

Deciphering the shift: Exploring key factors influencing contemporary D2C beauty products buying preferences through online channel

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore major factors influencing consumer buying preferences towards D2C (Direct-to-consumer) beauty products through online channel in contemporary scenario. Consumers are increasingly switching onto digital platforms for more personalized, convenient and transparent beauty solutions. There is an unprecedented transformation and explosive growth across global beauty industry which is mainly triggered by the rise of Direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands that are pre-dominantly riding online shopping channels like never before. The lipstick effect during Covid-19 situation not only propelled it further by eating away share of traditional (offline) trade, but also resulted into a new diaspora of repeat D2C online consumers, even when the Covid-19 situation depleted. The modern, updated and technologically advanced consumers are increasingly turning on to digital route to satisfy their beauty needs, not only at developed economies but also across developing economies like India and hence, the necessity of understanding factors shaping contemporary buying trends for D2C beauty products is more critical than ever before. Existing research papers on varied international markets as well as Indian consumers were referred to extract more reliable and contemporary updates in form of secondary information uncovering key trends, preferences and forces driving digital-age buying decisions for D2C beauty range utilizing the e-commerce eco-system. Key factors influencing contemporary buying preferences include personalization, sustainability, digital engagement, transparency, education, convenience, authenticity, offerings, social proof, innovation and wellness trends. These factors primarily drive engagement with modern consumers in the online marketplace. Understanding the factors influencing consumer preferences will provide crucial direction to the researchers, institutions and professional marketers.

Keywords: D2C, Direct-to-consumer, Beauty, Online Channel, Consumer Buying Behaviour.

Introduction: The above introduction and background set the stage for an exploration of dynamics redefining the beauty industry in this constantly evolving digital age. D2C has risen as one of the biggest consumer-centric business opportunity in the recent times and propelled by Covid-19 phase giving a clear competition to offline (traditional) trade to emerge as a sustainable option, revolutionized by the technological ecosystem. It is constantly upgrading basis the changes in both technology as well as consumer behaviour (Bhagat & Ravi, 2020).

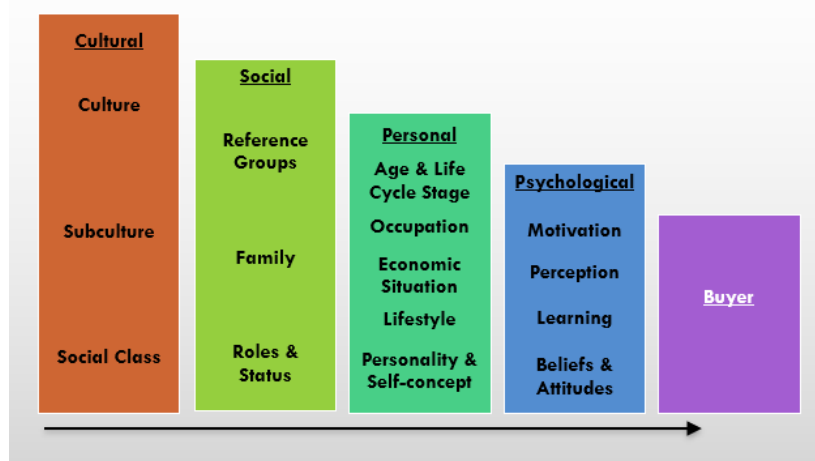
The Internet's importance has significantly escalated, expanding beyond its role as a mere knowledge repository in the field of cosmetology. It has evolved into a dynamic marketplace, bustling with activity in the sales and distribution of beauty products. This transformation underscores the internet's pivotal role in shaping the modern beauty industry, providing consumers with unprecedented access to a diverse array of products and brands while simultaneously offering beauty businesses with vast opportunities for growth and expansion in the online sphere (Ścieszko et al., 2021).

As per contemporary study, consumers are keenly aware of the advantages associated with e-retailing and Internet shopping when compared to traditional brick-and-mortar channels. This recognition underscores the shifting consumer preferences and the growing acceptance of online platforms as convenient and efficient avenues for purchasing goods. Notably, factors such as ease of access, wider product selection, competitive rates and the convenience of shopping from any place are highlighted as key reasons for favouring online retail experiences over traditional modes of shopping (Končar et al., 2021).

The extent to which consumers recognize a particular channel significantly influences their decision-making process, thereby enhancing their perceived value of the product or service being offered. This recognition encompasses various aspects, including the reputation, accessibility and reliability of the channel. When consumers perceive a channel positively, they are more likely to trust the products or services available through that channel, leading to increased satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, favourable channel recognition can also contribute to a sense of convenience and ease in the purchasing experience, further bolstering the perceived value for consumers (Li et al., 2020).

