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Exploring Genderless Skin Care and Fragrance

Brands explain how product efficacy, gender expression and sustainability are the foundation for the new genderless product revolution.

By **Obi Anyanwu**

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Phluid Project and Scent Beauty's gender-free scents. COURTESY PHOTO

Skin care and fragrance may be big industries to disrupt — but the **genderless** (<https://wwd-com.libproxy.fitsuny.edu/tag/genderless/>) wave is coming.

Much like the fashion industry, the beauty world is segmented by gender, with products produced and marketed to women and men. However, the rise of genderless skin care and gender-free fragrance may be poised to start a silent revolution in the multibillion-dollar industry.

The global skin care market is expected to bring in \$153.3 billion in 2022, and grow more than 5 percent at a compound annual growth rate through 2026, according to Statista. The fragrance market is projected to bring in \$56.7 billion, and to grow nearly 4 percent at a compound annual growth rate through 2026.

Within those markets, consumers are searching for genderless products. Search volume for phrases like “unisex perfume brands” (up 5.6 times) and “gender-fluid perfume” (up 2.3 times) increased during the past year, according to First & First Consulting.

And more men are catching on to the genderless skin care and fragrance conversation, which previously was dominated by women. In the past six months, women’s share of the genderless skin care and fragrance conversation dipped to 55 percent, compared to the prior six months’ 64 percent, according to First & First.

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For years, companies produced face washes and cleansers, moisturizers, antiwrinkle and eye creams and exfoliators that target women, and multipurpose body washes and shampoos and shaving, hair coloring and hair removal products for men.

But consumers have become savvier shoppers in the last decade thanks to social media, and while women parse products according to ingredients and prioritize efficacy, even whittling their routines down to fewer steps and

products, men have **begun moving away** (<https://wwd-com.libproxy.fitsuny.edu/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/mens-grooming-routine-skin-care-hair-makeup-personal-care-1234789561/>) from 3-in-1 products, aiming to target specific skin care and hair care needs.

Typically, women recommend their products for the men in their lives, expanding men's personal care regimens beyond hair care and shaving. A survey conducted by First & First of 500 U.S. men that said 1 in 4 heterosexual men primarily buy skin care products their significant others recommend to them.

But that's just one side of the gender spectrum.

Marketing for gendered skin care and fragrances excludes nongender-conforming people and doesn't speak to everyone along the gender spectrum or their varying gender expressions. While brands have attempted inclusive marketing by featuring models with different skin and hair types and complexions, typical advertisements still adhere to traditional gender norms and leave nonbinary consumers out of the conversation.

Retailers, too, merchandise skin care and fragrance by gender — even when brands are genderless.

Men are 2.4 times more likely to say they prefer gender neutral or unisex skin care products to more masculine products, and are 2.5 times more likely to say they don't mind if products they buy are marketed to women, than to say they avoid products that are too feminine, according to First & First.

Genderless products often aim to solve skin concerns that people across the gender spectrum face, including dryness, irritation, breakouts, under-eye circles, wrinkles and ingrown hairs. Many **genderless** (<https://wwd-com.libproxy.fitsuny.edu/sustainability/social-impact/gucci-chime-for-change-the-meteor-gender-summit-barnard-april-1235167971/>) lines have environmental objectives, aiming to reduce waste in the environment by producing fewer products and using environmentally conscious packaging.

“Genderless is very normal now,” said Jose Alvarez, cofounder of Abbott Fragrance. “Many of our competitors are genderless brands. Our take on it is we do believe gender is outdated when it comes to a fragrance.”

Alvarez and cofounder Michael Pass left their jobs in banking and law, respectively, to launch Abbott in 2016 to offer scents made with sustainable ingredients. Initially, the line was genderless but “geared toward men,” Pass said, but the brand eventually dropped the male focus.

“The first three to four years was uphill, but it has gotten easier with more recognition,” Pass said. Abbott launched at Sephora in May, and the brand is part of the retailer’s “clean fragrance” assortment.



Abbott COURTESY PHOTO

While genderless products aren’t new, genderless marketing veers sharply from the hypersexualized fragrance marketing of the ‘90s and early Aughts.

