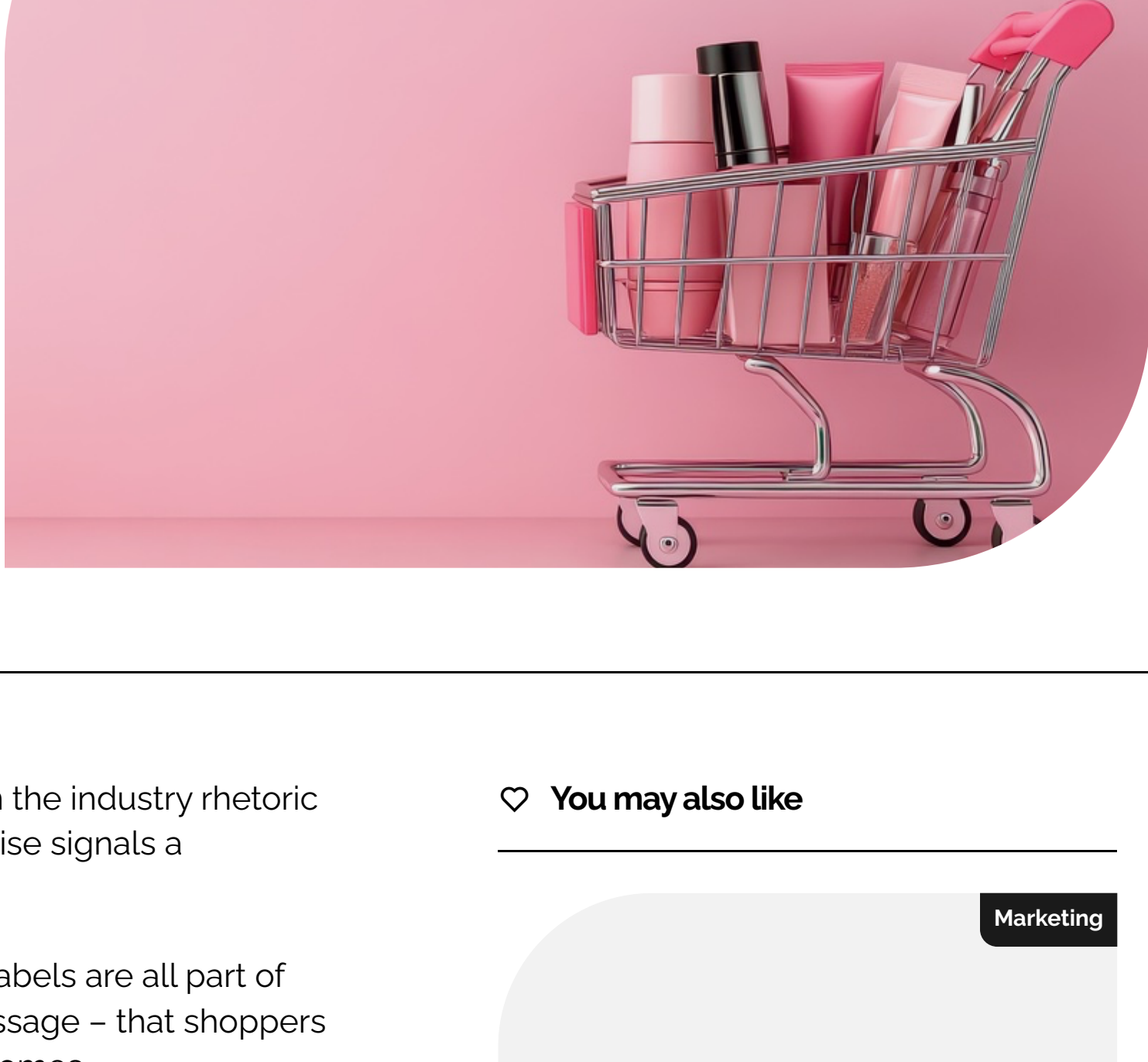


Beauty's overconsumption problem and the movement tackling it #221814

By Amanda May | Published: 10-Feb-2025

Finance Marketing

The underconsumption in beauty movement is soaring due to societal, economical and environmental factors, creating a long term behavioural shift the industry cannot ignore



Although underconsumption in beauty is nothing new – having reappeared in the industry rhetoric under various different umbrella terms over the years – its continued steady rise signals a significant cultural shift towards much more mindful purchasing habits.

