

April 18, 2019

HOW K-BEAUTY BECAME MORE THAN A TREND

K-BEAUTY HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS MORE THAN JUST A TREND, SO WE TURNED TO PEACH & LILY'S FOUNDER TO FIND OUT WHY—AND HOW CERTAIN BRANDS TURN INTO CULT FAVORITES AMONG YOUNG CONSUMERS...

From sheet masks to snail mucin, K-beauty has “exploded in popularity” and is expected to reach \$13.1 billion by next year, according to [Euromonitor](#), contributing to the lucrative skin care boom. A quarter of young females told us in our [Borderless Culture](#) report that they follow K-beauty, and in our [Wellness Intensified](#) trend, we saw that young shoppers are adding more and more products to their daily skin care routines à la the famous Korean ten-step skin care routines.

And K-beauty might not have transcended from trend to mainstay if not for Peach & Lily, a site that started curating cult Korean products for U.S. consumers at the brink of the boom, seven years ago. Famous for popularizing the multi-step K-beauty routine and for giving young consumers fabled “glass skin” (per [Refinery29](#)), the brand banks on cold, hard science to back its products, vetting ingredients by a standard that exceeds Korea’s own already-stiff EWG rating system—a strategy that appeals to today’s ultra-informed young consumer.

Now, Peach & Lily has launched their own namesake line available via the likes of Ulta and Forever 21’s beauty spin-off store Riley Rose (whose founders [also talked to us](#) about K-beauty), along with the more accessible Peach Slices brand at CVS and Target. We turned to founder Alicia Yoon with our most-pressing K-beauty questions, finding out the secret recipe to achieving cult status among young consumers along the way:

YPulse: Can you tell us about the current state of K-Beauty?

Alicia Yoon: One thing is that it's not a trend. It's now been seven years since starting Peach & Lily, where we first introduced Korean beauty to the U.S. market, and it's still a very fast-growing category—and it really has staying power. This begs the question: Why is it that [K-beauty is] something that has so much staying power and isn't just this fun trend? And I think it's because, at the end of the day, it's really rooted in the science and innovation behind the formulas. When it comes to something like skin care, it's about results—it has to work. So even if it's using ingredients that might not be as common in the U.S., like snail mucin—yes, there's a trendy nature to that because you're introducing a new ingredient, but it's [also] a very effective ingredient.

I see that before, it was just this overall topic of Korean beauty as a category that got buzz. But more and more as the category matures, it's about the specific brands within that category. Secondly, there's a continuation of new things that are being introduced to the market: new ingredients, new textures, and new product categories. For example, instead of a serum, there's now a serum veil that can double as a sleeping mask. I'm also particularly excited about a lot of products and trends that are coming out of dermatologist's offices and are all focused on high science, and I think that's where the K-beauty category is evolving to.

YP: Peach & Lily offers personalized skin care consultations with estheticians. Are they popular

with young consumers, or do they prefer a more DIY approach to creating their routines?

AY: It's definitely very popular but it's not for everybody. Some people just want to completely be self-served. We get a lot of questions every day, and I love the service because it's very personalized. There are no forms that are filled out. There are no standard answers given out. It's a real person answering and only our in-house licensed estheticians can answer those questions about skin care, or someone's skin concerns, skincare routine, etc.—and it's completely complimentary. It's something I felt very passionately about personally because I'm an esthetician and I know that it's really difficult for somebody to be empowered with their skin care if you don't have guidance to answer some of your key questions. I think it's been a really invaluable way for us to build a sense of community with our customers, as well as understand in a very qualitative and deeply insightful way what is really on their minds, what they're looking for, and what the trends are.

YP: Do you think social media played a role in the popularization of K-beauty in the U.S.?

AY: I think that [social media] helps to democratize beauty in a way where the best really rises to the most viral places; also, people can research really easily using hashtags and by looking up K-beauty. I think [social media] definitely has helped expand [K-beauty] but also helped people understand it better, which then leads to them becoming customers who also spread the word. I do think that retailers have also played a big role. If you're only digital, especially with beauty being so touch and feel, it doesn't become as tangible until you walk into an Ulta Beauty, CVS Pharmacy, or Barney's and you see your favorite Korean beauty brands.