Calvin Klein was perhaps the first adopter in gender-inclusive marketing in the ‘90s. In clothing, the brand pushed plain white T-shirts and Calvin Klein Jeans as a minimal, inclusive, nongender-conforming uniform. And in beauty, the brand introduced CK One, a gender-inclusive scent that gave “freedom for the wearer to express themselves,” said Joanne Bletz, senior vice president of global marketing for Calvin Klein Fragrances at Coty.

Consumers took to the fragrance immediately to the tune of \$5 million — or 20 bottles a minute — in the first 10 days of launch in 1994. “The franchise remains our number-one franchise worldwide,” Bletz said. “When we launched CK One originally, it was at Tower Records in a nongender-specific format. Those kinds of things are replaced by e-commerce launches of today where there’s obviously an easy way to shop gender inclusivity than to go from one department to another.”

Calvin Klein expanded its genderless fragrance range in 2020 with CK Everyone.

But despite the brand's fast and sustained success with CK One, genderless skin care and fragrances have remained nascent.

Bletz explained that CK One came to the market just as consumers tired of showy materialism, flashy clothes and big hair. People were ready to embrace their authentic, natural selves — an energy that's emerging again against the backdrop of social media, where filters and retouching have led to more unattainable beauty ideals.

“There's a new opposition to that about embracing who you are and the realness of who you are and that's refreshing,” Bletz said. “There's a push to being unfiltered, speak your truth, bear your soul and we see that even in the pandemic and the explosion of mental health. The unfiltered self is very important.”

Conversations around gender and expression have helped people acknowledge where they fall on the gender spectrum, go by pronouns they better identify with and home in on their own unique expressions that are most true to themselves.

The Phluid Project founder Rob Smith, who goes by the pronouns he/they, built Phluid to be a gender-inclusive fashion destination and quickly became an authority and adviser for companies learning how to connect with the LGBTQ community and gender-nonconforming and transgender people, as well as all gender-expressive folks. Smith said the scent space is “über gendered” when it comes to naming and marketing. Women are offered perfumes while men are offered colognes, and the marketing campaigns supporting the scents are “often incredibly sexualized,” Smith said.

For instance, past and present men's cologne advertisements feature conventionally beautiful, muscular men meant to be symbols of what consumers could be, too, if they simply wore the fragrance in the ad.

“Young people are rejecting that across the board,” Smith said. “There's a rejection of having to look like a Kardashian or a Hemsworth. Sure that's a part of gender, that idea of masculinity and femininity, but people fall in the gap between.”

And what does the gap between smell like?

For Calvin Klein's gender-inclusive scents developed by perfumer Alberto Morillas, it's a mix of quintessential sweet and fruity perfume ingredients like green tea and bergamot, with traditionally masculine ingredients like musk and cedarwood. Combining these ingredients blurs the gender lines, even though men's and women's fragrances often share notes.

"Men's fragrances historically have lavender, but all have musk because it's a sensual scent," Bletz said. "Wood is in both fragrances even on competitor brands. The U.S. is a little later in its sophistication, but it's there now. I appreciate the palettes and ingredients and believe the market is there for not having to categorize."

The Phluid Project and Scent Beauty relaunched on June 1 100 percent gender-free scents: Transcend, Humanity, Intention and Balance. All have formulations that include citrus and floral notes. "Feminine scents get too sweet and it's almost offensive and the men's is so heavy, but we found that balance in the middle," Smith said.

He said ingredients like coconut, sea salt and spices create images of a vacation, which provides insight into another motivator for wearing a scent beyond just sex appeal.

Alvarez and Pass' fragrance company Abbott, also aims to transport their customer through scents inspired by family trips to Shelter Island, New York, in their Crescent Beach scent, camping trips to Sequoia National Park for the Sequoia scent, ski trips to Montana for Big Sky and winter surfing in Cape Cod for The Cape.

"Our starting point is always nature," Alvarez said. "Our fragrances are meant to transport you to the natural world. We want to be genderless, but be reminiscent of the natural world when you smell a fragrance. If you smell Sequoia, it's a very woody, smoky campfire scent and has hints of smoky incense. It's our most popular fragrance."