From 'use what I have' movements to 'no/low buy' month challenges, these labels are all part of the broader underconsumption movement, but they all harp to the same message – that shoppers are now much more conscientious about what they buy and bring into their homes.

And this push back on overconsumption is trickling into buying habits, with more than two-thirds (68%) of UK adults finding the amount of beauty and grooming products available to be overwhelming, reports industry analyst Mintel, and a further 56% thinking it is superficial to spend too much money on them.

So, to pass it off as a mere trend would be naive.

This is a greater sustainability shift that some shoppers are actively trying to be part of for the long term.

“All this is contributing to the rejection of 'fast-beauty' and the advent of 'slow skin care'”

“Interest in underconsumption is rife at the moment thanks to a shift in consumer values whereby more mindful and meaningful consumption habits are prioritised,” says Maya Regan, Assistant Beauty Trends Editor at global trends intelligence company Stylus.

“A stronger desire for streamlined routines and high-quality products is driven by economic uncertainty and rising financial constraints from the cost-of-living crisis, coupled with environmental concerns and efforts to minimise waste, as well as counteracting society's pressure to engage with TikTok-driven consumerism.”

The latest iterations of the movement pushing back on excess have included 'underconsumptioncore' – a hashtag on social media encouraging people to be more thoughtful with what they buy and to live more modestly.

The concept went viral in the latter half of 2024, with global Google searches for 'underconsumption' increasing by a staggering 144% alone in August.

“Underconsumption comes as a sequel to the steinfluencing trend as people realise that influencers are gifted lots of products and promote unnecessary purchases,” adds Regan.

“But it will have better longevity as it does not expect consumers to stop buying all together, just to make smarter choices and find quality products that are worth it.”

70% of the industry's plastic waste is not recycled, found the British Beauty Council's The Courage to Change report

