the booming online sales as they cultivate brand culture and retain high-end brand images through showcasing technology power (e.g. skin prick, VR visit), emphasizing product experience, and promoting a specific lifestyle that is socially

¹⁰⁸ Euromonitor International, "Sampling in Beauty: How Sampling Became Profitable," *Euromonitor International Analyst Insight*, April 21, 2015, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://blog.euromonitor.com/sampling-in-beauty-how-sampling-became-profitable/>.

¹⁰⁹ Curology, last modified February 13, 2019, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://blog.curology.com/curology-is-for-you-really-9dc9db5ef716>.

significant and exclusive to the leisure class. Moreover, consumer loyalty is further secured by after-sale service centered on brand concept/stories. Through implementing systematic consumer lifecycle management campaigns, beauty brands cultivate an environment as well as a routine for beauty consumption, establishing a connection between brand culture and consumers. The bond between consumers and products is gradually formed in experiences, such as a skin SPA. In this way, beauty brands guide consumers to realize the significance of beauty and, at the same time, actively collect consumer feedback to facilitate the R&D process and roll out products quickly to better suit consumer needs. In a word, with the synergy of online and offline strategies that focus on experience and convenience respectively, marketing strategists form a connection between brand culture and consumers to attract, convert, and lock down consumers through social activities that provide leisure services, such as beauty salon workshops, theme parties, and educational program, such as skincare experts conferences, to not only accommodate but also influence consumer preferences.

VI. Consumption and Innovation: Experience/Search/Credence Goods

Nonetheless, consumer experience, closely tied to the purchasing phase, of skincare products is revolutionized by the global pandemic. Beauty businesses are wracking their brains to come up with creative strategies that bridge the gap between the worldwide lockdown phenomenon and the previous vivacious consumer culture. Skincare products and beauty services grounded in avant-garde concepts of customization and revolutionary technologies loomed as the savior of the beauty industry, reconstructing the connection between consumers and products and the one between individual experience and brand values. At the same time,

consumers are more cautious about their digital shopping decisions considering the financial disruptions and additional free time dedicated to online searching. Additional marketing efforts are correspondingly invested in branding, as witnessed on and off brands' website. Besides increasing marketing spending to boost their presence and ranking in the hierarchical search engines and on social media platforms, beauty brands redesigned their website which now becomes the main gate where consumers are invited to interact with beauty products. Web designers use a soothing color palette to boost consumer moods and optimize the UX (user experience).

Despite not backed up by a digital consumer culture as mature as the one in China, e-commerce around the world has surged this year as pandemic-weary consumers looked online for everything from hand sanitizer and groceries to skincare products and cleaning supplies. In other words, the unique consumption pattern in the Chinese skincare market in light of COVID-19 is closely associated with its early colonial emphasis in concepts of hygiene and health as well as a pre-pandemic advanced digital shopping culture. Yet a shifting reliance on e-commerce is not limited to China but observed as a universal scene. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, consumers in the U.S. spent \$211.5 billion during the second quarter on e-commerce, up 31.8 percent quarter-over-quarter.¹¹⁰ The pandemic has pushed more shoppers online, with e-commerce now accounting for 16.1 percent of all U.S. sales, up from 11.8 percent in the first quarter and this trend is likely to stick, even as brick-and-mortar stores open their doors again.¹¹¹ As seen in figure 18, 77 percent American and 82 percent Chinese consumers are trying new shopping behaviors. Clearly, the popularity of e-commerce among consumers is challenging the

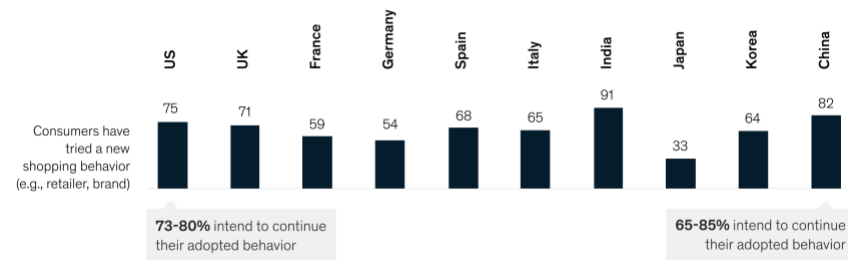
¹¹⁰ J.P. Morgan, "How COVID-19 Has Transformed Consumer Spending Habits," *J.P. Morgan Corporate & Investment Banking Solutions*, November 23, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.jpmorgan.com/solutions/cib/research/covid-spending-habits>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

traditional consumer loyalty as consumers are given relatively more freedom in the process of researching and comparing different products offered by beauty brands online.

