

Skincare Spiral

At what point did caring for your skin become this exhausting?
By KRITI SHUKLA



It begins, as so many modern anxieties do, on a phone screen around midnight. A woman—cocooned in a chin strap, mouth tape, silk bonnet, collagen eye patches, and at least three overnight serums—peels herself awake for the camera in a ritual the internet calls the “morning shed”. The tagline: the uglier you go to bed, the prettier you wake up.

I confess I’ve watched more of these than I should have. This is my professional territory—I receive launches before they hit shelves, I read founders explain

the science behind the twelfth iteration of a vitamin C serum, I own more SPF than any single face requires. And yet I found myself staring at a bathroom cabinet so cluttered that it seems more of an accusation than a routine. The question that strikes me: at what point did caring for your skin become this exhausting?

MAKING OF A CHECKLIST

The morning shed is a logical endpoint of a decade spent worshipping the multi-step routine. By some estimates,

the average skincare-engaged consumer is now exposed to a new “must-have” ingredient every 72 hours—slugging gives way to skin cycling, glass skin gives way to barrier repair, and through all of it, the bathroom shelf grows more crowded while the face in the mirror seems no closer to the promised radiance.

Dr Jamuna Pai, cosmetic physician and Founder of SkinLab, watches clients arrive carrying enormous bags of products—not with pride, but bewilderment. “We have moved from skincare being a ritual of self-care to a rigorous, high-pressure performance,” she observes. “People feel they must keep up with every new ingredient or they are somehow failing their skin.” The consequences are increasingly visible on the skin itself. Over-exfoliation, incompatible actives, and restless product switching has produced a generation of sensitised skin—not inherently sensitive, but made reactive by overzealous intervention. “Their skin,” says Dr Pai, “is essentially screaming for a break.”

PSYCHOLOGY OF A PERFECT FACE

In *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Miranda Priestly famously explains how decisions made in rarefied rooms eventually filter down into what ordinary women buy. Replace cerulean sweaters with serums, and her argument applies almost perfectly to the modern beauty industry. Dr Ishita Mukherji, Clinical Psychologist at V6 Clinics, cites beauty burnout within a wider architecture of modern anxiety. “We live in a culture that rewards constant self-optimisation,” she says. What makes social media uniquely corrosive in this regard is the neurological mechanism it exploits. “The loop goes: comparison, anxiety, product acquisition, temporary reassurance, renewed comparison,” she explains. “Over time, this leads to decision fatigue and skincare burnout.”

There is something almost Victorian in the dynamic—the anxious pursuit of an unattainable complexion, the deep entanglement of moral worth with physical presentation. The arsenic tablets of the 1880s and the 47-step morning shed of 2024 are separated by a century-and-a-half of scientific progress, but the underlying logic—that beauty requires suffering, that the natural face is insufficient—has not changed much.

But let’s not forget that beauty burnout is not a universally distributed experience. Dr Mukherji carefully notes that women, non-binary, and queer individuals face disproportionate appearance scrutiny tied not merely to aesthetics but to safety, professional acceptance, and belonging. The weight sharpens considerably when class enters the frame. For women in client-facing work—hospitality, retail, the gig economy—a ‘polished’ appearance is not an aspiration but a condition of income. A *Notre Dame* study from 2020 showed female Uber drivers were rated partly on their presentation.

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The burden deepens further when beauty standards themselves are exclusionary. When Euro-centric ideals or K-beauty’s glass-skin template become the aspirational default, those whose faces naturally diverge are left in a state of constant self-evaluation against a standard never designed for them.

THE ANTIDOTE

The particular genius of the beauty industry is that it has already identified the burnout it propagated and begun packaging the cure. Skinimalism has been a declared trend for three years. Barrier repair is now a full product category. “The industry is savvy,” notes Dr Pai. “It will pivot to selling us ‘calming’ products next.”

The question, for those of us who have spent years both covering and consuming this industry, is whether this corrective path will be permitted to hold or whether the machine will simply rebrand the exhaustion and sell it back to us with a new ingredient. ■



IMAGE: COURTESY GETTY IMAGES