

The Real Difference Between Cheap and Pricey Beauty Products; With a new influx of skin care products at extreme price points, the psychology of why we buy what we buy has never been more complex. A peek into the mind-vanity connection

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FULL TEXT

WHEN SHE TRAVELS, Amanda Goddard, a content editor in New York, checks two bags: one for clothes, the other for skin-care products. "And that's just for what I put on my face," the 28-year-old said. Her load includes a Hepta-Peptide Serum, Lactic Acid Serum, Rosehip Oil and Retinol Serum, all from budget brand the Inkey List. "I just shamelessly love skin care," she admitted. The amount Ms. Goddard spent on all four sophisticated elixirs? About \$50, a solid deal in a beauty landscape where a serum can easily run into the triple digits.

Given the rise of affordable-yet-covetable products from lines like the Inkey List, Versed and Amazon's Belei, anyone can now snap up charcoal masks and peptide eye creams for less than \$20. The prices often beat even uninspiring drugstore brands, and the products have a more modern approach, featuring the kind of ingredients (hemp!) and packaging (Helvetica type!) found on beauty blogs like Into the Gloss.

Yet scroll through Instagram or page through a magazine and you'll find evidence of an opposing trend: essences and masks with extravagant prices from boutique brands, such as Dr. Barbara Sturm, Orveda and Vintner's Daughter. These high-end lines are holding their own against budget-minded brands, and both fuel a robust, multibillion-dollar skin care industry. Such extremes mean that seemingly similar items are offered at radically different prices—do you buy the Inkey List's Hyaluronic Acid Serum for \$8 or Dr. Barbara Sturm's Hyaluronic Serum for \$300?

Results matter but they're not the only motivator, said Dr. Amy Wechsler, a New York dermatologist who is also board-certified in psychiatry. "Buying is an experience," she explained, and everything from how a product looks, smells, feels and is labeled can influence your perception of its effectiveness and value. The question then isn't, 'Will this enzyme peel work?'—but, 'Will it improve your life in some way?'

The only thing Naples, Fla.-based event planner Margaret Short, 45, wants more than dewy skin is time—time not spent applying creams. So she'll pay handsomely for the concept that she needs just two multitasking products: the \$185 Active Botanical Serum and \$225 Active Treatment Essence from Vintner's Daughter, a minimalist Napa brand whose tinctures marinate for several weeks, supposedly to increase potency—a step more cost-conscious brands can't necessarily afford. "These have replaced all of my other products: toners, moisturizers, eye creams," Ms. Short enthused.

Similarly, Casey Fremont, 35, an executive director in New York, would rather pay for M.D.-created fixes at home than clear her schedule for pro beauty treatments. "I have kids, I don't have time to have a facial once a month," she explained. Instead, she opts for Dr. Barbara Sturm's eponymous line, which includes a \$215 Face Cream and a \$160 Deep Hydrating Face Mask. Using products developed by a physician makes Ms. Fremont feel that she is getting her money's worth.

Jennifer Stansbury, co-founder of the market research firm the Benchmarking Company, finds that women will also buy based on a brand's "social awareness." Creating products that use organic ingredients or eco-conscious packaging can drive up the cost of goods—and that's a fair trade-off for some. Shannaz Schopfer, a beauty-industry executive in Los Angeles, springs for Orveda's nontoxic, vegan formulas, like the \$303 Prebiotic Emulsion, a lotion that comes in a recyclable glass bottle. "Not doing harm to myself or the planet makes it money well spent," explained Ms. Schoper.

Some lower priced lines have adopted earth-friendly, safe practices, too. The trade-off is the formulas might not be quite as potent as the premium brands, but that can be a good thing if you have sensitive skin. Natasha Kloster, 40, a research consultant in Greenwich, Conn., recently ditched high-end lines in favor of CeraVe's \$15 Moisturizing Cream. "I tried the more expensive products, but on the whole, they irritated my skin," she said. As Dr. Wechsler has found, "Some luxury skin-care products have a lot of fragrance and ingredients that aren't necessary, and can aggravate sensitive skin."

The most practical solution might be the high-low approach, adopted by women like Connecticut-based Gia Burton, 41, who strategically spends on a \$128 SkinCeutical hydrating cream but saves on \$9 facial wipes, which she reasons, "only sit on your skin for 30 seconds." No matter what you spend, Dr. Wechsler said that simply sticking to a routine will produce results. If a fancy cream encourages you to apply it often, or you love the satisfaction of a budget mask, then the bill is worth it.

Credit: By Kari Molvar

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