Moving away from 'unseemly' excess

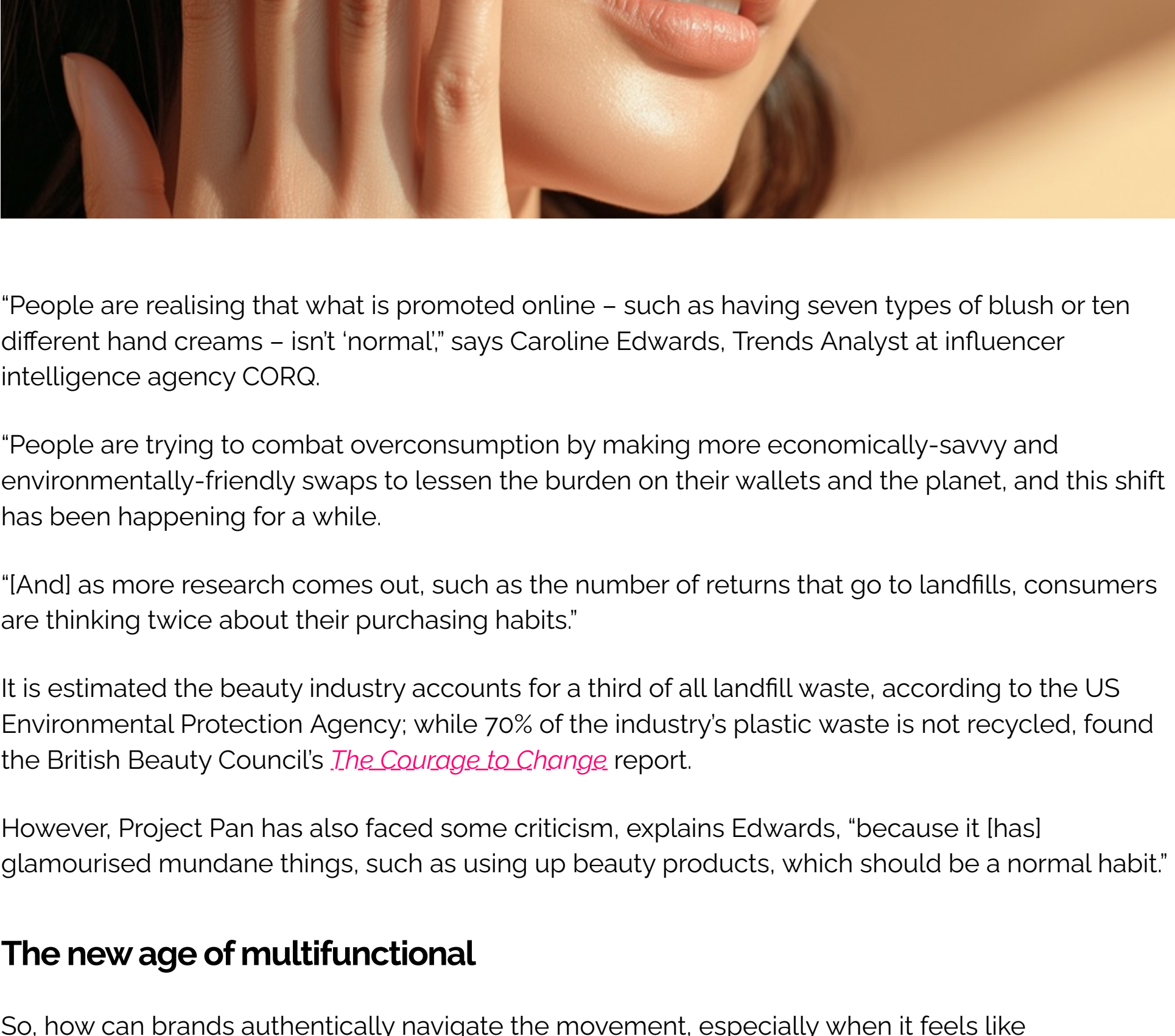
This year, the 'Project Pan' challenge – which sees people aim to finish all of their beauty products before buying more – has taken off on TikTok, with more than 42,500 posts already.

And this thoughtful shopping approach is also taking shape as part of consumers 2025 resolutions, says Tom Spratt, Head of Beauty at Pinterest UK, with many finding more creative ways to make the most of their current beauty collections.

“Instead of impulse buying, beauty lovers are taking time to rediscover the products they already own, while also carefully considering new purchases that truly fit their needs and values,” says Spratt.

Pinterest UK's most recent data (revealed exclusively to Cosmetics Business in January) aligns with this, showing that searches for 'saving money aesthetic' have surged x50 and 'budget challenge' by x3.5 over the past three months.

But with a pre-existing Reddit community dedicated to the practice of Project Pan dating back as far as 2015 – and which has more than 22,000 members – why is the discussion on this louder now than ever before?



“People are realising that what is promoted online – such as having seven types of blush or ten different hand creams – isn't 'normal,’” says Caroline Edwards, Trends Analyst at influencer intelligence agency CORQ.

“People are trying to combat overconsumption by making more economically-savvy and environmentally-friendly swaps to lessen the burden on their wallets and the planet, and this shift has been happening for a while.

“[And] as more research comes out, such as the number of returns that go to landfills, consumers are thinking twice about their purchasing habits.”

It is estimated the beauty industry accounts for a third of all landfill waste, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency; while 70% of the industry's plastic waste is not recycled, found the British Beauty Council's The Courage to Change report.

However, Project Pan has also faced some criticism, explains Edwards, “because it [has] glamourised mundane things, such as using up beauty products, which should be a normal habit.”

The new age of multifunctional

So, how can brands authentically navigate the movement, especially when it feels like overconsumption and underconsumption are still somewhat at odds with one other on social media?

Although the underconsumption movement promotes eschewing mass shopping hauls, or avoiding falling prey to videos that promote consumers to endlessly buy the hottest new thing, the shift is not, by any means, a negative for the industry in terms of innovation.

“Underconsumption in beauty is defined by consumers who embrace more minimalist mindsets and reach for multifunctional products with improved formulas,” explains Regan.

