

Trust

Issues

In the age of fake product reviews and self-proclaimed beauty experts, whom can we truly trust?

By MISHAL CAZMI

Last year, cult favourite skincare brand Sunday Riley settled an investigation with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) after it was revealed that the company's employees had been posting fake positive reviews of its products on Sephora's website to help boost sales.

In October 2018, a former employee shared a leaked email from the company on Reddit that encouraged employees to write positive reviews and disapprove negative ones. "We need to make sure the reviews for clients stay positive and help generate confidence in the products," read the directive. "If you notice someone saying things like I didn't like 'x' about it, write a review that says the opposite." The email went viral after a screenshot was also shared by social media watchdog Estée Laundry, which is considered the beauty industry's version of Diet Prada. In the end, the FTC banned the company from posting fake reviews but didn't impose any fines.

Given how much consumers rely on product reviews—a seemingly sacred space for getting honest feedback—this social media snafu invites the question "Whom should people trust in the beauty industry?" In

an age where consumers value authenticity and demand transparency, the proliferation of fake product reviews and "sponcon" has created a certain level of mistrust. Add to that a few self-styled experts with questionable or no credentials and you've got a murky landscape that's difficult to navigate for the average beauty consumer.

It's precisely this environment that has given rise to Estée Laundry. The anonymous beauty collective is made up of friends working in the industry who were tired of the lack of transparency, inauthenticity and accountability. The account has garnered over 150,000 followers, including beauty editors, influencers, industry professionals and even celebrities like Victoria Beckham, who has her own namesake beauty brand. Arriving on the beauty scene with guns blazing, Estée Laundry has called out copycats, shady practices and the lack of diversity and inclusivity. It has also built a community of active users known as "Laundrites" who aren't afraid to voice their opinions.

Similarly, Reddit, where the email from Sunday Riley was first leaked, is another online community where beauty lovers converge to dole out and solicit advice for any skincare concern under the sun. The

subreddit r/SkincareAddiction has over 1.1 million users with threads on sunscreen, skincare concerns, skincare routine order and more and is overseen by 10 moderators. While the community has been a literal skin saver for many, sound advice isn't always guaranteed (even though the subreddit's rules state: "Don't ask for or hand out medical diagnoses. We are not doctors, so we can't diagnose your skin condition").

Reddit can be a mixed bag, says Michelle Wong, a science educator from Sydney, Australia, and the founder of Lab Muffin, a website that uses science to debunk beauty myths. A former moderator for the subreddit, she explains: "On the one hand, it's quite good because you have an up-vote system. You can check into how reliable they've been in the past. On the other hand, there is an element of groupthink there. The things that get voted up may not necessarily be correct because it's a majority-rules sort of situation."

The popularity of Reddit and Estée Laundry also demonstrates how people are seeking out beauty information and advice from different sources than they once did. A decade ago, you might have seen a dermatologist or consulted the pages of a magazine. Today, you could be getting advice from a YouTube star or Gwyneth Paltrow. More importantly, just as social media has democratized the beauty landscape and made information more easily accessible, it has also given rise to armchair experts.

"A lot of people have influence who in the past never would have," says Dr. Shereene Idriss, a board-certified dermatologist in New York City. "They're creating little niches for themselves, which is great, but it's also a detriment when it comes to your health if they claim to be experts but have no real training in a field."

At her practice, Idriss has met people who use sunscreen pills as a form of sun protection and have turned to DIY fillers after watching a YouTube video—neither of which are recommended. "People come in repeating false information," she says. "I had someone who got a sewing needle and decided to do a deeper microdermabrasion on her face, which gave her a really bad infection."

Tired of the misinformation she was hearing about skincare and cosmetic procedures, Idriss started #PillowTalkDerm. What began as an occasional Instagram story to educate her audience turned into a YouTube channel because of its popularity. And while dermatologists are not always easily accessible, Idriss is an example of how some have made their way onto social media to share their expertise and connect with an audience who wants to make sense of all the noise.

The desire to combat myths in beauty is what also compelled Wong to start Lab Muffin about nine years ago. "It really annoyed me," she says. "I was seeing a lot of debunking of myths in the medical sphere, but I wasn't seeing it in beauty. I thought it would be a great way to reach out to people and try to change the landscape a bit." While the beauty scene has changed considerably, some of the same myths persist, says Wong; she's tackling them along with new ones that have cropped up with the rise of clean beauty and the greenwashing that comes with it.

While it's getting harder to sort fact from fiction in the beauty world, there are people—and brands—in the industry who are trying to keep it real with their honesty or expertise. Beauty is a powerful multi-billion-dollar industry, but at the end of the day, it's consumers who get the last word—and breaking their trust is bad business all around. ■

OPEN BOOK

More beauty pros and influencers who pride themselves on being brutally honest.



Caroline Hiron
@carolinehiron
This facialist and published author of *Skincare: The Ultimate No-Nonsense Guide* isn't afraid to call out beauty BS with her frank takes and skincare knowledge.



Gel Cream
@gelcream
Former magazine editor Yana Sheptovetskaya, known as "the anti-influencer," shares her honest product reviews and steers clear of ads and sponsored content on her feed.



Sali Hughes
@sallihughes
The beauty columnist for *The Guardian* offers a guide to the best beauty products; she has also published two tomes: *Pretty Honest* and *Pretty Iconic*.



Samantha Ravndahl
@ssssamanthaa
The Canadian beauty YouTuber and influencer is known for her candour and doesn't accept PR samples, calling them "incredibly wasteful."



Stephen Alain Ko
@kindofstephen
This Toronto-based cosmetic chemist and formulator brings a science-based perspective to beauty products and keeps his followers and readers of his blog, KindofStephen.com, on top of beauty-industry news.

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