Over 60 percent of global consumers have changed shopping behavior, many of them for convenience and value.

Customers who have tried new shopping behaviors since COVID-19¹
 % of respondents



Top 3 reasons for shopping a new brand²



¹Q: "Since the coronavirus (COVID-19) situation started (i.e., in the past ~3 months), which of the following have you done?"
²Q: "You mentioned you tried a new/different brand than what you normally buy. What was the main reason that drove this decision? Select up to 3." Brand includes different brand, new private label/ store brand.

Source: McKinsey & Company, COVID-19 Consumer Pulse surveys, conducted globally between 6/15 and 6/21/2020

McKinsey & Company

Figure 18. Shift in Consumer Preference During COVID-19 Pandemic. Cited from Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19."

These phenomena witnessed in the global beauty markets further demonstrate the effectiveness of marketing strategies designed to make best use of the pandemic conditions where certain conventional binaries are challenged. Fundamentally, the new connection between consumers and their homes as well as the universal reemphasis on the ideas of hygiene and health upgrades skin care products from non-essential goods to a socially accepted necessity. A renewed attention on the need of germ-free body and home care is promoted: consumers are

educated to believe that beauty rituals can help improve mood. In other words, skincare products are no longer considered on the spectrum of experience/search goods, but taken as a credence good; namely, the credence qualities of skin care products cannot be evaluated in the normal, daily use, but taken for granted as a belief.

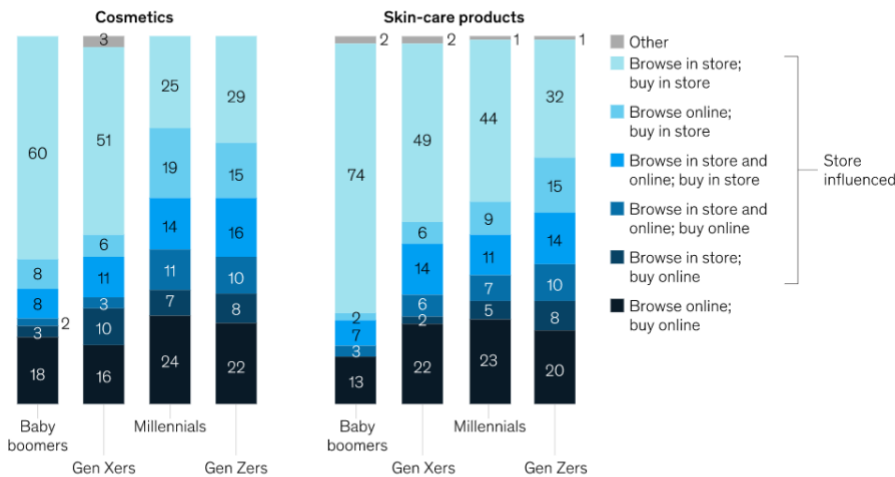
Marketers transform skincare products from experience/search goods into credence goods through strategically demonstrating certain values and social priorities reflected by the consumption of skincare products – the universal modern emphasis on health and wellness and the prestigious social status of the leisure class. Traditionally, skincare products are marketed at the intersection of experience goods and search goods. On the one hand, offline experience-led strategies utilize physical public space, such as beauty salons and department stores, to foster an attractive consumer culture where individuals construct their social identities through the consumption of skincare products. On the other hand, digital marketing strategies focus on amplifying the infectious consumer culture that demonstrates the modern concept of convenience and leisure. With the synergy of both methods, individuals are converted into consumers of skincare products that resonate with the system of values and social priorities that individuals long for. Despite of the mutually reinforcing nature of online and offline marketing strategies, the interactive experience of trying on and purchasing skincare products contributes to a more significant portion of brand values. According to data from retail consultancy Stellar, which surveyed 300 U.K. consumers online in March, it is discovered that 85 percent of individuals would be “encouraged to buy a product” after an in-person demonstration.¹¹² Most notably as shown in figure 19, in most major beauty-industry markets, in-store shopping accounted for up to 85 percent of beauty-product purchases prior to the COVID-19 crisis, with some variation by

¹¹² Lucy Handley, "Workplace Revolution: DIY Treatments and a Digital Pivot — Here's How the Beauty Industry Coped with the Coronavirus," CNBC, last modified July 13, 2020, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/13/heres-how-the-beauty-industry-coped-with-the-coronavirus.html>.

subcategory. Even online-savvy American millennials and Gen Zers (those born between 1980 and 1996) made close to 60 percent of their purchases in stores.