So, I think for a cohesive strategy and for really helping to build awareness as well as grow the market size for new things, there's definitely digital and social media. But also, there has to be this in-real-life element. Omnichannel points of sale and distribution as well as omni-channel marketing is really key. Both have to be there and they go hand-in-hand.

YP: How does Peach & Lily use social media?

AY: We want to be a platform for building community and for being helpful. I know that a lot of social media captions could be super short, especially on Instagram where it's about the visual—and you'll notice that our captions are rather long, and I think people really respond to that and have a lot to say as well. It's also really fascinating because we get a very high level of DMs (Direct Messages), and I think it's because, with that voice of, “We're really here to help you and provide as helpful of information as possible,” it engenders trust as well as this feeling of, “I can just DM them and ask them for help.”

YP: Can you talk about the process of creating your own line of products for Peach & Lily?

AY: We were in a very privileged and unique position in the sense that, on the one hand, working on Peach & Lily, we have so much insight and access to going deep into the lab shelves and understanding where the best innovations are coming from. The second part of it is just understanding our community so well through the conversations we have. We have an understanding of what people are looking for and things that they aren't able to find. The third part is my own personal passion in product development. I have severe eczema, which is how I became an esthetician 20 years ago. My home is like a little lab meets beauty store filled with reams and reams of research, data, and pattern recognition of different ingredients that work well together. All of that really came together to influence this very unique set of formulas that we've developed. It was really a dream come true to be able to formulate with the most innovative partners. It was like this Willy Wonka Factory of pushing the envelope.

YP: Peach & Lily curates cult brands and has been called one themselves. How do you think brands attain that coveted status among young consumers?

AY: At the end of the day, I think gimmicks don't work. Ultimately, I think it really does begin with excellent products and that curation process [for brands we feature on our site] isn't something we ever cut corners on. What we do is that we're in Korea making sure we have our ear to the ground and meeting very regularly with top dermatologists, estheticians, store directors, beauty editors, and celebrities. I also do consumer shop-alongs. I just stand in the street and I will actually just ask customers when they're coming out of major beauty stores, "What are you hearing? What do you love? What did you just buy? Why?" We do this canvassing constantly and a lot of digital listening as well. And we then look into brands and we want to understand: Is it buzz because some celebrity just pushed it or when we look at the actual ingredient list in the formula, is it buzz because people are seeing such incredible results? It has to be results-driven buzz.

About 5% of brands we're looking into make our cut. By the time it's on our site, we vetted this every which way and we are so confident about these products being able to help our community. When people then try the products, they're raving about them.

YP: What trends do you think are next in the K-beauty space?

AY: In K-beauty, one thing that I'm very excited about is the clean beauty movement. There's an app called [HwaHae](#), and it's this watchdog app meets Yelp. You can look up any skin care product and the whole ingredient list shows up and is rated against the EWG rating score. Underneath, people are leaving reviews on the products. This app is downloaded millions of times in Korea and everybody I know—my family, my cousin, people I meet in beauty meetings—everyone has this app on their phone. It's created this awareness of ingredients. So now, a big trend is to say we're EWG green (the highest-possible rating). And that's actually not the easiest thing to accomplish, so a lot of the labs are really innovating on how to create better products. The whole clean beauty movement is seeing a lot of innovation and that's been very exciting to see.

Alicia Yoon, Founder, Peach & Lily

Alicia Yoon is a Korean skincare expert and the founder of Peach & Lily, a leading source and retailer for all things Korean beauty. Her acclaimed Peach & Lily skincare collection is 100% worry-free, non-toxic, and cruelty-free, using clinically-proven ingredients. Alicia travels regularly between New York City and Seoul to find the best products and most innovative skincare, and she has helped make Korean beauty the phenomenon it is in the U.S. today. An esthetician certified by spas in Korea and licensed in New York, Alicia is also a Harvard Business School graduate and an avid sheet-masker. She is on WWD's 25 Most Innovative Beauty Executives list and serves on the Cosmetic Executive Women (CEW) Board of Governors.

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