“Interest in underconsumption is rife at the moment thanks to a shift in consumer values whereby more mindful and meaningful consumption habits are prioritised”

“This looks like unshowy products in functional categories, or more refined and quiet luxury leaning where the wellbeing benefits of a more streamlined, clutter-free lifestyle result in spending more on high-performance products.”

Multifunctional products that promise to do more with less will succeed in this, especially everyday personal care items like deodorants, “which will be elevated with quality natural ingredients that are both environmentally and skin care-friendly,” adds Regan.

Promoting cult classics

Another big marketing driver for brands during this time will be celebrating hero products as timeless beauty staples that claim to do it all.

By offering helpful tips and tricks that show shoppers how to maximise the utility of these well-loved items, and by working with experts and influencers that align with the movement, beauty brands can speak to underconsumption in an authentic way.

“And for consumers who are still tempted by micro trends, brands can use social media to show how their products are multifunctional and can be used to achieve multiple trending looks,” says Georgia Stafford, Mintel Senior Beauty and Personal Care Analyst.

Model and Rhade beauty brand founder Hailey Bieber nailed this on social media in 2023 using her nutrient-rich essence Glazing Milk.

She mixed the product with her foundation in a video for a 'glass skin' hack and it went viral because it showcased the glazing product in a new light, highlighting its versatility.

“Equally, brands can update and relaunch hero products so they respond to evolving consumer needs,” says Georgia Stafford, Senior Beauty and Personal Care Analyst at Mintel.

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One way to do this is via refillable options, a movement which is growing in the industry.

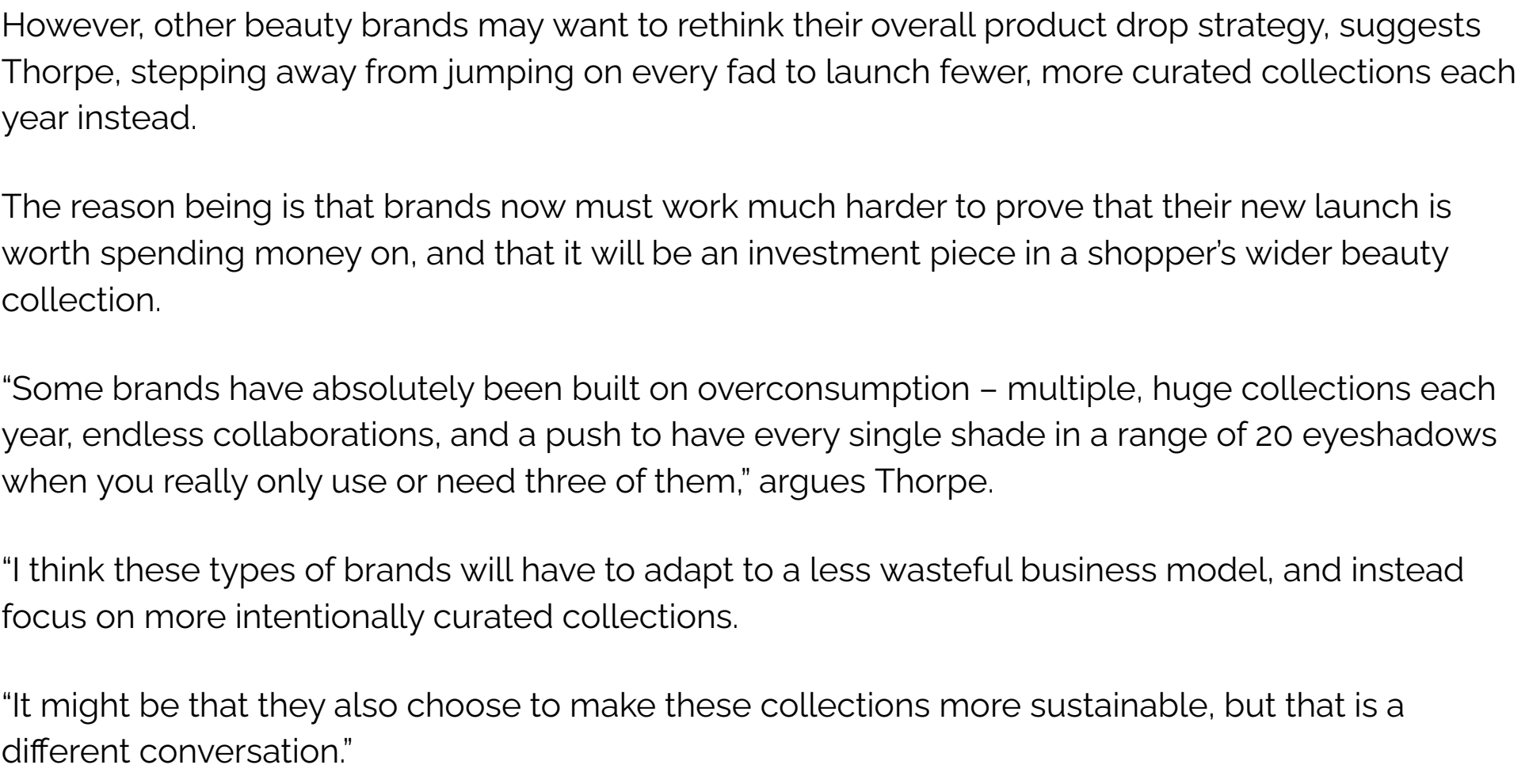
MUA Lisa Eldridge, for example, launched her Rouge Experience Lipstick as a refillable item last year due to demand and sustainable reasons, and because lipsticks have very much become the new beauty hairloom.