Literature Review: It was critical to refer quality literatures consisting each attributes impacting the findings of this research paper. Key areas associated to the title of this paper are extensively researched as a part of literature review and needful insights are represented in the following sequential order:

Consumer Buying Behaviour is Always Dynamic: Consumer behaviour is defined as an individual or a group of people who purchase goods or services for their own consumption and it is affected by the constant shift in factors like Cultural, Social, Personal & Psychological. Consumers across the world tremendously differ from each other basis various factors, tastes & preferences, which keep on changing every moment of time. Consumers churn these factors to finally stimulate their buying decision which is a very dynamic process with different patterns (Kotler Philip & Armstrong Gary, 2012). Following chart reflect factor-wise bifurcation of relevant factors influencing consumer buying behaviour:



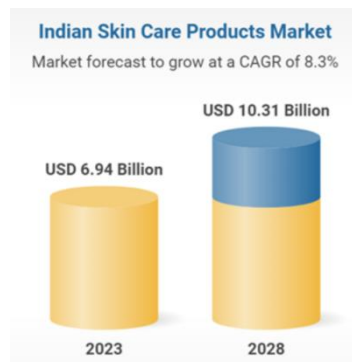
Source: *Principles of Marketing* (Kotler Philip & Armstrong Gary, 2012)

Figure 1: Factors influencing consumer buying behaviour

It is critical to understand their necessity, preferences & ultimate buying behaviour on a constant basis without which things can go haywire. The success or failure of any institution or a company is ultimately in the hands of consumers (Anderlová, 2021).

Importance of Beauty: Skin is the largest organ of human body & is continuously exposed to environmental factors due to which it becomes essential to take care of it (Sharma et al., 2022). Historically speaking, beauty care was always correlated with female consumers but during recent years, male consumers have also become positive about using the beauty product range (Byrne & Milestone, 2022). Beauty care is basically a product for skin of face & body to cleanse, moisturize, massage etc. The objective of it is not only to maintain skin in a healthy condition but also to protect it further from harmful environmental impact. Also, as a general part of it, beauty falls under cosmetic category. Beauty care includes facial care, toner, moisturizer, sunscreen, anti-tanning sets & lotion, skin lighteners & exfoliants (Khan et al., 2013).

A Contemporary Snapshot of Beauty Industry: With more than 1.4 billion population, India has a long way to go in the beauty market as it is currently the 4th largest market, if we count globally. It is expected to grow by more than 40% in next couple of years which places India as one of the most dynamic and prospective beauty market in the world (TH, 2023). This report also states that India historically has been a consumer market but from hereon, India has emerged as a global trend-setter market in beauty segment due to extensive technological ecosystem and quick evolution in consumer buying pattern driven by this digital era. India's total beauty market was nearly USD 7 Billion in 2023 and expected to cross USD 10 billion by 2028 with an annual CAGR of 8.25%, which makes it a very lucrative business category (IGR, 2023). This report also states that beauty product category is broadly classified into Face Creams & Moisturizers, Cleansers & Face wash, Sunscreen, Body creams, Shaving Lotions & Creams, and Others.



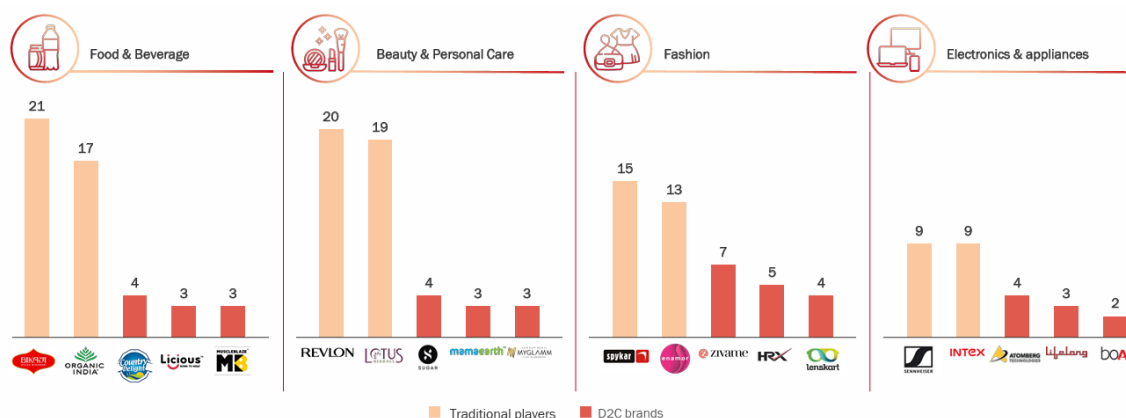
Source: <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/5566921/india-skin-care-products-market-2023-2028>