Some beauty-product sales are shifting online, but the store still has a critical role to play.

Shopping habits, by age group, % of respondents¹



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.
¹Question: How do you purchase [cosmetics and skin-care products] most often? (n = 10,000).
 Source: McKinsey New Age of the Consumer Generational Survey 2019

McKinsey & Company

Figure 19. Beauty Product Shopping Channel Preference by Generation. Cited from Gerstell et al., "How COVID-19."

Therefore, one of the main challenges presented to beauty brands amid a global pandemic is to come up with an innovative alternative to the “try-on” experience as e-commerce and online shopping ruthlessly replace the in-store experience. The social and cultural values that are affirmed through the consumption of goods are inescapable while considering how consumer and producer interacts and even how consumer experience and product values reacts to each other. Consumer experience of trying on a product not merely satisfies a through the solution of a particular problem but creates effective routines that are remembered and valued.¹¹³ Most recent research focuses less upon the economics of experience goods than upon the dynamics and

¹¹³ Prahalad and Ramaswamy, "The New Frontier"; Salem Khalifa, "Customer Value."

dimensions of experience, either as an intangible factor in consumption decisions or as a good in its own right.¹¹⁴ To put it succinctly, consumers actively construct value in goods through the experience of consuming them. As the concept of experience goods articulates how consumers relate to products and services and how this dimension affects consumer engagement and consumer determinations of value, skincare products are usually judged by the feelings they evoke rather than the functions they perform.¹¹⁵ And subsequently, the asymmetry between the “latent” and “realized” value of products, reserves a perfect space for skincare marketers to mobilize different perceptions of value, ranging from emotional value to hedonic value, the value a customer receives based on the subject experience of fun and playfulness.¹¹⁶

Different emotional and hedonic values that brand marketers endow regarding the same products are consequently recognized as innovation by consumers. However, the hedonic value defined and recognized by consumers based on their experience is by no means subjective, consumers face a pronounced bias as early as the search process prior to the experience where their value expectations for skincare products are already established and to some extent normative. And towards that extreme, hedonic and symbolic values have the most pronounced engagement bias in that the consumer is fully involved with the good at a social and/or personal level. In other words, the formality of consumption set up by marketers is limited in the first place yet re-packaged as a liberal and autonomous palate full of choices presented in front of consumers. Circulating back to Bourdieu’s idea of accumulation of cultural capital, marketing and branding strategies, though negligible from consumers’ perspectives, have fostered an

¹¹⁴ Caru and Cova, "Consuming Experiences"; Hjorth and Kostera, *Entrepreneurship and the Experience*; McIntyre, "Museum and Art Gallery"; Hutter, "Value and the Valuation."

¹¹⁵ Jeana H. Frost et al., "People Are Experience Goods: Improving Online Dating with Virtual Dates," *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 22, no. 1 (January 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.20107>.

¹¹⁶ Barry J. Babin, William R. Darden, and Mitch Griffin, "Work And/or Fun: Measuring Hedonic and Utilitarian Shopping Value," *Journal of Consumer Research* 20, no. 4 (March 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1086/209376>.

overarching learning environment for consumers to acquire and build cultural capital as well as a biased set of values associated with these symbolic products.