Elorea, a newly established Korean fragrance brand cofounded by CEO Wonny Lee, also looks beyond sex appeal. Lee said they launched in January 2022 with their Elements Collection comprised of four scents — floral Heaven, woody Earth, fresh Water and warm Fire — named after the trigram of the Korean flag that represents the four elements of the world.

“The fragrance industry is deeply ingrained, but at Elore, we want to buck tradition by creating genderless signature scents from the start to appeal to a wide group of individuals,” Lee said. “And our customers are responding to this. We were pleasantly surprised that Heaven, our floral scent that historically was marketed to women, was such a hit with our male customers. Scent is really personal and can smell different on different people so we are thrilled that our scents are helping our audience express themselves in whatever way they want.”

When it comes to genderless skin care, brands are aiming for honest expression, product efficacy and sustainability.

“Ingrown hairs have been a primarily male issue, but the true cause is from not exfoliating often, and women do that every day no matter what because they know the importance,” said Ty McLaren, cofounder of genderless and natural skin care line Koa. “The overall root cause is the same and that’s what we’re trying to solve.”

Lines like Valoie and Lesse aim to bring the natural movement into genderless produces, while Pharrell Williams’ Humanrace, and brands like Schwanen Garten and Intō aim for efficacy. Soho House’s new line, Soho Skin, also positions itself as genderless.

Non Gender Specific, which makes skin care and fragrances “for all humans,” according to its website, was perhaps the first to kickoff the modern genderless skin care movement.

“It was considered niche and probably still is to some degree, but I think the segment has become more of the norm,” said founder Andrew Glass.

Glass launched his brand with the Everything Serum that aims to tackle wrinkles, fatigue, hyperpigmentation and other skin concerns. Part of the goal was to create products for everyone — the other was sustainability. When Glass entered the beauty industry, he worked for “speed to market, trend-driven brands churning out a ton of products.” and the strategy left him unsettled.

“We reduce consumer waste through multicorrectional products,” he said. “I grew up living a sustainable lifestyle in a tiny village in South Africa and lived in nature. We grow the business very strategically. We want everything we put out to be purposeful and don’t want 20 to 30 [stockkeeping units]. We also use recyclable glass and biodegradable packaging.”

Non Gender Specific
Botanical Armor COURTESY
PHOTO

Lesse, launched by Neada Deters in 2018 also has a “less is more” message meant to resonate with all genders.

“The simplicity of our line has connected with men, women and genderless folks in its very simple to understand if you haven’t invested in a skin care routine,” Deters said.

“A lot of these gendered ideas have been manufactured by the industry to target different genders and not because it’s an issue truly exclusive to that gender,” she added. “There are many issues that transcend demographics.”

Koa, launched by McLaren, Hiro Shinn and Kaponu Chung in 2019, was initially targeted toward men, but the cofounders changed directions after recognizing that the brand resonated with all genders. “We changed the design language,” McLaren said.

The duo felt the skin care space was “super complicated” at launch and they wanted to create a simpler path with products that use ingredients native to Hawaii like yuzu, noni fruit, kukui nut, seaweed, green tea, hibiscus and macadamia.

There have been an influx of genderless lines in the past few years.

Intō, launched in February 2020 by Ray Suzuki, was founded “to promote the importance of probiotics and balance in times of growing division,” Suzuki said. Schwanen Garten, which also debuted in 2020, looks to antioxidants for its 10-product skin care offering, and aims for efficacious products.

“After two decades and countless trials, we developed our proprietary Schwanen Garten Antioxidant Source, a naturally derived blend of antioxidants

to defend the skin against premature aging and protect it from free radicals,” said founder Sung Hyun Kim. “Every product in our 10-item line utilizes this exclusive complex and is clinically proven to be gentle, safe but effective. The brand has always been unisex and genderless from the start. We do not market specifically to a gender because skin is skin.”

Humanrace, which also launched in 2020, offers a rice powder cleanser, a lotus enzyme exfoliator and humidifying cream to simplify the skin care routine. “We wanted to instill in people the notion of taking the time to take care of themselves, every day, even if only for three minutes,” said cofounder and president Rachel Muscat.