Figure 2: Beauty product market size in 2023 and trend till 2028

D2C (Direct-to-consumer) Beauty Preference in Digital Era:

India's Beauty market was historically dominated by traditional brands with very limited new launches. Increase in internet penetration and disposable income of the consumers gave rise to premiumization which was aggressively encashed by D2C brands by providing innovative products, digital distribution compatibility and tapping the niche segments where traditional brands were lagging which was welcomed by the new-age consumers whole-heartedly (Jayapal & Durga, 2020).

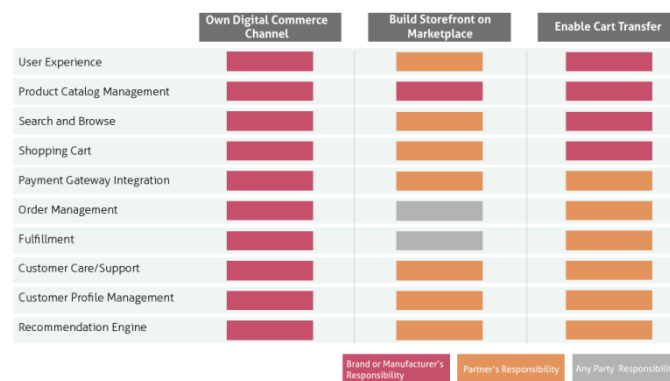
Indian D2C beauty market gave an overall rise to more than 80 D2C brands in beauty category for both men and women. With an annual CAGR of 29%, online beauty and personal care market is expected to touch \$ 4.4 Billion by the year 2025 with product margin ranging from 65-70%. D2C form of business mainly started by driving majority of their business and acquiring consumers through D2C Online Channel or they aspired for omnichannel only post initiating their distribution through online channel. In beauty category, D2C brands like Sugar Cosmetics, Mamaearth and MyGlamm propelled to cross INR 100 Crore (\$13 Mn) mark in less than 5 years of their launch. On the other hand, already established beauty brands like Revlon and Lotus herbals, who were more focused in the traditional form of business, took 20 years and 19 years respectively to cross the same benchmark (Naik Pankaj et al., 2020).



Source: *D2C Brands-Disrupting the next decade of shopping* (Naik Pankaj et al., 2020)

Figure 3: Journey (In Years) to INR 100 Crore (\$13 Mn) Revenue in India

In order to cope up with and align with the contemporary consumer buying behaviour, D2C brands mainly undertake 3 models i.e. Channel which is totally owned and managed through digital commerce by the brand itself, Storefront created on marketplace or Store enabled through cart transfer. Following lies their key executory strategy to diligently target the consumers using latest technological advancements, starting from user interface towards proper consumer experience, cataloguing of product, customized shopping experience etc. which has been a back-bone of D2C brands operating through digital space (Jayapal & Durga, 2020).



Source: D2C Sales Strategy-CPG, CPG Brands Direct to Consumer Sales Strategy Version 1.0

Figure 4: Main D2C Models Operated by Brands

Typically, within the D2C business model, all digital interfaces for consumers need to be available across a wide range of popular mobile consumer devices. This comprehensive approach should encompass omnichannel communications and interactions for marketing, spanning e-commerce, merchandising, and tools for trade promotion. This ensures accessibility to website content, product catalogues, consumer centric service and support features, as well as incorporating artificial intelligence. Furthermore, it involves analysing the customer details, integrating the voice of the customer through feedback mechanisms, and prioritizing transaction security at the point of sale. Digital ecosystem should harness both consumer and operational data, offering comprehensive analytics and reporting tools for business leaders (Ament Leslie, 2020). The report also stated that these resources can be utilized for strategic planning or enhancing operational practices continually. Areas of focus may include optimizing demand and supply chains, improving consumer service and support, enhancing digital security and cybersecurity measures, fostering innovative products and streamlining manufacturing processes, managing warehousing operations, and optimizing shipping logistics, among other essential processes.

Major factors influencing contemporary D2C beauty products buying preferences through online channel: Following key factors are broadly extracted basis extensive literature review on digital-age consumer buying preferences and their inclination to buy D2C product categories like beauty in this contemporary scenario.