When it comes to value construction, marketers sync new ways of consumption with the emerging social trends. With the mandated lock-down policies, the diluted boundary between binary concepts of “public” and “private” stimulates the business idea of “home beauty,” which perfectly marries the dynamics of an interactive online learning environment with an unprecedented domestic beauty routine.¹¹⁷ A new demand for home beauty products is emerging in the beauty industry as individuals start to bring in the “public” into their private homes. Rather than invite customers to visit the stores or clinics, beauty businesses grant consumers a free trial and deliver the sample products to their home, connecting consumers with products through bridging the gap between the “latent” and “realized” value and thus the gap between experience and research goods. This new business idea centering the essence of “home beauty” influences how consumers perceive the value producing relationship between themselves and the products and services they procure or are about to procure.¹¹⁸ The emotional and hedonic value is produced as skincare products are packaged and promoted as a therapeutic well-ness good which could almost cure any negative feelings and emotions caused by the COVID-19 disruptions, distracting consumers from paying attention to the functional value of these skincare products which are usually learned through a previously established set of expectations. Brand marketers enhance the inherent experiential dimensions of goods through design, branding (e.g. manipulation of colors and theme), such that emotions and feelings internal to the consumer are summoned. These advertisements around the ideas of “home beauty,” “wellness,” “health,” and “hygiene” merge into consumer domestic experience as they tend to generate new learning

¹¹⁷ Klein, "Evaluating the Potential"; Daugherty, Li, and Biocca, "Consumer Learning."

¹¹⁸ J. Brock Smith and Mark Colgate, "Customer Value Creation: A Practical Framework," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 15, no. 1 (January 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2753/MTP1069-6679150101>.

routines, feedbacks and expectations.¹¹⁹ Thus, the symbolic value of these skincare products is constructed by marketers and further learned and practiced by consumers as soon as consumers started making associations between the functional and/or hedonic values of goods and various sociological implications they provoke. Combined with various marketing strategies, consumer feedbacks fuel the endless production-consumption loop which brands rely on for increasing returns and retaining consumers.

VII. Away from the Exogenous Preferences Framework

Innovative ways of beauty consumption are drastically revolutionizing female consumers' connection to the concept of beauty as their interactive experience of trying-on new products is migrating from physical stores to digital platforms and from a public sphere to private homes. Besides trespassing the conventionally polarized concepts of private and public in the disguise of a novel concept of "home beauty," skincare products emerge as the controversy at the intersection of necessity and indulgence (non-essential products). As much as these skincare products are marketed as the perfect wellness solution during an unprecedented time, they stimulate turbulent discourses as more consumers begin to practice new beauty routine and accept them as the antidote to their various existential concerns. Through indoctrinating "the right skincare routine," marketers provide female consumers with a medium through which women actively and regularly practice obtaining and maintaining an ideal self-image inscribed on their face and skin. Through consuming these skincare products brimmed with social,

¹¹⁹ Gary T. Ford, Darlene B. Smith, and John L. Swasy, "Consumer Skepticism of Advertising Claims: Testing Hypotheses from Economics of Information," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 4 (March 1990), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/209228>.

gendered, and racial symbols, female consumers are guided by the marketers to engage themselves in an endless journey of constructing their individual identity toward a broader collective image of desirable women.

The new digital experiential beauty consumption shuffles the existing modes of valuation, guiding consumers to craft their self-image with skincare products that are customized based on their own preference. These so-called personalized products are by no means objective yet cautiously pre-selected by marketers in favor of beauty brands that are surfing on the waves of turbulent market trends. By all means, the consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols is central to consumer culture, and yet the perpetuation and reproduction of this system is largely dependent upon the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life.¹²⁰ However, far from the ideal of “free personal choice” in mainstream economics, the term “consumer culture” also conceptualizes an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives.¹²¹ These meanings are embodied and negotiated by consumers in particular social situations roles and relationships under the influence of marketing and advertisement. Through aligning themselves with a certain line of skin-care products, female consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings associated with these skin care products to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals.¹²² From this perspective, consumer preferences are generated under complicated sociological conditions. Marketers project certain

¹²⁰ Holt, "Why Do Brands."

¹²¹ Robert V. Kozinets, "Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meaning of Star Trek's Culture of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 28 (June 2001).

