

The digital dermatosis - Social media's unintended impact on pre-adolescent skincare

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The digital landscape of skincare

The last decade has witnessed an unprecedented rise in social media penetration, profoundly reshaping how individuals, including children, interact with information and perceive beauty standards.¹ Platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat with their visual-centric content and algorithmic curation, have inadvertently become powerful arbiters of trends, including those related to skincare and cosmetic enhancements.¹ A new phenomenon, often dubbed the 'pre-adolescent skincare pandemic,' has emerged, driven by viral content featuring elaborate, multi-step routines.² In a study, over 80% of the questioned adolescents look for medical information online.¹ This shift raises alarms among dermatological communities, prompting a critical examination of social media's role in influencing skincare practices among impressionable younger demographics.

The allure and accessibility of social media skincare

Social media's appeal lies in its constant stream of engaging, visually driven content. For pre-adolescents, this often manifests as 'get ready with me' videos or product reviews, demonstrating sophisticated skincare regimens.³ Studies show that these videos by young content creators garner millions of views. The constant exposure normalises complex routines with numerous products, creating a perception that such regimens are essential for healthy skin. The accessibility of these platforms means that young users are exposed to trends without parental guidance or professional advice. Furthermore, the use of 'beauty filters' on social platforms, which alter facial features and conceal imperfections, can foster unrealistic expectations about skin appearance, driving a desire to achieve these filtered aesthetics in reality.¹ This

digital 'perfection' can translate into a tangible pursuit of cosmetic procedures, and even a new term, 'digitalised dysmorphia,' has been introduced.⁴

The 'pre-adolescent skincare pandemic': Trends and costs

Recent research has shed light on the alarming specifics of pre-adolescent skincare trends. A systematic analysis of TikTok videos featuring skincare routines by young content creators revealed several concerning patterns:⁵

- Children use an average of six skincare products per regimen, with some applying more. These often include serums, toners, and facial mists beyond the basic cleanser, moisturiser, and sunscreen recommended for this age group.
- Routines are costly. This financial burden is often borne by parents who may be unaware of the products' ingredients or necessity.
- Skincare companies actively market to this younger demographic through visually appealing packaging, cartoon logos, and terms like 'age-appropriate,' 'clean' and 'glow,' further blurring the lines between suitable and unnecessary products.⁵

A very popular concept originating from the Korean skin care is 'glass skin,' meaning a bright, shiny, and unblemished skin. It is an unattainable goal that makes the patients continue the care routine indefinitely.

Dermatological concerns

The most critical concern arising from social media-driven skincare trends in pre-adolescents is the direct harm to their

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developing skin barrier. Unlike adult skin, younger skin is more delicate and permeable, making it highly susceptible to irritation and adverse reactions from harsh ingredients. Key dermatological risks include:

- **Irritant contact dermatitis:** Many products promoted on social media contain active ingredients (e.g., acids, retinoids, vitamin C) that are entirely superfluous for pre-adolescent skin and can cause significant erythema and burning sensation. Using multiple active ingredients simultaneously exacerbates this risk.³
- **Allergic contact dermatitis:** Frequent exposure to numerous ingredients at a young age can lead to sensitisation, resulting in chronic skin allergies that may persist into adulthood. Common allergens found in promoted products include fragrances and certain inactive ingredients.³
- **Compromised skin barrier:** The overuse of exfoliants and strong active ingredients disrupts the skin's natural protective barrier, leading to dryness, increased sensitivity, and potentially worsening existing conditions like acne.
- **Sun sensitivity:** Alarming research indicates that only about a quarter of daytime skincare routines featured on social media include sunscreen. Moreover, some active ingredients promoted can increase sun sensitivity, raising the risk of sun damage and long-term skin cancer development.⁵
- **Inappropriate products:** The pursuit of anti-aging benefits or attempting to achieve flawless skin can lead to the use of products with ingredients designed for mature skin, offering no benefit and significant harm to children.
- **Endocrine disruptors in cosmetics:** These are substances that mimic natural hormones, such as phthalates, aluminium, or perfluorinated chemicals.⁶

The influence of misinformation and unrealistic expectations

Beyond the physical risks, social media skincare trends contribute to a complex array of psychosocial issues:

- **Unrealistic beauty standards:** Videos often emphasise 'lighter, brighter skin,' implicitly promoting racialised beauty ideals. The constant exposure to seemingly flawless complexions, enhanced by filters, creates an unattainable standard of beauty.³
- **Body image dissatisfaction:** The pressure to achieve these idealised appearances can lead to body image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, and even obsessive tendencies in young individuals.³
- **Misinformation and trust:** A significant portion of content originates from social influencers who lack formal dermatological training. The highly visual presentation of products heavily influences purchasing decisions, leading many women to buy products recommended by bloggers.¹

- **Consumerism:** The trend also fuels consumerism, as children demand expensive, unnecessary products to mimic what they see online, transforming playdates into shopping sprees for skincare.

Clinical implications and recommendations

The pervasive nature of social media's influence on pre-adolescent skincare necessitates proactive measures from healthcare providers (Box 1):

Box 1: Suggested proactive measures from the healthcare providers.

1. Dermatologists must be aware of trending skincare fads and their potential side effects. They should proactively educate both parents and pre-adolescents during clinical visits about appropriate, basic skincare routines (gentle cleanser, moisturiser, daily SPF30+).
2. Emphasise the importance of critically evaluating social media content and seeking information from reliable sources. Patients should be encouraged to consult a dermatologist before incorporating new products, especially those with active ingredients.
3. Clinicians should be vigilant for signs of body image issues, anxiety, or obsessive behaviours related to skincare. Discussions should extend beyond product recommendations to address the underlying psychological pressures fuelled by social media.
4. There is a need for dermatologists to promote on social media platforms evidence-based skincare information themselves, tailored for younger audiences, acting as reputable 'skinfluencers' to counteract misinformation; also a mechanism should be inbuilt in the platforms themselves to ensure veracity of the influencers, ideally
5. Increased scrutiny and clear regulations are needed for cosmetic and cosmeceutical products marketed to children.

Conclusion

Social media has revolutionised how information spreads and influences consumer habits, but its impact on pre-adolescent skincare is a growing health concern. Trend-driven routines often expose young skin to harmful products, increasing risks of irritation, allergies, and sun damage. Simultaneously, they contribute to unrealistic beauty standards and potential psychological distress. Parents, doctors, and platforms must work together to promote safe skincare practices and media literacy to protect the next generation's well-being.

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