Personalisation and customization of products: A cluster of emerging startups, known as Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) brands, are rapidly expanding. D2C shoppers affirmed that co-creation, cost-effectiveness, website attractiveness, brand uniqueness, social media engagement, and innovativeness of D2C brands have a significant impact on consumer's attitudes. Additionally, cost-effectiveness indirectly influences consumer's re-purchase intentions, while brand uniqueness, social media engagement, and brand innovativeness directly affect re-purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2021). Also, personal factors like self-image, concerns about ageing, and perceptions of physical attractiveness significantly impact purchase intention towards beauty products. The market for both the genders i.e. men and women are constantly expanding due to international brands expanding their limits to developing nation and overall purchasing power increase of consumers (DAS et al., 2022).

Clean and sustainable formulations: The green attitude exerted a direct and positively mediating effect on purchase intention of the digital consumer while making their buying decision (Lavuri, 2022). The leading cause of dermal toxicity is synthetic construct and chemically formulated medicinal as well as pharma products. It is because of this reason, herbal, natural and organically prepared non-toxic beauty products have a better acceptance, belief and trust by the modern-age intellectual consumers (Sharma et al., 2022).

Digital engagement and community building: Digital consumers increasingly depend on websites, online stores, Instagram, web inquiries, and YouTube throughout their purchasing process. Nevertheless, it seems that consumer's dependence on digital channels is influenced by individual traits, including gender and age group. Female consumers indicate a heightened dependence on Instagram for identifying potential needs, while males rely on YouTube throughout various decision-making stages. Finally, younger generations of consumers demonstrate a higher reliance on digital channels compared to older demographics (Livas et al., 2022).

The quantity of sales and the prevalence of high-quality negative feedback significantly shape consumer decision-making processes. These two factors hold paramount importance in guiding consumers towards or away from a product or service. The volume of sales reflects popularity and market acceptance, indicating to consumers the level of trust and satisfaction experienced by others. Conversely, the presence of high-quality negative comments serves as a warning sign, alerting

consumers to potential issues or drawbacks associated with the product or service. Together, these factors play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions (Yang et al., 2022).

Transparency and trustworthiness: A contemporary theoretical study mentions that consumers prioritise transparency and trustworthiness while their buying decisions. Attributes like website identification also plays a vital role in buyer's trust on a brand while selling on digital platform. An effective brand website and product offering can be attractive to the consumers, to not only make a first purchase but also remain a repeat buyer if it is maintaining a high level of trustworthiness (King et al., 2016).

For Indian online shoppers, social media recommendations, new product launches, targeted advertising, same-day delivery, secure payment options, and high-quality merchandise with competitive pricing were identified as key drivers of purchase behaviour. Furthermore, a positive user experience, shaped by these factors, significantly enhances customer satisfaction. Interestingly, trust acts as a mediator, strengthening the positive influence of social influence, variety seeking, and user behaviour on satisfaction, while also directly contributing to increased customer satisfaction (Davis et al., 2021).

Educational content and expert advice: Consumer nowadays are keen in becoming more updated towards sustainable products, their changing habits, social media influence and self-education has contributed to the growth of beauty industry (MarketLine, 2022).

External cues presented by marketers seem to significantly influence not just the dissemination of information to consumers but also mold their perceptions and attitudes. The emphasis on appearance consciousness emerges as the primary external cue communicated through digital marketing and communication efforts across different brands. Furthermore, it stands out as the foremost crucial indicator recognized mainly by premium consumers selecting organic beauty brands and consumers show the highest receptiveness to cues concerning the skin benefits, packaging and pricing of organic beauty products (Narang & Sharma, n.d.).

Convenience and acceptability: Savvy consumers accept products that provide value for money mainly due to current economic & recessive pressure triggered by the ongoing global scenario. As per study on contemporary consumer's acceptance and preference towards beauty products, they give a priority to product durability followed by brand value, product impact, size, price and fragrance of products. Also, as per consumer demographics, their acceptance differs for beauty range basis product attributes which is actually centric towards consumer convenience and acceptability (Kamwendo & Maharaj, 2022).

Brand authenticity and values: As per the study on consumer's emotional brand attachment towards beauty products, attributes like authenticity and values have a very deep impact on consumer buying preference. Therefore, beauty brands focus on how realistic the consumers feel (M H A et al., 2022).