¹²² Grayson and Martinec, "Consumer Perceptions"; Kozinets, "Can Consumers"; Mick and Buhl, "A Meaning-Based"; Peñaloza, "The Commodification"; Ritson and Elliott, "The Social"; Scott, "The Bridge."

values and steer the marketplace into a space where provides female consumers with an expansive and heterogeneous palette of resources from which to not only decorate their faces, but also to construct their individual and collective identities.¹²³

All in all, using China as the special example among the broader global hierarchical beauty industry whose contemporary market trends and consumer preferences for skincare products is shaped by the post-Mao new social environment incubating the takeoff of top-notch technologies and reshaped by a more responsible governmental response to the global pandemic, this project unfolds the dynamic, ever-evolving relationship between consumer preferences and skincare products – how they interact with and shape each other – and contextualize ways retailers, marketers, as well as other strategic players interpret, generate, and reshape the bond between consumers and products in reacting to different social conditions. Through tracing the current market trends back to the colonial history, this project showcases the residual historical patterning of consumption behaviors and marketing influences over the dynamics between consumers and products. That is, as consumers constantly react to and, in return, externalize on the surrounding social context, marketers actively contribute to exploiting and maintaining ideal consumer behaviors and market trends through employing various strategies that reintroduce or reinforce certain ideologies (e.g. health, hygiene) in products, which perfectly resonate with consumers' habitus and social aspirations. In other words, marketers customized strategies that play on the trendy social factors without necessarily violate the traditions. In order to demonstrate this recurring influence that marketers exert on the dynamic between consumers and product, this project advocates for implementing a sociohistorical lens to interpret the current market survey data in the beauty industry, linking the contemporary economic issues to the

¹²³ Thompson and Hirschman, "Understanding the Socialized"; Murray, "The Politics"; Jensen Schau and Gilly, "We Are What."

broader sociological questions. Starting from the data and trends shown in the COVID-19 survey, I invite readers to ruminate over consumers' desire for certain social status acquired through the consumption of skincare products, racial hierarchy exacerbated by the positioning of beauty products and perpetuation of beauty ideals, as well as the consequences of imposing further gendered expectations along with the practice of consuming skincare products. Moreover, the active role that marketers play in perpetuating these racial, social, and class ideologies, maneuvering consumers' preference for certain ideals, as well as fueling constant desires for conspicuous consumption deserves contemplation.

To some extent, the Chinese story serves as a lead-in for readers to not only ponder over the status quo of the broader global beauty industry but also contemplate on the universal active role marketers play in the overarching consumption realm. All over the globe, brands are tapping into a few trends and opportunities that have appeared due to the effects of the pandemic. First is the increased interest in self-care, which is driven by health and wellness concerns in light of COVID-19. At the same time, it also occurs to brands that consumer demand for savings and value is soaring without compromising on their needs for quality and efficacious products. Moreover, an emerging consumer interest in discourses regarding environmental, social, and governmental issues is sharply captured by marketers. Brands consistently communicate superior benefits across touchpoints, reposition brand images, and partner with credible influencers to deliver that message for consumers.¹²⁴ Skincare products protrude as one outstanding example that absorbs all these budding demands and mirrors marketers' efforts to melding valuations with consumptions. The seamless integration of digital platforms with the consumption of beauty products lures consumers into a pro-technology consumption era where consumer preferences

¹²⁴ Lim, "Ramping up Momentum," *Cosmetics Design-Asia*.

are calculated by algorithm, consumer experience replaced by AI and ER, and consumption completed in private not public.

However, underlying severe social issues are never featured on the fancy beauty advertisements. The universal and historically stunning emphasis on health and hygiene inevitably attracts consumer attention alongside concerns to the health of workers. Besides promoting hygienic and sustainable packaging materials, brands are challenged by consumers' worry about the health conditions of workers, not only including the ones that produce products, but also the ones that package and ship them. Such a concern prompts us to think about the visibility of the overall supply chain. As consumers, we are used to only care about the presentable final products, taking the production process for granted. Following the similar logic of thinking, we should apply a critical lens into viewing the whole invisible marketing scheme, which disconnects the relationship between labor and products. In other words, marketing as a thoroughly mediated process dilutes the fact that products consolidate labor yet dissolves the visibility of labor. Therefore, beauty products should be recognized as a stimulus and teaser to scrutinize the overarching supply chain, industry, and even broader social issues. The invisible labor is spotlighted by the invisible germs. Indeed, it takes a global pandemic for us to set about concerning the previously negligible germs. But what does this new way of consuming beauty mean for the condition of women? And how are the additional emotional values and symbolic meanings that come with the production and consumption of these skincare products going to reshuffle the existing social sphere? These are questions that should always concern economists, consumers of skincare products, and strategic beauty players, not just in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

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