“Reusable packaging and products have slowly been moving into people's routines and that could be one way that people adapt as it reduces consumption on a smaller scale,” says beauty writer Lucy Thorpe.

Alongside this, brands should look to reinvent their take-back and recycling programmes to meet the needs of these consumers – both luxury department store Harrods and supermarket Marks & Spencer updated their schemes last year to offer more.

Plus, brands should work with creators on longer-term campaigns that showcase the same product time-and-time-again to prove that it is a worthwhile investment for their followers.

This strategy aligns with Mintel's data which shows that 64% of UK social media users who follow brands that post about beauty and grooming prefer to follow brands that do not constantly promote new products.



Tough business decisions

However, other beauty brands may want to rethink their overall product drop strategy, suggests Thorpe, stepping away from jumping on every fad to launch fewer, more curated collections each year instead.

The reason being is that brands now must work much harder to prove that their new launch is worth spending money on, and that it will be an investment piece in a shopper's wider beauty collection.

“Some brands have absolutely been built on overconsumption – multiple, huge collections each year, endless collaborations, and a push to have every single brand in a range of 20 eyeshadows when you really only use or need three of them,” argues Thorpe.

“I think these types of brands will have to adapt to a less wasteful business model, and instead focus on more intentionally curated collections.

“It might be that they also choose to make these collections more sustainable, but that is a different conversation.”

“People are realising that what is promoted online – such as having seven types of blush or ten different hand creams – isn't 'normal’”

Of course, cost-saving plays a core part in underconsumption, with 32% of people now buying cheaper alternatives, including fragrances, make-up and beauty products, to save money during the rising cost of living, found a Barclays 2024 report.

But cost-cutting doesn't mean that luxury brands are out of the mix as plenty of methods in the movement online involve prestige players.

It seems consumers are spending more on one or two luxury products because of their promise of better quality, rather than buying lots of impulse purchases.

“It is about redirecting spending and approaching shopping in a more minimalist way, and for some people, this is about finding more prestige items that last longer than cheaper alternatives and prevent the need for more products,” says Regan.

“Propositions based on hard-working ingredients in functional product formats promise a more impactful experience while minimising waste.”

What lies ahead

As consumers continue to become much more informed about skin care, they are making purchasing decisions based on the science, sustainability credentials and versatility of the item.

“Rather than buying into the next big trend, they are researching much more into the product – how it works and will it perform before they invest,” explains Emma Kohring, an independent consultant in health and beauty.

“Consumers also appreciate that to get the benefits they need to use the product, which drives consumers now to use the product til it is empty versus abandoning it in the back of the vanity unit.

“All this is contributing to the rejection of 'fast-beauty' and the advent of 'slow skin care.’”

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