The research on beauty products indicates a high level of alignment between brand benefits and brand loyalty, highlighting the significance of brand authenticity and values. Emotional benefits emerge as the most influential dimension in fostering brand loyalty, underscoring the importance of genuine connections with consumers. Conversely, the dimension of social benefit presents an area for improvement, suggesting the need for further alignment with brand values to enhance overall brand loyalty (Dirgantari et al., 2022).

Direct-to-consumer offerings: Digital consumers are heavily attracted basis product discount programs to buy products through online applications and website. Product offers are major driver of impulse buying as well for regular buyers (Hasbi et al., 2022). Consumer buying intention through e-coupon is highest for the consumer who has a high sensitivity towards discount and is a top prospect for all the e-retailers to target while deploying e-coupon based promotional programs (Ren et al., 2021).

For beauty category, both promotional efforts and product quality exerted a notable impact on brand image, which in turn, significantly influenced purchasing decisions in contemporary scenario (Lamasi & Santoso, 2022).

Social proof and influencer marketing: Traditionally, previous customer online reviews played a crucial role in determining the success or failure of an online business. This is because online consumers would come across these reviews while browsing a website, directly impacting their ability to make impulsive purchases and engage in online impulse buying behaviour. According to the study, hedonic value online reviews contribute to impulse purchases when consumers visit a website. Moreover, their online impulse buying behaviour is influenced by their browsing activities on the website (Hong et al., 2021).

Major studies on online buyers suggest that perceived time constraints and purchase uncertainty correlate positively with heuristic processing of online reviews but negatively with systematic processing. Additionally, both heuristic and systematic processing enhance buyer's confidence in their purchase decisions, with systematic processing yielding higher levels of confidence compared to heuristic processing (Lee & Hong, 2021).

In this digital era, social media marketing activities can directly impact purchase intentions and customer engagement while purchasing beauty product range, with the potential for customer engagement to serve as a mediator in the relationship between social media marketing activities and purchase intentions (Faritzal & Wicaksono Perkasa, 2022).

Technological Innovation: Fintech has been an important stimulator in today's digital consumer world. While studying the consumption values and its gap on contemporary consumer's adoption for options like mobile payment application (MPA), it was found that values like functional, conditional, epistemic and emotional values have a critical impact on consumers adopting to these types of digital payment options. Indian government bodies should also constantly promote MPAs by focusing on policy revisions to build a safer ecosystem and specific drives to increment trust amongst the consumers (Chakraborty et al., 2022).

In order to furnish an effective personalized experience, technological innovation has always strived with consumer centric approach. Immersive digital shopping experience has been the most innovative part of it in the recent digital era of e-commerce driven personalized techno shopping experience like virtual try on (VTO) which helps the consumer to select and virtually try as per their skin tones. Such Artificial Intelligence (AI) based tools have been a paradigm shift to bridge the gap between online and offline channel buying experience for the consumers (Khan Zeba, 2023).

Wellness and selfcare trends: The growing emphasis on consumer wellness and self-care is driving the beauty sector to innovate products that serve not only aesthetic purposes but also offer curative and preventive benefits to address adverse health factors like aging, stress and skin alterations. In this era of sustainable "cosmeceuticals," there is also a potential for cosmetics to be integrated synergistically with other research fields, such as the development of food supplements and promotion of healthy nutritional habits (Salvioni et al., 2021).

Conclusion: A continual comprehension of the factors that impact consumer buying preferences is essential for modern D2C beauty brands. These identified key factors are personalisation and customization of products, clean and sustainable formulations, digital engagement and community building, transparency and trustworthiness, educational content and expert advice, convenience and acceptability, brand authenticity and values, direct-to-consumer offerings, social proof and influencer marketing, technological Innovation as well as wellness and selfcare trends.

Mentioned factors serve as key drivers for D2C beauty portfolio marketers in the evolving realm of online commerce to enable effective engagement with today's discerning consumers.

Future scope and limitations: This is a literature review-based report focused majorly on consumer behaviour of D2C consumers trending in the current scenario. Though, papers pertaining to other D2C industry and their trend were also referred to get insights on overall consumer buying preferences in the global markets as well as Indian perspective. This entire consumer buying cycle is dynamically influenced by forces like government policies, technological advancement, product innovation and channel strategy.

Additionally, further studies are recommended into the specific factors outlined in this report and the overarching forces driving consumer purchasing decisions. By employing established consumer behaviour theories, such as the theory of planned behaviour or the hierarchy of needs, researchers can further derive meaningful implications with greater reliability. These insights can be helpful to fellow researchers, academic institutions and marketers alike, fostering a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour dynamics and guiding more effective marketing strategies.

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