Humanrace’s chief dermatologist, Dr. Elena Jones, is also Williams’ dermatologist. She helped create the brand’s formulas.

“After working with [Dr. Elena Jones] and discovering that it wasn’t about your gender or your race, it was about your skin type, i.e. oily versus dry skin, we knew that we believed in, following through with a genderless product,” Muscat said. “We didn’t want to assume that a person’s gender would play into any of the knowledge, which is why we have a very neutral approach to our product education.”

Valoie cofounders Jayme and Nick Valo spent years developing their honey-infused products with the intent to mimic the results of a 12-step routine in fewer steps. The cofounders were inspired to launch the brand after traveling the world together and finding difficulty bringing all of their skin care products with them. Jayme said that honey is used often in Danish culture to clear blemishes, is an antibacterial and antimicrobial, and protects and balances the skin.

They found that their products serve multiple purposes for both of them. Nick said he uses the Aktiv Pore Repair as an after shave and “I don’t nearly get the same irritation or stubbly itch.”

“Because Nick has a beard he has the dry issues that come with having a beard,” Jayme added. “Aktiv acts as an exfoliant, regenerates the dead skin cells and both women and men have that issue. It’s not only for the face and neck, but anywhere you shave.”

Soho Skin was also launched with simplification in mind.

“It was important to us that we streamlined our formulas and delivered products that are intended to support, nourish and destress the skin,” said Soho House Retail managing director Aalish Yorke-Long. “We want to empower the skin, not overpower it. In addition, our formulations don’t include skin-lightening components sometimes used to eliminate dark spots. This was a conscious decision in ensuring the range works for all — Soho Skin brightens the skin, it doesn’t lighten it.”

Humanrace Skincare, Pharrell Williams’ latest venture made with his dermatologist Dr. Elena Jones. TIAN KHEE SIONG

The Future of Genderless Beauty

For genderless brands to get their message across, it’s important to be “genuine,” said Glass.

Many fashion brands and magazines use tropes like women in men’s suiting or men in skirts and nail polish to communicate genderless fashion, championing cisgender women and men as influencers in challenging gender norms. Celebrities including Harry Styles, Lil Nas X, Bad Bunny and Machine Gun Kelly “are giving permission to play around and experiment,” noted Phluid’s Smith.

But looking to cisgender celebrities to front the genderless movement sidelines nonbinary and transgender people from the conversation.

Some legacy companies and retailers are beginning to make strides to rectify that, with services that target the nonbinary and transgender people, as well as stocking genderless beauty products. Sephora introduced face contouring classes in 2018 and L’Oréal this year launched in Puerto Rico a training program

called Transformation for beauty salons to help transgender people feel comfortable about taking care of their hair.

“The more brands do embrace gender-expressive people, the more relevant they’ll be,” Smith said.

At retail, genderless products haven’t had an obvious home. When Glass launched Non Gender Specific in 2018, “people that couldn’t grasp the concept considered us for a nonbinary or transgender demographic, but we saw it as ‘for everyone.’ It took a while for the industry to get there,” Glass said.

Deters, of Lesse, said Mohawk General Store initially intended to stock the brand at its women’s location, but then decided to stock at the men’s store, as well, after the men’s team tested the products.

“That was an incredible moment for us,” Deters said. “There is hesitation in how we invest in skin care and self care for men. There is a demand for it and when we do open up the gates beyond these gendered ideas we see time and again that the response to it is overwhelming.”

Brands in this story said Amazon, Sephora, Credo, Nordstrom, Bloomingdale’s, Ssense, Dover Street Market, Goop and Verishop have created homes for genderless skin care both directly and indirectly.

“I feel like it would be more difficult in fashion than with skin care,” said Glass. “Skin is skin.”

Smith drew a comparison between these times and past decades. He was born in 1965, during an era that saw a rapid style evolution on top of demand for social justice when it came to race and gender. “Fifty years later and we’re still fighting,” he said.

“We’ve come so far, but we’re still fighting,” he continued. “The difference is corporations feel like they’re on our side and stepping in where politicians don’t, but there’s a sense of an uprising in individuals and society. We’re always unlearning and relearning. Change is inevitable. There’s a hardening around politics for sure, but a softening around gender and sexuality.”

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